The Evolving Life of Country House Display (Russborough, 10 Apr 25)

Russborough House & Park, Apr 10, 2025

Russborough House & Park

To celebrate the unique history of Russborough, on the occasion of the ‘return home’ of the Prodigal Son series by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617 – 1682), this study day explores the interplay among houses, collections, and collectors, in a cross-disciplinary attempt to celebrate the richness and diversity of Irish and British country houses.

The historic houses ICOM’s sub-committee (DEMHIST) has identified three main elements that characterise historic houses that are open to the public, and that were formerly owned by collectors — as in the case of Russborough. These are: the container (the house), the content (the collection), and the creator (the collector). All three elements are profoundly intertwined; however, over time, their relationship can evolve, interrupt, or re-bond, thus altering and creating new narratives of collecting, display, and afterlife, often at the intersection of the private and the public.

This is certainly the case for Russborough, where two families and their collections in particular, the Milltowns and the Beits, and two important donations to the National Gallery of Ireland at both ends of the 20th century, have impacted the present history of Russborough and shaped the nature of Ireland’s national collections. The legacy of these donations is commemorated through the naming of the Milltown and Beit wings at the National Gallery of Ireland, and that of the Alfred Beit Foundation at Russborough.

While Russborough offers a significant case study, country houses across Ireland and Britain equally illustrate the evolving nature of historic interiors and display. The architectural design of these properties, their decorative schemes, and the methodologies used to interpret their contents have developed significantly over time, with ongoing research shedding new light on these complex histories.

Drawing on Anne Higonnet’s concept of the ‘collection museum’, one may view the relationship between houses, their collections, and their former owners as one that transcends the physical displacement of objects. Despite relocation, such collections often continue to evoke the memory of their original settings and custodians, commemorated through names, foundations, or reimagined displays.

This study day will examine continuities and changes in historic display practices and architectural design, with insights drawn from country houses across Ireland and Britain. Speakers will consider the methodologies and sources that inform such research.
The day will also offer participants the opportunity to reflect on Russborough itself, the Beits' col-

lecting activities, and their connection to Murillo's Prodigal Son series, which participants will have the opportunity to view in its historic setting.

The Return of the Prodigal Son exhibition, presented in partnership with the National Gallery of Ireland, runs until May 31st.

PROGRAMME:

09:45-10:15 Registration – Tea/Coffee
10:15-10:30 Welcome & Intro
10:30-11:10 John Goodall (Country Life) – Keynote speech
11:10-11:20 Discussion

Session 1: The Architecture of Display
Chair: Mary Heffernan (Office of Public Works)

11:20-11:40 Alec Cobbe (Alec Cobbe Design), 'Inside Matters'
11:40-12:00 Frances Bailey (National Trust NI), 'Bringing Mount Stewart Back to Life'
12:00-12:20 James Rothwell (FSA, National Trust), 'Restoring Baroque Pomp and Circumstance: The Beauty Room at Petworth, Sussex'
12:20-12:30 Discussion

12:30-13:30 LUNCH & Free Flow Tour of Murillo Display

Session 2: Sources for Studying Collecting & Display
Chair: Dr Audrey Whitty (National Library of Ireland)

13:30-13:50 David Sheehan (Castletown Foundation), 'Castletown: 'The Epitome of the Kingdom, and All the Rarities She Can Afford''
13:50-14:10 Prof Adrian Tinniswood (University of Buckingham), 'A Madness to Gaze at Trifles'
14:10-14:30 Dr Seán O'Reilly (Institute of Historic Building Conservation), 'Sociological and Psychological, Artistic and Architectural Aspects of Country House Display and Prospective Impacts for Management'
14:30-14:40 Discussion

14:40-15:00 Comfort Break & Free Flow Tour of Murillo Display

Session 3: Russborough, The Beits, Murillo's Return of the Prodigal Son
Chair: Fionnuala Croke (Chester Beatty)

15:00-15:20: Dr Aidan O'Boyle (Office of Public Works), 'The Reconstruction of an Eighteenth-Century Picture-hang at Russborough'
15:20-15:40 Prof John Hilary (University of Nottingham), 'The Beit Collection: Murillo's Prodigal Son Series in Context'
15:40-16:00 Leah Benson and Muirne Lydon (National Gallery of Ireland), 'From Russborough to the National Gallery: The Beit Gift and the Conservation of Murillo's Prodigal Son Series'
16:00-16:20 Discussion & Closing Remarks

16:20 – 17:30 Drinks reception

Reference:
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