

Woburn Abbey in Focus: A Taste for Dutch and Flemish Art

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Woburn Abbey in Bedfordshire [Fig. 1] is home to the Duke and Duchess of Bedford. It has been a site of human occupation for nearly 1,000 years and has evolved over the centuries. The present building represents perfectly the English country house of the long eighteenth century, built to impress and entertain. The original abbey, founded in 1145, had been given in the will of Henry VIII to his loyal minister Sir John Russell, later 1st Earl of Bedford, in 1547. It did not become the family's principal seat until 1619, when the 4th Earl built new north and south wings. As we see it today, the main west front was commissioned by the 4th Duke in 1747 to designs in the Palladian style by the architect Henry Flitcroft, while further substantial additions and alterations were made for the 5th Duke in the final years of the eighteenth century.¹

This great ducal property demonstrated wealth, taste, erudition and, ultimately, power, to elite guests and tenants alike.² To furnish their newly built interiors, the dukes acquired a spectacular art collection of works by acclaimed contemporary and historic artists. This was a key aspect of conspicuous display and an essential component of the grandly appointed and richly furnished interiors at Woburn Abbey. The first floor of the west front contains a 60-metre-long sequence of formal State Rooms, called an enfilade, where the majority of the finest artworks were displayed.



[Fig. 1] Woburn Abbey: the West Front.
Photograph. © From the Woburn Abbey Collection.

Woburn Abbey's collection of old master paintings evolved from a magnificent accumulation of family and royal portraits – including a version of the famous 'Armada' portrait of Elizabeth I and numerous grand Van Dycks. Many of these dated from the Tudor and early Stuart periods when it was fashionable to display portraits of celebrated figures in long galleries to be discussed when using these spaces for exercise on rainy days. The Dutch and Flemish paintings, which remain the strongest component, were mostly acquired between 1742 and 1759 by John, 4th Duke of Bedford (1710-1771) [Fig. 2],³ and significantly augmented from 1789 by his grandson, Francis, 5th Duke (1765-1802) [Fig. 3]. Some further additions were made by Francis's brother, John, 6th Duke (1766-1839), whose main interest was in contemporary British paintings.⁴

The 4th Duke's tastes were typical of his age. They extended to Italian 'Grand Tour' paintings and the celebrated series of twenty-four Venetian views by Canaletto. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, British collectors largely sourced old master paintings at art sales or from dealers, often in London or Paris. Many of the 4th and 5th Dukes' acquisitions were made in London, a rapidly growing centre for the European art trade, and some of these came from collections formed by French aristocrats (particularly after the French Revolution). Italianate landscapes, like Aelbert Cuyp's (1620-1691) *Landscape near Elten* (No. 16),⁵ and Jan Asselijn's (about 1610-1652) *Ruined Roman Bridge* (No. 1),⁶ as well as David Teniers's (1610-1690) *Picture Gallery and Village Feast* (Nos. 7, 15),⁷ and Jan Steen's (1625/26-1679) *Twelfth Night* (No. 9),⁸ for example, all displayed in this exhibition, primarily reflected contemporary French taste. Rembrandt's (1606-1669) reputation underwent a sharp revival in this period in France and Britain, although an understanding of the distinction between autograph and pupils' work was still evolving.⁹ In his search for works by the master, the 4th Duke bought fine examples of both (Nos. 4, 6).¹⁰

Some of these purchases were originally intended for Bedford House, the main family property in London, but after its demolition in 1800 these mostly came to Woburn. The grandest works were shown in prominent positions in the State Rooms, while smaller works were allocated to more compact spaces, such as 'cabinet' rooms. One of the 5th Duke's most significant contributions was the creation of a new Library at Woburn, and he specifically sought out portraits of artists, especially self-portraits, representative of taste and culture, to line the spaces above the bookshelves [Fig. 4]. These included Frans Hals's (about 1582-1666) *Portrait of a Man* (No. 2) and Van Dyck's (1599-1641) *Portrait of a Married Couple* (No. 3),¹¹ although neither is today regarded as necessarily portraying an artist. Rembrandt's *A bearded old Man* of 1643 (No. 4) was also hung here in the time of the 6th Duke.



[Fig. 2] Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788), *John Russell, 4th Duke of Bedford* (1710-1771), 1768. Oil on canvas, 124.5 x 99 cm. Woburn Abbey Collection (no. 1388). © From the Woburn Abbey Collection.



[Fig. 3] John Hoppner (1758-1810), *Francis Russell, 5th Duke of Bedford* (1765-1802), 1796/97. Oil on canvas, 244 x 150 cm. Woburn Abbey Collection (no. 1236). © From the Woburn Abbey Collection.

The exhibition *Mastering the Market: Dutch and Flemish Paintings from Woburn Abbey* features carefully selected paintings from Woburn's collection and invites you to see them through a new lens outside of their country-house context. Displayed in the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, alongside some of the finest of the Barber's own Dutch and Flemish paintings, these can be viewed by a contemporary audience whose attitudes towards art and status are likely to be very different to those of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century visitors. Today, we may find other reasons to value these artworks - for example, as invaluable tools for learning about the periods in which they were created - and they are still held in high regard. Despite the sale of about 30 paintings in 1951, the Woburn collection of Dutch and Flemish old masters remains one of the most distinguished in private hands.



[Fig. 4] H. Stuart, *The Library, Woburn Abbey*, 1850. Watercolour. Woburn Abbey Collection (no. 10719). © From the Woburn Abbey Collection.

¹ For the development of the architecture and interiors of Woburn Abbey, see Duggan 2003, Stroud 1965a and 1965b, and Hirst 2017.

² See Jackson-Stops 1985 for the broader context of the development of country houses and their collections.

³ For details of the 4th Duke's acquisitions see Russell 1988.

⁴ See Taylor and Poulton 2023, esp. pp. 15-23.

⁵ Purchased for the 5th Duke at the Rt Hon. Richard Rigby, MP, sale, Christie's, London, 9 January 1789 (part II, lot 6). Cuypp's celebrated *The Valkhof at Nijmegen on the River Waal*, c. 1660, oil on canvas, 106 x 147 cm, also at Woburn Abbey, was also purchased at this sale by the 5th Duke (part II, lot 16).

⁶ Acquired between 1804 and 1827, presumably by the 6th Duke.

⁷ Purchased by, respectively, the 4th Duke at the Dr Richard Mead sale, London, 20-22 March 1754, for 70 guineas (£73.10s.); and the 5th Duke at the Calonne sale, Skinner & Dyke, London, 23 March 1795, for the very high sum of 700 guineas (£735), reflecting the celebrity of this picture.

⁸ Purchased by the 4th Duke at the Dr Robert Bragge sale, London, 24 January 1754, 33 guineas (£34.13s.).

⁹ See Seifert 2018, esp. pp. 22-41.

¹⁰ Rembrandt's *A bearded old Man* was recorded at Bedford House in 1771; it may be the '1/2 length head by Rembrandt' cleaned and lined by Isaac Collivoe in 1747 (Bill to the 4th Duke, 27 August 1747, Woburn Abbey Collection, 4D-A1-2-40-25). *A Girl at a Window*, now attributed to Rembrandt's pupil Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627-1678), was bought by the 4th Duke, as by Rembrandt, at the Roger de Piles sale, London, 29 April 1742 (lot 77), for 64 guineas (£67.4s.), this collection having been imported from Paris by the dealer Francesco Geminiani.

¹¹ Both works acquired by the 4th or (more likely) 5th Duke of Bedford by 1796, when first recorded at Woburn Abbey.

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