

Pictures in the collections of the Earl and Duke of Kent

by

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This short article is an addendum to the paper published in 2011 in Volume 55 of these Transactions, identifying a building at No. 4, St. James Square, London, as an Art Gallery built by Nicholas Hawksmoor. It arises because, subsequent to that publication, Lord Lucas deposited with Bedfordshire County Archive receipts and valuations for art works in the collections of the eleventh earl of Kent (of the first creation) and of his son, Henry, who became the first duke.

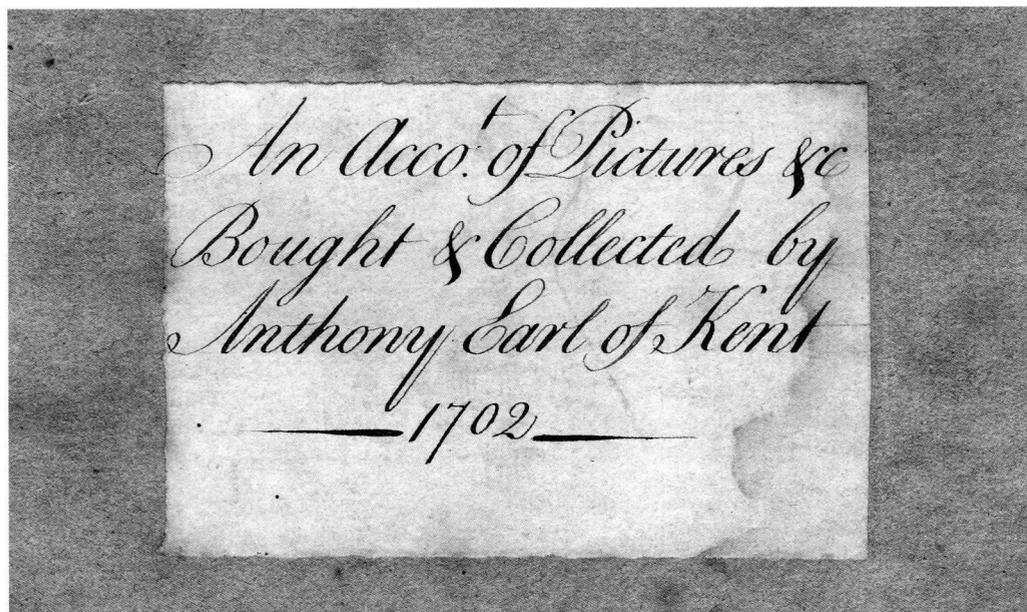


Fig. 1

The cover label from L34/1, 'An Account of Pictures &c Bought & Collected by Anthony Earl of Kent', 1684-1702. 7 pages paginated in later pencil, only pages 1-4 and 7 have been used. Gives: from whom bought, artist, title, measurements and value. Bound in blue paper cover.

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John Warren is an architect and town planner with wide historical experience, who was commissioned by the Naval and Military Club to design and superintend the alterations to its new premises at No. 4, St. James Square.

The Art Gallery built, as is now evident, by Nicholas Hawksmoor at No. 4, St. James Square, for Henry, Duke of Kent, in 1711 or 1712, survives only as a facade: a pedimented bay with wings. The remaining structure was subsumed into major reconstructions following a fire in 1725 which destroyed the house entirely. The Art Gallery, however, standing at the end of the garden, survived the fire but succumbed to the duke's ambitious rebuilding in 1726. It appears probable that the pictures in the house at the time of the fire, with one possible exception, were saved, but because items were interchanged between the destroyed house, the Gallery itself, the country mansion, 'Rest' (now Wrest Park) and another family residence, Hill House, it is unlikely that we shall ever know exactly which paintings were housed in the Gallery during its short life. Nor is that important, but the new information, derived from receipts and valuations for art works in the collections of the eleventh earl, Anthony, and his son Henry, does tell us something of their collecting tastes, the contemporary values of much that they acquired, and something of the changing attitudes of their time (Fig. 1). It can with safety be deduced that this was a period of acquisition, not dispersal. There is very little to suggest loss. One picture only is recorded as having been destroyed, presumably in the fire, and therefore it may be believed that it was hung in the house. Two equally undocumented paintings are recorded as having been donated to Lord Ashburnham and they may reasonably be presumed to have accompanied the duke's daughter on her marriage to the occupant of No. 3 next door.

Broadly it can be thought that the Gallery was built to accommodate the overflow that derived from an enthusiasm, if not a passion, for collecting. The receipts and notes offer insight into the tastes of father and son and provide information of substance on commercial values. Some few were purchased at auction. At one such 'outcry' in 1684 the earl purchased (presumably through an agent) a 'Van Dyke' for £4.11s.0d at no less a venue than the relatively new Banqueting House in Whitehall. Imagination quivers at the thought of bidders afire with the fever of the moment gazing up at the great Rubens panels of that ceiling. Their Baroque richness set a standard in painting parallel to the power and purity of the Inigo Jones building itself and wholly beyond the commercialism of the auction room.

The earl seems to have bought his Van Dyck rather cheaply there – together apparently with copies of paintings by Titian. Shortly after, in 1686, he paid to Alex Brown £46.10s.0d for a picture of 'Mr. Mallory', also by Van Dyck. Earlier he had paid £80.0s.0d for a portrait by the same artist, sold to him out of Sir Peter Lely's great collection. He continued to favour Van Dyck, buying from Edward Davis a composite portrait of the sons of the duke of Lennox for £30.0s.0d, followed by other Van Dycks from Prince Rupert's collection, including a portrait of Charles I (£23.0s.0d) and his queen (£40.0s.0d). From Lord Darcy he purchased a Van Dyck portrait of the second wife of the earl of Southampton (£40.0s.0d), and for a picture of that earl's first wife he paid a handsome £60.0s.0d. It is, however, by no means certain that these figures were the actual sums paid, as opposed to valuations; but the list of Van Dycks continues with a portrait bought from Mr. John Cock in 1699 for £47.10s.0d, and terminates with 'Our Saviour', an unusual subject for Van Dyck, bought for £32.5s.0d by Henry.

No other artist was so extensively represented in the Kent collections. There were many portraits, particularly of family members, but the taste for silk-clad, shimmering beauties and satin waistcoated men was now tempered by landscapes. In the growing fashion of the time we find the formal and calculated landscape compositions of continental painters: Gaspard Poussin, Claude (de) Lorraine and Salvator Rosa chief among them. By Henry's time, however, English landscapes were making their appearance with obvious topographical interest – Tilleman's views of the gardens at 'Rest', (£25.0s.0d) and (£15.0s.0d), and of Warren Hill at Newmarket (£35.0s.0d). Other subjects creep in as Henry followed his father, but inheriting more than he himself purchased, he obviously had a problem in accommodating all his canvasses. Hence the Gallery and Nicholas Hawksmoor's involvement.

From the documents now available, the collection of Anthony, 11th Earl, is valued at £2,353. 3s. 0d and that of Henry, his son, at £1207.19s.6d. The majority of these pictures were in London and, before the building of the Gallery, it may be concluded that the walls of the original house were not a little crowded. In the days when 'sea pieces' by Van der Velde could stand in at £18.0s.0d and £7.0s.0d and a 'Jerome' by Veronese was registered at £35.0s.0d, and when a 'Paul Reuben' (sic) was worth £26.10s.0d, these totals represented substantial numbers of paintings. Among the highest valued pictures was one of Henry's purchases, a landscape by Claude Lorraine, standing in at £150.0s.0d, although another painting by the same artist was deemed worth only £32.0s.0d.

Prices seem to have fluctuated little over the period of these acquisitions, but taste changed perceptibly in favour of landscape and topography, with an evident swing away from classical subjects and the weight of the Venetians. So we can now visualise a little more precisely that post-prandial stroll down the garden to the double doors under their broken pediment. We may still see our obsequious footman in his livery, with tray, glasses and decanter of ruby red port. We may yet hear the rustle of silk, the chatter of ladies, a subdued giggle and perhaps a pat on a braided waistcoat to mark a well-satisfied belly; and in our imaginations we may still baulk at the one-upmanship of the cognoscenti as they circulated in Hawksmoor's handsome new building.

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