



Oswald Birley, *Rhoda Green Mask*

FRAME OF MIND

A new wine club and exhibition to honour portrait painter Oswald Birley are on the way. We speak to his grandson and Mayfair club maestro Robin Birley

BY LORNA DAVIES

The Birleys are arguably one of Mayfair's most famous families. We all know Berkeley Square's luxurious Annabel's, the club launched in 1963 by the late Mark Birley and favoured by everyone from Lord Lucan to Lady Gaga. Mark's son Robin Birley has taken on the role of the West End member's club doyen. Robin began with Birley's sandwich bars in the City in 1986, taking over his father's clubs – Mark's, Annabel's and Harry's Bar – in 1999 before selling them to Richard Caring for a reported £90 million in 2007. Now he's the founder of the successful 5 Hertford Street, which, among other ventures, includes a new wine club named after his grandfather, the somewhat forgotten painter Oswald Birley.

Sir Oswald was the go-to portrait artist of the 1920s-40s, commissioned to paint royals, aristocrats, politicians and leading movers and shakers of his time. Robin, along with renowned dealer Philip Mould, are set to give Oswald the recognition he deserves, with the club and an exhibition.

The team at Mould's Pall Mall gallery, including a dedicated art historian for the show, have sleuthed paintings from the walls of country houses, museums and palaces, many of which have never left their homes since the day they were painted.

Born in New Zealand in 1880, while his parents were on a world tour, Oswald served in France in World War I, first with the Royal Fusiliers, later with the Intelligence Corps where he obtained the rank of Captain and was awarded the Military Cross in 1919. During World War II, he served with the rank of Major in the British Home Guard. A favourite of the Royal Family, he was well known for his

portraits of King George V, Queen Mary, King George VI, Queen Elizabeth, The Queen Mother and Queen Elizabeth II. Birley was knighted in 1949.

"He was a man of tremendous integrity," Philip says. "Churchill [Birley's subject and friend] talked about the masculine bluntness of his realism. So it was a combination of realism and attention to detail and the quality of the sitter, combined with accuracy and honesty. A society portrait painter's job is partly to capture a likeness, but that's only the first part. The subject needs to impose their own personality. And then there is the artist's vernacular, or world view, or way of understanding and responding to humanity,

which is often the reason why the subject is brought in to that particular artist's way of doing things, and it's that last bit which is so significant in the form of Birley, because he was utterly in tune with a certain type of Englishness, sensitivity, a sort of feudalism, but also he understood, partly through his war experience, the vulnerability of the human condition."

The exhibition will include 40 to 50 works, from "hierarchical civic splendour," as Philip describes it, to the more personal, such as Mark Birley as a child and a painting that visitors to 5 Hertford Street will know well – a portrait of Oswald's wife Rhoda, which welcomes guests to the club cloakroom. The stunning portrait shows Rhoda – whom Oswald married in 1921 at the age of 41 (she 20 years his junior) – in Venice carnival attire.

Philip and Robin are keen to convey that Oswald's success was not only down to his creative talent, but also his personable nature. "Yes, Lucien [Freud] was like that. He was very good with sitters, very



Philip Mould

amusing, very good company, wicked though he was,” Robin says.

Robin was born six years after his grandfather's death in 1952 so the pair never met. “My entire life, my father only mentioned my grandfather once. He said they were sitting at lunch and my grandfather liked dogs and there were some milling around and my grandmother said: ‘Look, it’s going to be either me or the dogs, I can’t take this anymore’, and my father remembers intercepting a look from his father that said: ‘Not a difficult job.’” Robin smiles, admitting: “They had a difficult marriage.”

Robin grew up around the paintings at his father's house, and often visited his grandmother at Charleston Manor House in Sussex (where Rhoda remained until her death in 1981).

“She had quite a few Churchills too, which sadly got sold,” Robin says. “He was incredibly prolific, ploughed through pieces, which is one of the reasons the prices aren’t very high.”

Oswald commanded an average fee of 300-350 guineas per portrait (approximately £21,000 in today's money). Today, a Birley can be between £5,000 and £10,000. “I buy a lot,” says Robin. “They don’t come up that often. I normally buy two or three a year. I bought one of a huntmaster about a month ago for £6,000, which is very nice indeed.”

Robin and Philip came up with the idea of an exhibition around 18 months ago over lunch.

“It’s a family pride thing,” says Robin.

“Secondly, if it’s put in the context of who he was painting, it adds a great interest to the whole thing, and that style of painter is completely and utterly neglected. I mean they’re just so unfashionable and yet I love looking at those paintings. It is recognition for him in today’s age and I think it can be something more than that.”

The creative gene was passed down in various guises. Robin's sister is artist India Jane Birley.

“My father was quite a good draftsman,” Robin says, “but he directed his creative talent through his clubs, and I guess, to some extent, the same is true of me. I live and breath pictures, that is what I love most. I’m constantly buying and improving. I put them in the clubs so I try not to look at the artist, although sometimes I can’t help myself. I don’t consider myself a collector. I’m an embellisher of my clubs.”



Oswald Birley, *Self Portrait*

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Oswald's, Robin's new club on Albemarle Street, opens in February. “It’s all about wine, on three floors. On the ground floor I am panelling it with all these mirrors, to give it a sort of glamour. I don’t think anyone has done it on this scale in the last 30-40 years. All the house wine will have a picture by my grandfather on the label.”

Philip says: “Was he an avant garde artist, a radical modernist? No. But what he was doing is something the British have done very well; he has captured a type of self representation of power and beauty, which has integrity and is tempered with his own understated good taste. Which has passed down thankfully.”

Birley: Power & Beauty, An Exhibition of the Works of Sir Oswald Birley MC is at Philip Mould & Company, 18-19 Pall Mall, September 26-October 10.