

ART REVIEW

A British family trove: what 500 years of taste can buy

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For half a millennium, members of the Cavendish family have been squirreling treasures away in their ancestral manse, a magnificent English country house called Chatsworth. With exquisite tastes and the money to indulge them, the Cavendishes, who were first the earls and later the dukes of Devonshire, amassed a spectacular horde, a trove of fine and decorative arts, minerals, scientific instruments and, above all, rare books. Selections from their holdings — more than 200 items — can now be seen at the Bard Graduate Center in “The Devonshire Inheritance: Five Centuries of Collecting at Chatsworth,” which offers compelling insights into the overlapping histories of nation, dynasty, fashion and art.

The show is organized chronologically, tracing the acquisitions of successive generations. It begins with a portrait of the family matriarch, Bess of Hardwick (1527-1608): Smart and ambitious, she navigated the treacherous political waters of Elizabethan England, marrying four husbands (not all at once) and procuring Chatsworth for her long line of descendants.

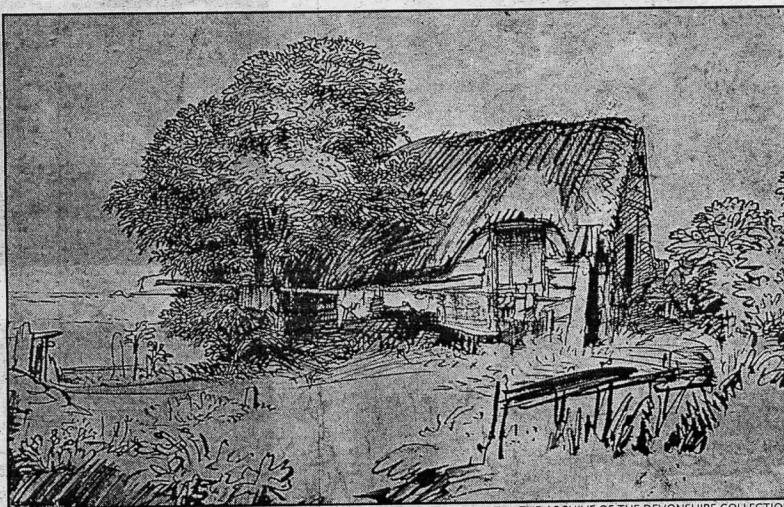
Her son William Cavendish, the first earl of Devonshire (1552-1625), who invested heavily and fruitfully in New World business interests, hired the philosopher Thomas Hobbes to tutor his children. He also enlisted Hobbes to catalog the family’s library, which had already reached an imposing size. The exhibit contains Hobbes’s 1628 inventory of some 2,000 volumes, along with a copy of “Elementorum Philosophiae” dedicated to his former pupil — whose name was also William (1617-1684), and who was also earl of Devonshire, only he was No. 3.

It was the second duke (1623-1729, yet another William) who really got the collection rolling. A born connoisseur, he presciently purchased drawings and prints by a spectacular array of Renaissance and Baroque masters, including Titian, Rembrandt, Dürer, Mantegna, Raphael, Parmigianino and many more. These extremely fine works, singled out by the duke’s sophisticated eye, fill a room at the Bard Graduate Center.

The fortunes of successive generations waxed and waned. The sixth duke (1790-1858 — yup: William, middle name Spencer) was

an aesthete whom the show nicknames “The Bachelor.” He spent lavishly, renovating the estate and gardens, filling the library with medieval illuminated manuscripts and acquiring odd and expensive tchotchkes, like the gem-encrusted Knipphausen hawk, and a solid gold collar for his black spaniel Tawny. His excesses set his heirs up for some serious retrenchment.

Financial setbacks, coupled with the World Wars, meant that the next few dukes added little to the family’s holdings. But the present duke (No. 11), Andrew Cavendish, has initiated some-



PHOTOS BY IAN FRASER-MARTIN, THE ARCHIVE OF THE DEVONSHIRE COLLECTION

A THATCHED COTTAGE by Rembrandt, circa 1650, pen and ink; below, a portrait of Deborah, Dutchess of Devonshire, 1956-57, by Lucian Freud



thing of a clan revival. He and his wife are patrons of the arts, commissioning family portraits by Lucian Freud and purchasing other notable paintings by 20th century British artists.

The Bard show has the odd, cumulative charm of riches discovered in a palatial attic. These objects were never lost, but they represent the layering of idiosyncratic taste, boundless means and unlimited storage space. That’s what aristocrats are for: Their whims become everyone else’s cultural patrimony.

WHEN&WHERE “The Devonshire Inheritance: Five Centuries of Collecting at Chatsworth” will be on view through June 20 at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, 18 W. 86th St., Manhattan. For exhibition hours and admission prices, call 212-501-3000 or visit www.bgc.bard.edu.