

Acquisition - a portrait of Thomas Howard

25 November 2004

The National Portrait Gallery is delighted to have acquired a highly significant portrait of Thomas Howard, 4th Duke of Norfolk, one of the most powerful figures in the Elizabethan Court.

Image



Portrait of Thomas Howard

The portrait, one of only two lifetime oil portraits of the sitter, was acquired by private treaty sale through Christie's, with the generous support of the National Heritage Memorial Fund and the National Art Collections Fund (Art Fund). No other lifetime portrait of Thomas Howard is owned by a public collection and this important acquisition addresses a significant gap in the narrative history of sixteenth-century England among the National Portrait Gallery's collections.

At the age of around sixteen Thomas Howard succeeded to the Dukedom and a vast inheritance. He later became Earl Marshal, a Privy Councillor and he supervised the funeral rites of Mary I and the Coronation of Elizabeth I. Between 1554-1572, the Duke of Norfolk was the premier nobleman in England whose wealth ensured great power and influence at court and whose actions changed the course of history. His turbulent relationship with Queen Elizabeth I and his flirtation with pro-catholic factions meant he became involved in a series of plots and political intrigues. As the key rival of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, Norfolk's powerful position led to a deeply divided court, which characterised Elizabeth's reign. His secret plan to marry Mary, Queen of Scots, and the central part he played in the plot to attempt to ensure her succession to the throne, led to his dramatic fall from grace in 1571 and his execution in 1572.

The portrait is a compelling work of art produced by a significant artist trained in the Netherlands, or by an English artist trained by a Netherlandish émigré. Technical analysis and further research may in the future help to identify the artist responsible. The recently uncovered contemporary inscription dating the portrait to 1565 and the artist's handling of the sitter's likeness, indicating the painting was made from the life, greatly enhance the significance of this picture.

The acquisition has been made possible by a National Heritage Memorial Fund grant of £105,535 and an Art Fund grant £33,350.

Sandy Nairne, Director of the National Portrait Gallery, said: "As a sixteenth century portrait of a highly important member of the Elizabethan court this painting is a rare survival, and in good condition for its age. This was possibly the only opportunity to acquire a portrait of this sitter for the nation and we are extremely grateful to the National Heritage Memorial Fund and the Art Fund for their assistance."

Stephen Johnson, Head of the National Heritage Memorial Fund, said: "As the fund of last resort for the nation's heritage, we felt the opportunity to save this extremely rare portrait for the nation could not be missed. Soon to be displayed in context, alongside the largest collection of portraits in the world, the painting also joins a list of over 1,200 incredible items that have been rescued with our support in the past 24 years."

David Barrie, Director of the National Art Collections Fund, said: "This rare portrait of such a powerful and influential figure from the Tudor period will make a significant addition to the National Portrait Gallery's collection, and we are delighted to have helped the Gallery to acquire it."

The painting will be shown in the Main Hall of the National Portrait Gallery from 25 November 2004 until early in 2005, after which it will be off display for a short period for conservation work and further research. The picture will ultimately be displayed alongside the National Portrait Gallery's collection of outstanding Elizabethan portraits in Room 2, including Elizabeth I, Mary Queen of Scots and Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester.

Notes to editors

The portrait is oil on panel and measures 103x80cm. It is inscribed "1565".

The painting was recently included in the Elizabeth exhibition at the National Maritime Museum in 2003

Further information

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