

Press Release: June 2017

**Power & Beauty:
An Exhibition of the Art of Sir Oswald Birley MC**

Rarely-seen portraits of movers, shakers and style makers from the dark corridors of England's stately homes and beyond, throw new light upon a forgotten time - at Philip Mould & Company,
26 September – 10 October 2017

For centuries, portraits have not only provided insight into the appearance and character of history's key players, but have also given painters the opportunity to produce startling artistic statements.



Sir Oswald Birley (1880 -1952) was one of Britain's most successful portrait painters. From 1919 until the early 1950s he was the go-to artist of the time, commissioned by the Royal family, the aristocracy, politicians, artists, scientists –leading figures of their day. His work hangs in many of the UK's major palaces, country houses, institutions and private homes; his paintings rarely leave the walls which they were designed to adorn.

A show to be held at Philip Mould & Company gallery in Pall Mall, London from 26 September – 10 October 2017 will assemble 50 of Birley's most iconic portraits and will present an opportunity to review the work of an artist who made an immense contribution to the painted record of 20th century art.

Robin Birley, Sir Oswald's grandson, has initiated this exhibition. He says: "I grew up surrounded by my grandfather's paintings and I am a huge admirer of his work. I believe it is time for his artistic legacy to be appreciated by today's generation. I'm delighted that Philip Mould & Company will be making these pictures available for a wider audience to view."

Philip Mould said: "As specialists in the world of portraiture it is a privilege to be able to show these rarely seen pictures. Birley is one of those English artists ripe for reappraisal. He was a master of his craft and of a legacy of society portraiture that traces its origins to Holbein, Van Dyck and Velazquez. Here is a chance to re-meet some of his faces who so imprinted Britain's inter-war years".

Oswald was educated at Harrow followed by Trinity College, Cambridge and he studied art in Paris and Madrid. At the outbreak of the First World War he joined the Royal Fusiliers and became an observer for the Intelligence Corps, making dangerous sorties over enemy-held territory with the Royal Air Force to create maps and models. He was awarded the Military Cross in 1918 in recognition of this work.

Thereafter, he was usually referred to as Captain Birley, and his appearance was more of a soldier than a painter. Handsome, charming, well turned out and at ease within illustrious society, Birley made full use of his establishment credentials. Following an impressive debut solo exhibition in 1919 he became the most popular portrait painter of the time. Regarded as a safe pair of hands, competent and creative and able to capture a good likeness, he required as few as four one-hour sittings and could produce the finished, varnished and framed portrait within as little as six weeks. Birley commanded an average fee of £300 – 350 guineas per portrait (approximately £21,000 in today's money).

Philip Mould adds: "What this exhibition reveals is that, beneath the civic and Establishment constrictions laid on him, he was a painter of emotional empathy and lyricism. He was a consummate man of his times, who did not merely record the image his work projected, but provided much of its visual poetry, too."

In 1921 at the age of 41 he married the young Irish beauty Rhoda Lecky Pike, 20 years his junior. Following their honeymoon in Venice, Birley painted a magnificent portrait of his young wife, depicting her in carnival attire with an alabaster face, her eyelashes demurely lowered.



The couple settled in London and had two children – Maxime, a renowned beauty, model, muse and mistress and Mark, an internationally acclaimed restaurant and club owner.

Oswald Birley famously was cuckolded by his high-spirited young wife, but the pair remained married until his death in 1952. In 1932 they moved to Charleston Manor House in Sussex where they established a music festival and Rhoda designed the garden, remaining there until her death in 1981.

While living in Sussex, the Birleys became friends with Sir Winston and Lady Churchill. Birley painted three stunning portraits of Churchill; and on occasion, the couples went on painting holidays together to the south of France.



Leading art historian Dr Jonathan Black is the show's curator and author of the accompanying catalogue. He said: "Oswald Birley was working at a fascinating moment in history. It is important to re-examine this genre of art and shine a light on a lost generation, their manners and mores. Birley remained at the top of his profession for three decades and painted countless influential individuals. These pictures demonstrate his impressive technique, sensitivity and ability to capture the appearance and character of people who contributed so much to the history and events of that time."

Robin Birley has contributed portraits which usually hang in his club at 5 Hertford Street and other portraits have been contributed from private collections, museums and galleries from London and around the UK. Highlights of the show include portraits of: Winston Churchill, Lady Birley, Mark Birley as a child, Maxime Birley as a child, Kyra Nijinska the ballerina (daughter of Nijinsky), Field Marshal the Earl Alexander of Tunis, the Marchioness of Zetland and Churchill's political sparring partner Stanley Baldwin; plus fascinating images of Indian individuals he painted after several visits to

the sub-continent between the wars.

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26 September – 10 October 2017

The exhibition will be open to the public from 10am – 6.00pm Monday – Friday

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The exhibition catalogue, written by Dr Jonathan Black, will be available in September 2017.