

# PORTRAIT OF A LADY

*An intimate new painting of the young chatelaine of Houghton Hall is joining a revered family collection of masterpieces to be hung in this storied stately home.*

*By Violet Henderson*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY HARRY CORY WRIGHT

SITTINGS EDITOR: ROSIE ARKELL-PALMER



Phoebe Dickinson working on her portrait of Rose Cholmondeley in the family-room at Houghton Hall



PHOEBE DICKINSON WEARS SHIRT, £835, ISABEL MARANT AT MATCHSFASHION.COM; TROUSERS, £860, BRUNELLO CUCINELLI, ROSE CHOLMONDELEY WEARS JUMPER, £950, HOLLAND & HOLLAND; JEANS, £349, SEE AT MATCHSFASHION.COM. ALL JEWELLERY THROUGHOUT, THEIR OWN

The family-room at Houghton Hall, thought by many to be the finest example of Palladian architecture in England, is sequestered in a corner of its extraordinary *piano nobile*. It can be entered by any one of three baroque mahogany doors; the ceiling is ecclesiastical in height and the pale chartreuse walls are adorned with gilded carvings, classical landscapes and magnificent 17th-century Mortlake tapestries.

Still, this is – as its name suggests – a room that is lived in. The two damask sofas either side of the marble fireplace sag seductively at their middle, books lean across tables in towers, and in the corner of the room stands a 1920s Bechstein, selected for its purpose by the great pianist Arthur Rubinstein, its top littered with sheets of music. This is where David Rocksavage, the Marquess of Cholmondeley and Houghton Hall's owner and custodian, comes to play.

But the Bechstein this early morning is closed; the room smells of turpentine and at the centre is an easel bearing a tall canvas. Sitting in a shaft of cold, bright light streaming through an unshuttered window, Rose, the Marchioness, is posing for a portrait. Lovely and graceful, she seems so at ease within this setting that she too might have been designed for the house.

'I had a very strong idea of how I wanted to paint Rose even before I knew Houghton,' says the artist Phoebe Dickinson, checking perspectives with one paintbrush and applying with another light strokes of colour to the all-but-finished portrait. 'Years ago, I went to Mallorca to visit the studio of Joaquim Torrents Lladó, a Spanish artist who died before he hit the big time. I never forgot a picture where the sitter occupied the lowest corner of the canvas. What was compelling about it was the background... It drew your eye to the figure, so that it was hard, in the end, to see anything else.'

Dickinson's subject sits across the canvas' right-hand corner, ostensibly just another part of the *mise-en-scène*. Then, as you look further, her languid beauty becomes the only focus, painted in free brushstrokes reminiscent of John Singer Sargent's later years, although in a cool fresh palette which is the young artist's own.



'It feels quite strange to see myself like this,' says Rose, shyly, as she joins Dickinson on the other side of the canvas. She was 25 when, in 2009, she married David, moving from London to this 104-room Norfolk colossus, giving birth to twin sons, Oliver and Alexander, the same year. Before, she had worked as a parliamentary researcher for the Labour politician Kate Hoey, and as a model, at which she insists, 'I was useless, far too self-conscious'.

She straightens the antique crimson kaftan she is wearing; it is from Afghanistan, while the linen around her waist is Indian. It was important for her that what she wore for posterity was nothing too ostentatious. 'That is not our life here,' she says. 'And I'm not that sort of person. But I also didn't want to wear my jeans, because I thought that would, in years to come, be too dating.'

Anyone who knows Rose will recognise that it is in her sideways gaze that Dickinson has best captured her, a singular mix of vulnerability and guarded insight. 'This picture does feel very personal,' she agrees. 'I've always loved Phoebe's work for conveying not just a likeness of the person she paints, but some of who they are.'

It helped this portrait's particular alchemy that the sitter and the artist already knew each other: they are both 34, their parents are friends (Dickinson's father, Simon, is one of Britain's leading art dealers), and this is not the first time she has painted the family. Last year, her portrait of the couple's three children – Oliver, Alexander and Iris, pictured in the house's grand Stone Hall – was accepted into the prestigious BP Portrait Award at the National Portrait Gallery. The Cholmondeleys' idea had been for her to paint each of the twins individually, but Dickinson suggested a group. 'It's quite an unusual experience to be commissioned by David and Rose,' she reflects,

PHOTOGRAPHS: HARRY CORY WRIGHT, JOHN SINGER SARGENT/HOUGHTON HALL ARCHIVES, DICKINSON WEARS JACKET, £1,196, BROCK COLLECTION AT MATCHSFASHION.COM; JEANS, £345. SEA AT MATCHSFASHION.COM



Clockwise from left: the study. The Great Staircase. Dickinson in the dining-room. The Hall's west façade. Opposite: John Singer Sargent's 1922 portrait Sybil, Countess of Rocksavage (later Marchioness of Cholmondeley) in Houghton Hall's dining-room





*The Cholmondeley Children at Houghton Hall* by Phoebe Dickinson. Opposite: the Stone Hall, the setting for the painting

PHOTOGRAPHS: HARRY CORY WRIGHT. PAINTING BY PHOEBE DICKINSON. PHOTOGRAPHED BY ALEX FOX (WWW.PHOEBEDICKINSON.COM)





Clockwise from left: the Salon. Houghton Hall's parkland at dawn. Dickinson's portrait of Rose Cholmondeley. A painting of Robert Walpole in the study. Cholmondeley and Dickinson in the yellow drawing-room



PHOTOGRAPHS: HARRY CORY WRIGHT, CHOLMONDELEY (LEFT) WEARS JUMPER, £3,200; SKIRT, FROM A SELECTION, BOTH DIOR. DICKINSON WEARS JUMPER, £490, HOLLAND & HOLLAND. SKIRT, £895. ERDEM. HAIR AND MAKE-UP BY AMY BRANDON, USING GHD, LA MER AND BOBBI BROWN. SEE STOCKISTS FOR DETAILS

'because they give you this incredible freedom to do what you want. They trust you as an artist.' And although Dickinson does most of her painting from photographs in her London studio – 'I paint better when I don't have the anxiety of feeling I need to entertain my sitter' – she has visited Houghton often, to check how the light falls, or a piece of material folds, and during this time, she and the Cholmondeleys have built up an easy rapport.

'Inevitably we talk of art together,' she says, 'I love it. I always learn something new when I'm here. David often shows me something that will start me thinking of new ways to paint.' This is hardly surprising, given that the collection includes family portraits by Hogarth, Reynolds, Gainsborough and Sargent.

But then, art has always been central to Houghton Hall. When the house was built in the 1720s by Robert Walpole, England's first de facto Prime Minister, it was intended not only as a residence but as a monument to his power, wealth, dynasty – and his art collection. Designed by the two leading architects of the era, James Gibbs and Colen Campbell, with lavish interiors by William Kent, it took 13 years to complete. Into the new house, Walpole brought glorious European treasures, including Murillo's *Immaculate Conception* and Velázquez's *Portrait of Pope Innocent X*. (All this, and he visited but twice a year.)

When he died in 1745, George Walpole, the third Earl, left staggering debts, and in 1779, was forced to sell 200 of the best pictures to Catherine the Great. The house passed to the Cholmondeley family through the female line, and, preferring their Cheshire seat, left Houghton shuttered and unused for much of the 19th century. Only at the end of World War I did its fortunes revive with the arrival of David's grandfather (known as 'Rock', riffing off his courtesy-title Rocksavage, his sporting prowess and, one supposes, his absurd good looks) and his wife, Sybil, an Edwardian beauty and heiress to the Sassoon and de Rothschild fortunes.

As well as her money, Sybil brought to Houghton her knowledge of art and her lively, cosmopolitan tastes. It is her Bechstein that David plays, and her friendship with Sargent that continues to be a tangible presence in the house. The American first painted Sybil in 1913 and

returned to her a decade later, refuting his often-quoted quip: 'Every time I paint a portrait I lose a friend.'

David adored his grandmother and they shared many of the same interests. Before her death in 1989, he made a television documentary about her, and later created Houghton's walled garden in her memory. For both the Cholmondeleys, Houghton's present and future lie not only in maintaining the house's artistic legacy, but in expanding it. They have turned the park into a modern pleasure ground, in which contemporary artists are invited to realise installations.

Today, Jeppe Hein's *Water Flame* rises as if by magic from a fountain, while in the quiet seclusion of a copse west of the house, a hut on stilts – created by the American artist James Turrell – offers the opportunity to sky-watch; and Damien Hirst's sculptures, still in residence after this year's summer exhibition, cast huge, strange evocations throughout the park. Inside the house, in 2013, David staged a near miraculous reconstitution of Houghton's history, when, in association with the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, he reassembled Walpole's art collection, for an exhibition that lasted nearly six months and attracted more than 115,000 visitors.

Rose too has been dipping into the house's archives, discovering in the labyrinthine attics five unused panels of hand-painted Chinese wallpaper, dating from 1769, yet still preserved of their gilt and pink, and has since worked with de Gournay to make a 'Houghton' wallpaper range, in which her bathroom will soon be covered.

Back in the family-room, the painting is finished. Leaving it to stand on its easel, we depart to examine a record of an earlier chatelaine: Sargent's wonderful late portrait of Sybil that hangs at the end of the dining-room. She wears a Spanish-inspired outfit that Sargent specially commissioned from the House of Worth. Rose has subsequently worn it, to be photographed by Tim Walker beneath the portrait. 'It is a mad, wonderful compliment,' says Dickinson, 'that my work will now be keeping company with all this.'

Phoebe Dickinson's exhibition *'Journey Through Landscape'* is at Tessa Packard, London ([www.tessapackard.com](http://www.tessapackard.com)), until 14 December.

'I HAVE ALWAYS LOVED PHOEBE'S WORK FOR CONVEYING NOT JUST A LIKENESS OF THE PERSON, BUT WHO THEY ARE'