



A tribute to the world of myth: Ovid and Holkham Hall

Thomas Coke of Holkham

Suzanne Reynolds:

Thomas Coke was born in 1697 and he was the great grandson of the Duke of Leeds. He was orphaned at the age of ten. When he was about fourteen his tutor, Mr Wilkins, wrote to the guardians that he was actually a very gifted young man, and greatly enjoyed reading the best of the classic authors, as he put it, but that he was worried about his temperament, that he was prone to strong and violent passions, and was particularly addicted to field sports, so he had to make a decision about whether to continue his education in Oxford, at Christ Church, or whether to go abroad. And it was actually decided that a tour of Europe might suit him temperamentally better, as long as he was in the company of a very strict and regular governor who would be able to control his behaviour.

This is Thomas Coke at the age of twenty, about to return to England after his six year Grand Tour in Europe. It was commissioned from an artist called Francesco Trevisani and painted in the spring of 1717 in Rome. You could see this portrait as a kind of climax of what he'd been doing on the Grand Tour. He'd spent the previous years in the company of his tutor travelling around Europe, looking at its treasures, and this I think almost is like a statement of intent and a way of showing what he has become. He's become an extremely sophisticated, cultured young gentleman, about to return and take up his inheritance.

Coke returned in 1718 and it's clear by the sort of the middle of the 1720's that he's conceiving something on a very grand scale.

Thomas Coke based his design for the marble hall on a Roman temple.

Jessica Hughes:

Thomas Coke obviously gave a lot of thought to the way that he arranged the sculptures in the various rooms at Holkham, and one brilliant example is the Marble Hall where you get plaster casts of ancient sculptures in niches. These statues were arranged in pairs facing one another, and you get oppositions or contrasts between characters so, for example, Flora on the one hand, who's the Roman goddess of prosperity and fertility, and she's paired with St. Susanna who is a Christian martyr, who was decapitated because she refused to marry the Emperor Diocletian's son, so there you've got this very clever balance of two extremes of female virtue.

Throughout its construction, the building's design was tailored to Coke's collecting.

Suzanne Reynolds:

On his return he used a series of agents to continue scouring Italy for him and the items were shipped to Wells-next-the-Sea.

Some of the sculptures in this gallery were collected by Coke on his Grand Tour.

Jessica Hughes:

Coke's use of the statues and his possession of them told the world that well, first of all, he could afford to buy the statues, he could afford to go travelling round the continent looking for them, he had the leisure time and the financial wealth to do that, but also the way that he placed them showed that it wasn't all money, it was also there was a lot of learning and culture behind that.

As well as collecting ancient statues, Coke commissioned paintings from living artists.

Suzanne Reynolds:

This huge canvas is a painting by Sebastiano Conca who was a Neapolitan painter who'd moved to Rome in the early 18th century, and Coke commissioned it from him in 1716, and paid fifty Roman crowns for the privilege. And at the centre you have Aeneas with the shade of his dead father who is in the Elysian Fields and is pointing out to his son his future progeny, and follow figures all the way round, finally meeting Augustus Caesar.

Within this classical scene, Coke commissioned a portrait of himself.

Jessica Hughes:

Coke had much more control over the 18th century paintings that he commissioned or bought because it's very easy for us to say that Coke chose this and that classical statue but, at the end of the day, there was a finite market and you did to an extent, I think, get the best statues that you could get your hands on. So that's not so much the case in the 18th century because you can just open the pages of your Ovid and pick the myth that was more resonant to you as a person.

Suzanne Reynolds:

There is a danger of over-psychologising but you know, it is important to remember that Coke was orphaned at a young age, and that this is a story all about a search for a lost father, and a search for an indication of what my future holds.

45 volumes bought in a Lyon monastery formed the nucleus of his manuscript library.

Suzanne Reynolds:

Well, the guardians had agreed to fund the tour. I don't think they quite realised what they were letting themselves in for because the Lyon purchase of about forty-five manuscripts cost 3000 livres, which was over a quarter of that year's expenditure.

Jeremy Dimmick:

Coke was certainly collecting classical texts but I think that the manuscripts, and also early printed books which he collected a lot later in his life, are another interest of his that is a little bit different from the very classical tastes that's on show in the rest of his collecting.

Suzanne Reynolds:

There are letters which beg for more money on the tour and justify his purchases, especially of books, saying that they're fundamental to his formation as a gentleman.

Jessica Hughes:

Nobody else had your same manuscript that had been illustrated by hand, and I think it gave great prestige because the manuscript, it combines that thread of learning and erudition, so the words that are actually on the page, with this idea of the object and some of it's unique to you that you can collect, a bit like a classical statue.

Suzanne Reynolds:

Even though the manuscripts themselves, or many of them were still in storage by the time he died, when the house was left unfinished, the library itself was still at the centre of his concerns and it was left to his widow to pull things together and bring the whole project to completion, which she did, I think, rather triumphantly.