

**North Carolina Museum of Art Presents Free Exhibition of Old Master
British Paintings and Sculpture**
History and Mystery exhibition features research and conservation discoveries

Raleigh, N.C.—Beginning August 6, 2016, the North Carolina Museum of Art (NCMA) presents *History and Mystery: Discoveries in the NCMA British Collection*, which showcases the best of the NCMA’s permanent collection of Old Master British paintings and sculpture from 1580 to 1850. It marks the first time in 40 years that the NCMA has organized an exhibition focused on British art from its collection.



Anchoring the exhibition is an extraordinary group of nine Elizabethan and Jacobean aristocratic portraits from about 1580 to 1620. These works have been the focus of an ongoing research project involving the NCMA Conservation and Curatorial departments and students and faculty from University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill and Duke University. The portraits were given to the Museum in 1967 by North Carolinian Col. James MacLamroc, and, because of their condition, have rarely been exhibited since. Now, after six years of research on all of the paintings and conservation treatment to four of the nine, they go on view to the public.

Several teams are conducting the collaborative research: from the NCMA, the project is led by associate conservator Perry Hurt and curator of European art Dr. David Steel; from UNC–Chapel Hill, art history research is pursued by associate professor Dr. Tatiana String and her graduate students; from Duke University, analytic research is directed by adjunct associate professor Dr. Adele de Cruz and others. More than 30 scientists, art historians, and conservators from the US and UK have contributed to the research project.

“We see these portraits as glimpses into a particular moment in time—cultural time capsules, in other words,” says Hurt. “We’ve made exciting discoveries by changing how we look at the paintings and by asking new questions.” In the six years since the project began, researchers have expanded their study, looking for clues to answer questions including:

Who:

- *Who are the people, or “sitters,” portrayed in these works?* While many of the paintings bear inscriptions identifying the sitters, research has indicated that many of the sitters cannot be those previously identified.
- *Who were the artists who painted them?* Research has shown that, although most portraits from this period have been attributed to only a few known British artists, there were actually hundreds more portrait painters active in Britain at the time than previously thought.
- *Who were the original and subsequent owners?* Researchers looked at a variety of clues to reconstruct the provenance, or ownership history, of the portrait group—such as typewritten letters, 19th-century references to the portrait group, and more.

What:

- *What may be hidden underneath the layers of paint?* Conservators used X-ray technology and reflectography to study the paintings, as well as laser technology to clean them. These tools helped them to gain insight into the original appearance of each painting, which had changed over the centuries with the fading of colors, abrasion, and overpainting by later restorers. Discoveries included finding out that an article of clothing originally featured a bright red pattern, since faded, and realizing that an entire figure was not part of the original portrait and was painted at a later date.
- *What materials were used to make these paintings?* One portrait was painted on cedar wood—a rare support material for this period. Conservators also discovered that gold leaf and silver leaf were used to accurately portray the luxurious garment worn by one sitter—an extravagant display of his wealth and social standing.

When:

- *When were these works painted?* Researchers looked for several clues to help them accurately date each painting. The most significant evidence included the fashionable garments and accessories worn by the subjects in the paintings, which enable costume historians to accurately date the clothes—and therefore the paintings.

The exhibition also provides the opportunity to reexamine familiar favorites in the collection from new perspectives and to display a few “hidden treasures” that have rarely—or never before—been on public view. Complementing the nine early portraits are works by their artistic descendants, which illustrate the subsequent development of portraiture in Britain. These Old Master British works from the NCMA’s collection include paintings by Anthony van Dyck, Sir Peter Lely, Paul van Somer, Thomas Gainsborough, Sir William Beechey, Sir Henry Raeburn, Sir Joshua Reynolds, and Sir Thomas Lawrence.

“We hope this exhibition not only triggers further discoveries and international research into these portraits and other British works of art, but also invites questioning and close looking from exhibition visitors,” says Dr. String.



History and Mystery: Discoveries in the NCMA British Collection

August 6, 2016–March 19, 2017

West Building

Free

About the Exhibition:

Organized by the North Carolina Museum of Art. This exhibition is made possible, in part, by the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources; the North Carolina Museum of Art Foundation, Inc.; and the William R. Kenan Jr. Endowment for Educational Exhibitions. Research for this exhibition was made possible by Ann and Jim Goodnight/The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fund for Curatorial and Conservation Research and Travel.

Image Captions (from top to bottom):

British School, *Portrait of a Gentleman Wearing a Breastplate*, circa 1585–90, oil on canvas, 46 1/2 x 33 5/8 in., Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James MacLamroc

Sir William Beechey, *The Oddie Children*, 1789, oil on canvas 72 x 71 7/8 in., Purchased with funds from the State of North Carolina

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About the North Carolina Museum of Art

The North Carolina Museum of Art’s permanent collection spans more than 5,000 years, from ancient Egypt to the present, making the institution one of the premier art museums in the South. The Museum’s collection provides educational, aesthetic, intellectual, and cultural experiences for the citizens of North Carolina and beyond. The 164-acre Museum Park showcases the connection between art and nature through site-specific works of environmental art. The Museum offers changing national touring exhibitions, classes, lectures, family activities, films, and concerts.

The Museum opened West Building, home to the permanent collection, in 2010. The North Carolina Museum of Art, Lawrence J. Wheeler, director, is located at 2110 Blue Ridge Road in Raleigh. It is the art museum of the State of North Carolina, Pat McCrory, governor, and an agency of the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, Susan Kluttz, secretary.