

The Courtauld Gallery at Somerset House



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Introduction by JOHN MURDOCH



THAMES AND HUDSON

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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On the cover:

(front) Vincent van Gogh, *The Crau at Arles: Peach Trees in Flower*, 1889 (detail);
(back) Frederick Mackenzie (c.1787–1854), *Porchway, Somerset House*, pencil and watercolour. Both Courtauld Gallery

Frontispiece:

Rubens, *The Death of Achilles*, c.1630–5 (detail)

For the Courtauld Institute of Art

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Elizabeth Foy and Christine Butterfield

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Samuel Courtauld, July 1936.

INTRODUCTION

by John Murdoch

The Courtauld Gallery contains some 530 paintings, over 26,000 drawings and prints, and significant collections of medieval, Renaissance and modern sculpture, ceramics, metalwork, furniture and textiles. Since 1990 it has occupied the central part of the North Block of Somerset House, one of the most important eighteenth-century buildings in Europe, where it was reunited with its parent body, the Courtauld Institute of Art, one of the world's leading organizations for research into and teaching of the history of Western art. The Gallery is open to the public and, like any other major art museum, provides a full range of public services. Its special character, however, derives from two aspects of its history: first, that it directly supports the teaching programmes of the Courtauld Institute and the University of London; and second, that it is made up of a series of formerly private collections, each of considerable significance in the history of collecting, and each containing works of art of memorable beauty and historical importance. Unlike most of the other major art museums in London, however, it is wholly a creation of the twentieth century. It owes its inception to the imagination and generosity of Samuel Courtauld, who established it, originally in his house, 20 Portman Square, as a memorial to his wife Elizabeth following her death in 1931.

Samuel Courtauld (1876–1947)

Courtauld was descended from a Huguenot family which first settled in London and the south-east of England in the late seventeenth century; they were active as silversmiths in the eighteenth century, and became prosperous as manufacturers of silk crepe for mourning throughout the nineteenth. With the decline in demand for mourning clothes at the turn of the century, the family firm established itself as the leading world producer of the first important artificial textile, known as Rayon, and, expanding to meet the huge demand created by World War I, became the great multi-national company still in existence today. Samuel Courtauld became its Chairman in 1921, inheriting both the accumulated cash reserves of the company built up during the war years, and the glittering prospects for expansion provided by the new peacetime industries, from clothing to motor-vehicle tyres. In the course of the necessary financial restructuring of the company, he became, as a major shareholder, immensely rich, but as a man of high spiritual and moral consciousness, he shared also the common post-war determination to make the world a better and more 'modern'

place. He and his wife therefore engaged actively in London charities, and were invariably among the earliest and most generous donors to worthy causes, especially those directed at the aesthetic and spiritual advancement of mankind. Elizabeth was principally associated with the establishment and financing of the Covent Garden Opera and with the Wigmore Hall concerts founded by Malcolm Sargent in 1929, and Samuel with the National and Tate Galleries, the building of his own collection, and the encouragement of young British artists.

Courtauld's interest in art had originally been aroused when he saw Italian Renaissance painting in which, during his wedding journey to Florence with Elizabeth in 1901, he 'perceived a wonderful mastery allied with strong emotion and with life itself; . . . strong and exciting currents still flowing beneath the surface of the paint'. Such responses were definitively reawakened by the spectacle of the Hugh Lane collection, shown at the Tate Gallery in 1917. It demonstrated to him that the formal and emotional qualities of the Old Master tradition were alive and well in the 'modern' French school, especially in Manet, Renoir and Degas. It was this perception which led, as part of his charitable enterprises, to his determination to secure a suitable representation of works by these painters in the British national collections. He therefore gave £50,000 to the nation, to be spent on paintings which would be chosen, largely by himself, with the agreement of the respective Directors of the Tate and National Galleries. The purchases which he made now count among the most famous nineteenth-century works in the National Gallery – Renoir's *Première Sortie*, Degas's *Young Spartans*, Manet's *Servante des Bocks*, Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, Seurat's *Bathing Party*, and many others. At the same time, he began acquiring works for his own private collection, acting – as he did with his public purchases – partly on the advice of the dealer Percy Moore Turner, but principally in accordance with his own sense of the formal and emotional properties of particular works. In the private collection, as it can largely now be seen in the Courtauld Gallery, there is evidence of some system, both of emotional or visual balance between individual works, and of an effort to represent in depth a period or type of painting, such as the early paintings by Renoir, or Cézanne as a painter of landscape. By 1925, Courtauld knew that the paintings were to hang in the house that he and his wife acquired at this time, the great aristocratic town-house of the Dowager Countess of Home, built by Robert Adam in 1774. Under their supervision, the house was painstakingly restored, the pictures hung by Percy Moore Turner, and the Courtaulds, with their only child, a



Home House, 20 Portman Square: drawing room with paintings from Samuel Courtauld's collection.

daughter named Sydney after her paternal grandfather, moved in, intending the house to be a centre and symbol of a modernity in touch with all that was best in the past. Their entertaining was spectacular. At one party Courtauld took Sydney and her new husband, R.A. Butler, aside and said, 'I hope you will both understand if I give this house and its contents to the nation.' Three years later, in 1929, while on holiday in Canada, Mrs Courtauld suffered the first painful symptoms of cancer. In the same year, the collapse of stock prices on Wall Street and the first signs of anti-monopolistic trade legislation in the U.S. Congress signalled that for companies like Courtaulds the halcyon days were over. Samuel Courtauld stopped collecting; his wife died on Christmas Day 1931, and in her memory he established the house, their joint enterprise, which he could no longer bear to live in, to be a centre for the international community of artists, art historians, museum curators and critics, who would be enrolled in an organization known as the Home House Society. With supporting trusts for the maintenance of the house and its

collections, the Home House Society (today known as the Samuel Courtauld Trust) assumed ownership of a major part of Samuel Courtauld's private collection in 1932 and 1934, acquiring the rest, except for a number of pictures which were bequeathed by Courtauld to members of his family and particular friends, following his death in 1947.

Arthur Lee, Viscount Lee of Farnham (1868–1947)

It was Arthur Lee who conceived the idea that Britain should possess an institution for the teaching of art history to the rising generations of museum curators, critics and scholars. A soldier, diplomat, politician and administrator of great distinction, he had served extensively in Canada and the United States, marrying the daughter of a New York banker, and becoming an admirer of East Coast 'brahmin' culture, especially as exemplified at Harvard University and the newly founded Fogg Art



Philip de Laszlo, *Interior: The Viscount and Viscountess Lee of Fareham*, oil on canvas, 1925 (81.9 x 106.7 cm). Viscountess Lee gift.

Museum. Having formed a large collection of furniture and works of art at Chequers, his house in Buckinghamshire, in 1917 he and his wife Ruth turned it into a Trust to be used as an official country residence for successive Prime Ministers. He forthwith began a second collection, which he intended eventually to support the teaching of the history of art in a suitable university institution. In 1927 these ideas began to reach fruition when he persuaded Sir Gregory Foster, Vice-Chancellor of the University of London, to take the necessary steps. By 1929, the proposal had been approved by the Council, a suitable site earmarked on University land in Bloomsbury, curricula outlined and a possible director identified. Lee himself undertook to raise the necessary money, securing major contributions from Lord Duveen, Sir Robert Witt, Sir Herbert Cook, Alderman John Gross of Sheffield, Sir Martin Conway, and from Samuel Courtauld. But in the deteriorating economic circumstances, funds remained short of the amount required, and throughout the next two years little happened. Even Courtauld, whom Lee

approached for further help, was feeling the pinch, so instead of giving more money he suggested that the new institution, with its new director W.G. Constable, should move into the empty house at 20 Portman Square as a temporary measure, until the economy improved and the site in Bloomsbury could be developed. The Institute accordingly opened, accepting its first cohort of students in the autumn of 1932. In the event, the long Depression of the 1930s followed by World War II meant that the Institute never did effect the move to Bloomsbury, beside the Warburg Library, which Arthur Lee also personally intervened to save and bring to England from Hamburg in 1934, as part of the new institution. Lee declined the honour of having the Institute named after him, suggesting instead that, in recognition of the crucial role played by Courtauld in bringing the project to fruition, it should be named The Courtauld Institute of Art.

Under that name, and in the great house in Portman Square, the Institute acquired much of its special, intimate and, some would say, *élite* character. Courtauld himself seems to have been

pleased with its development, which gave a practical point to his establishment of the Home House Society. Lee died in 1947, bequeathing his collection to the University of London for the use of the Courtauld Institute, but with a life interest to his wife. In 1955 it was formally decided that the Institute would remain in Portman Square, and that the works of art should instead be displayed in purpose-built galleries on the site beside the Warburg Institute in Bloomsbury. For the opening of the galleries in 1958, Ruth Lee resigned her interest in the collection, which thus constituted the principal part of the historic displays in the new galleries.

The Lee Collection, it must be remembered, was always intended to provide exemplars for teaching. Beauty, fame and brilliant condition were less important to Lee than the relationship of a particular painting to the historical development of art as a whole. As a trustee of both the National Gallery and the Wallace Collection, he was well aware that the greatest works of art would be available in the national institutions in London, but that 'background', both in stylistic and technical terms, was

nonetheless necessary for academic study. Thus, the close craft relationship between painters, gilders, carvers and joiners in the Italian Renaissance workshops can be studied in Lee's group of painted marriage chests, which include the spectacular and extremely important Morelli-Nerli *cassoni* of 1472. Lee's relatively academic criteria did not indeed impede him from acquiring world-famous masterpieces, such as Rubens's sketch for the Antwerp *Descent from the Cross*, Cranach's *Adam and Eve*, or even, among his English pictures, Eworth's *Sir John Luttrell*, and the Lely *Concert Party* (all reproduced in this book).

The other founding collections

The names of Martin Conway (1856–1937) and Robert Witt (1872–1952) have remained familiar to generations of art historians through their collections of photographs documenting architecture, sculpture and the applied arts, and European painting. These constitute respectively the Conway and the Witt



Cassone (chest for household linen), Florence, 1472; one of a pair carved by Zanobi di Domenico and with painted decoration by Jacopo del Sellaio and Biagio d'Antonio. The two chests, each 212 cm in width and featuring scenes from Livy's *Histories*, were commissioned by Lorenzo di Matteo di Morelli on the occasion of his marriage to Vaggia di Tanai di Francesco Nerli; the arms of the two families are displayed on the front corners of each *cassone*. Lee Collection.

Opposite, above:
Muirhead Bone (1876–1954),
Sir Robert Witt in his Library.
Witt Collection.

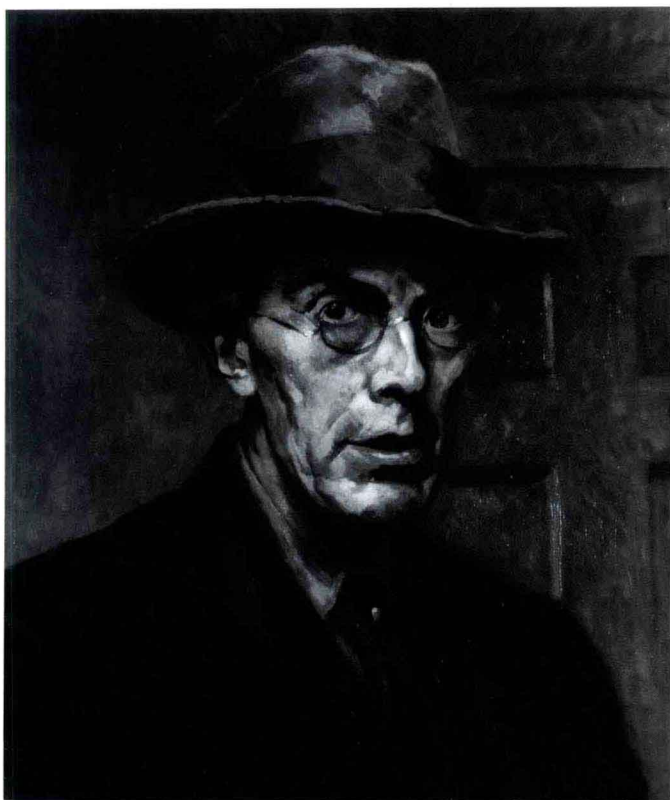
Opposite below:
Thomas Gainsborough (1727–88),
*Wooded Landscape with Herdsmen
Driving Cattle over a Bridge*.
Witt Collection.





Guercino (Gianfrancesco Barbieri; 1591–1666),
Women Drying their Hair. Witt Collection.

Left: Roger Fry, *Self-portrait*, oil on canvas, 1928.



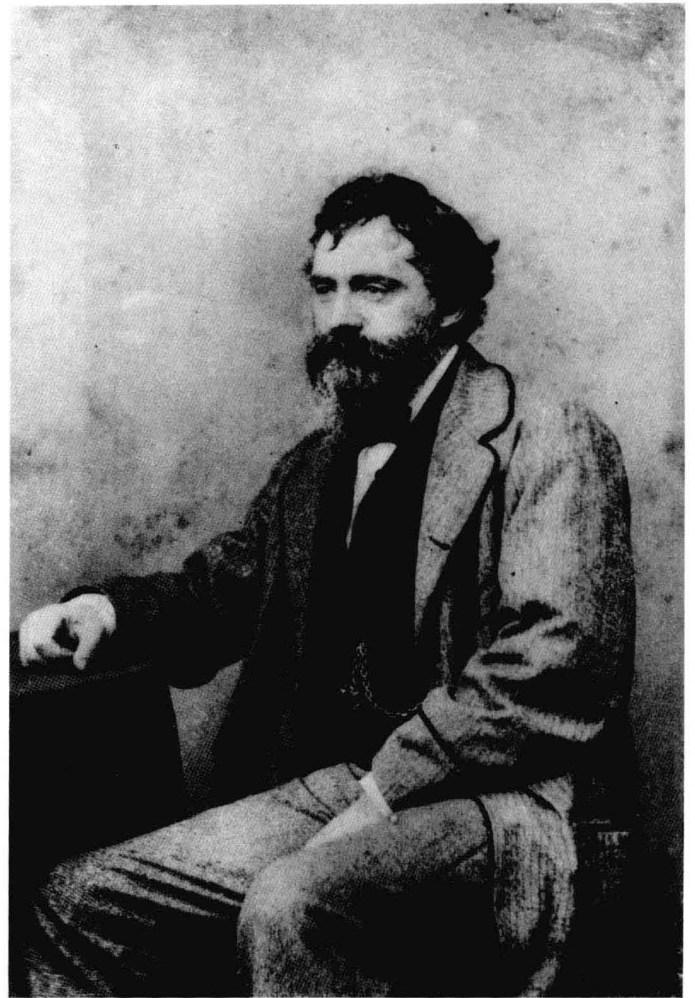
libraries of the Courtauld Institute, and are a vital resource for research by the whole community of scholars and art dealers in Britain. As well as photographs of paintings, Witt collected prints, firstly reproductive prints, but subsequently original Old Master prints and drawings for their own sake. As with Lee, his approach to works of art on paper was primarily academic, seeking to ensure the representation, for example, of the lesser Netherlandish masters, rather than concentrating on the great names which were, of course, already available for study at the British Museum. Again, however, the collection contains individual sheets which have become famous, such as the Bruegel *Kermesse at Hoboken* of 1559, and whole groups, such as the stunning series of drawings by Guercino, which certainly rival in quality those in the British Museum and Royal Collections. Witt also followed Lee's example in bequeathing his collections to the University, and for long they remained part of the Witt Library, becoming fully integrated with the principal collections

in the Gallery, and open to the public in a purpose-built Print Room, only in 1990.

Among the public supporters of Lee's initiative in founding the Courtauld Institute was Roger Fry (1866–1934), formerly Curator of Old Master paintings at the Metropolitan Museum, New York, and subsequently a key promoter of 'modern' art in Britain, who imparted through his critical writings an enthusiasm for, and belief in the spiritual significance of art, which became a substitute for religion in many readers, such as Samuel Courtauld. It was possibly with Courtauld, therefore, rather than with Lee, that he felt the greater sympathy, recognizing in the former a readiness to support the living arts, and to find aesthetic excellence outside the canon of academic art history. Fry bequeathed to Courtauld's Home House Society examples of his own paintings, important designs by the artists associated with the Omega Workshops (founded by him in 1913), and objects, such as the African *Head*, which, within the Fry aesthetic, were accorded at least equal status with the greatest works of European art. Fry's intention was that his collection should be seen in a special room in Home House, in association with Courtauld's pictures, there constituting a firm declaration in favour of an 'open' modernism in art.



Head, African dancing mask from Ulvira, Lake Tanganyika; height 61 cm. Fry Collection.



Thomas Gambier Parry (1816–88).

The later Benefactors

Established in Woburn Square and connected to the outside world by a small and famously slow lift, the combined collections after 1958 began to acquire their reputation as 'London's best-kept secret': amazing in quality, and a wonderfully private experience for the few visitors, including the students of the Courtauld Institute, who found their way there. The success of the Gallery soon led to other benefactions, the first of which was the bequest in 1966 by Mark Gambier-Parry of the greater part of the collection formed by his grandfather, Thomas Gambier Parry (1816–88) for his house, Highnam Court, in Gloucestershire. Like Thomas Roscoe and Walter Bromley Davenport, Thomas Gambier Parry was one of a small group of nineteenth-century British collectors who appreciated the aesthetic and historical importance of the Italian 'primitives'. His collection is thus principally famous for the gold-ground paintings of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, such as the *Crucifixion* polyptych by Bernardo Daddi and *The Coronation of the Virgin*



Islamic wallet, brass with silver and gold inlay, mid-thirteenth century. Gambier-Parry Collection.

by Lorenzo Monaco. Beyond the paintings, however, the collection extends into fields which, in the mid-nineteenth century, were also beginning to attract scholarly attention, such as French ivory carving, Limoges enamels, Italian maiolica and even Islamic silver-inlay metalwork. The collection was published in a special edition of the *Burlington Magazine* in March 1967, with articles by the leading Anglo-American scholars in the various fields.

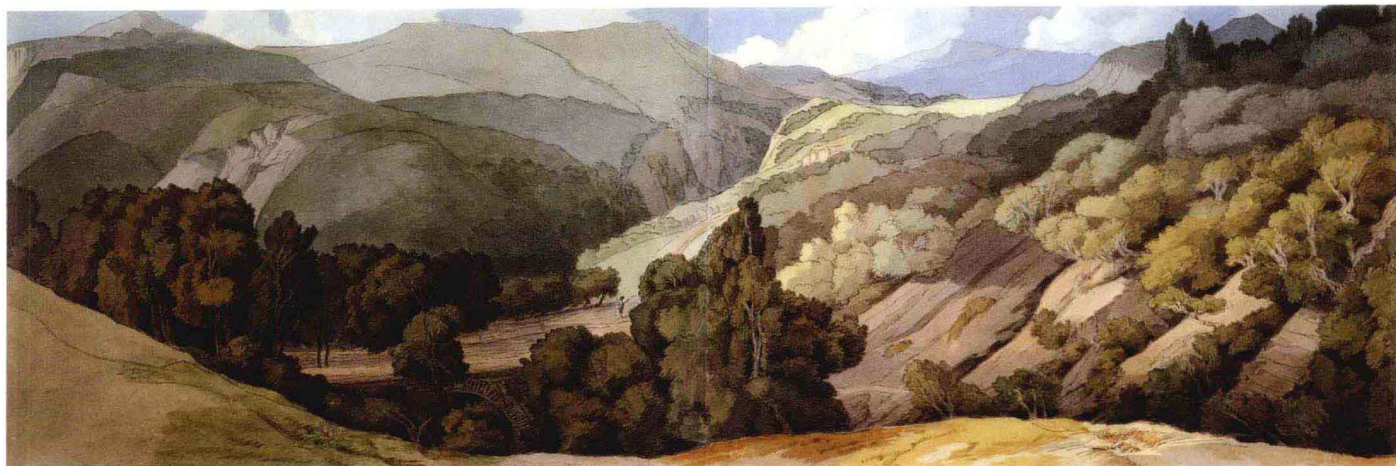
The announcement of the Gambier-Parry Bequest was quickly followed by the bequest to the University in 1967 of the collection of English watercolours formed by Dr William Wycliffe Spooner (1882–1967) and his wife Mercie. In combination with the English eighteenth-century drawings in the Witt Collection, the Spooner Collection (among post-war collections second only to that formed by Paul Mellon in the 1950s and early 1960s) helped to establish the Gallery as one of the major centres for the study of English draughtsmanship. Mostly in superb condition, the watercolours include notable works by J.R. Cozens and Francis Towne, and were immediately made the subject of a special exhibition. A few years later, with the death of Sir Stephen Courtauld (1883–1974), the younger brother of Samuel, the potential strength of the English displays was increased with the bequest of a group of drawings by J.M.W. Turner, both major finished pieces such as the *Crook of Lune* from the Richmondshire series, and examples of the artist's astonishing, essentially private sketches, such as the *Storm over Margate Sands*. Like all works of art on paper, these watercolours can be displayed only occasionally, but they also soon formed

the subject of a special exhibition in 1974, and are now always available to be seen by appointment in the Gallery Print Room.

The 1970s closed with one of the greatest single benefactions ever received by a British gallery. This was the collection built up by Count Antoine Seilern (1901–78), born in England, the son of Count Carl Seilern and his wife, the American-born newspaper heiress Antoinette Woerischoffer (1875–1901), who died at his birth. With characteristic modesty, he originally intended that his bequest to the Home House Society should bear his mother's name rather than his own, but settled instead for the 'Princes Gate Collection', after the location of his London house.

Having been in his youth a keen hunter of big game, and a race-horse breeder and owner, he developed a serious academic interest in the history of art, and became a close friend of Johannes Wilde, at that time a curator at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, and subsequently Deputy Director of the Courtauld Institute. Wilde, one of the most acute connoisseurs in Europe of the technical qualities of works of art, together with the great Dutch scholar Ludwig Burchard and the Austrian restorer Sebastian Isepp, advised Seilern on his acquisitions and on the series of catalogues raisonnés which Seilern progressively printed throughout his life for private circulation. Many of his most significant acquisitions were made through James Byam Shaw of Colnaghi's, and they reflect not only Seilern's essentially scholarly approach to collecting – as in the systematic groupings of sketches by Rubens and Tiepolo – but also a brilliant opportunism in securing great finished works of art from all schools and periods. These range from the *Entombment* triptych by the Master of Flémalle, through the great Rubens *Landscape by Moonlight*, and include world-famous drawings by all the principal European draughtsmen, such as Michelangelo's *Dream of Human Life*. Though the centre of his intellectual life was undoubtedly in the great tradition of European Old Master painting and drawing, Seilern, like Courtauld, was also deeply interested in art as a living process. It is to Seilern accordingly that the Gallery owes the presence of one of its most important twentieth-century works, the enormous *Prometheus* triptych of 1950 by his friend Oskar Kokoschka.

It was always implicit in Courtauld's vision of the memorial to his wife that it should engage with the art of the present century. It was therefore particularly welcome when the collection formed by Dr Alistair Hunter (1909–83) mostly in the 1970s was bequeathed to the University. The collection is chiefly distinguished for the series of major works by Ivon Hitchens, an



Francis Towne (1740–1816), *Near Devil's Bridge, Central Wales*, watercolour. Spooner Collection.



J.M.W. Turner, *The Crook of Lune, looking towards Hornby Castle*, pencil, watercolour and body colour, c.1816–18. Stephen Courtauld bequest.

artist whom Hunter particularly admired, but it contains also British classics such as *Painting 1937* by Ben Nicholson and the study for the Tate Gallery's *Origins of the Land* of 1950 by Graham Sutherland. Like Courtauld, Hunter was essentially an *amateur* of art, with a keen and discriminating eye. Lillian Browse on the other hand was, and happily remains, a thorough professional. One of the first women to break into the charmed masculine circle of the London art trade, she was a key member of the well-known firm Roland, Browse and Delbanco, which dominated sales of contemporary British art to museums throughout the country during the 1950s and 1960s. In the course of her work, Miss Browse built up a personal collection of drawings, paintings and sculptures, including an especially distinguished group of paintings by Walter Sickert, drawings by Henry Moore and bronzes by Degas and Rodin. In 1984 she presented her collection to the University of London for display, after her death, at the Courtauld Gallery.

Despite these generous gifts and bequests, the adequate representation of the art of the twentieth century and beyond remains a challenge for the Gallery. The justice of Courtauld's essential conviction that European art had been renewed through the work of the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists is to some extent belied by the absence of great works of the Fauve or Cubist movements, or major works of German Expressionism or American abstraction. Both for teaching purposes, and to fulfil the character of the displays, it is most desirable that this gap should be filled. The problem is partly one of space, for so much of the most important work by twentieth-century artists has been on a very large scale. More profoundly, it is a question of the Gallery's nature and historic character, as a collection of collections. On that basis it seems necessary to await – but with a confidence based on the experience of the past – further great benefactions to take the Gallery into the new century.



Count Antoine Seilern
(1901–78).



Michelangelo (1475–1546),
The Dream of Human Life,
black chalk (39.6 x 28 cm).
Princes Gate Collection.