

# CASTLEGATE HOUSE GALLERY

## Lord Lambton and family by Carel Weight (RA) – c 1965

*Lord Lambton and Family*, painted in 1965, is a large oil on canvas measuring 100.5 by 126 cm. Atmospheric settings and implicit ambiguity are characteristic features of Carel Weight's oeuvre. Many of his paintings see human dramas unfold in English suburban settings, depicting situations which are sometimes humorous and sometimes frightening. Combined with their social realism, Weight's paintings often convey a feeling of risk and sadness. They present a cryptic 'Edvard Munch-like tableaux of modern city life,' often with a sense that there is something happening adjacent to what the viewer can see on the canvas. While this particular work observes the uncertainty and intrigue of Weight's body of work, the portrait's sitters are fathoms beyond suburbia.

*Lord Lambton and his Family* does not present city life, it presents the illustrious Lambton family, figures of the English establishment. This painting offers a most striking treatment of the Lambton family and its dynamics. Lord Lambton relinquished his peerage to become an MP, and both his acquiescent position in the work and the absence of Lambton's wife, Belinda Bridget 'Bindy' Blew-Jones, and one of his daughters, leaves much to consider in the work's visual character.

The family itself is one of the earliest and still persistent themes in British portraiture. It also preserves the sitter and their kin in a specific aspect, and cherishes the importance of the family. During early modernity, the family portrait was a public image, more preoccupied with the sitter as a symbol than truly recording people. Noble families sought to be represented through a rigid set of conventions. The depicted family, a father, flanked by his obedient wife and offspring, embodied familial pride through both the conventions of genre and the patriarchal desires of the commissioner. The appointed artist was thus tasked to render the current generation of a family as witness to 'a genealogical tree made flesh'; a reverberation of the father's strength, the mother's warmth, and the children's deference.

Adjustments were made as aristocratic family portraiture evolved. Artistic portrayals which had previously been public images became more preoccupied with celebrating a private sphere. The specifications of a commissioned portrait developed in tandem with the shifting social positions of women and children. By the late 18th century, there was a clear interest in more 'natural' depictions of families and a discernible shift in the representation of children. Children and adolescents were complimentary figures to their parents, miniature versions of their father or mother, in uncomfortable and dignified clothes. Nevertheless, family portraiture illustrated a delight in the innocence of children, corresponding with the slow recognition of childhood as a distinct stage in human experience.

Family portraits of the 18th and 19th centuries present views of well born families in ostensibly less affected situations. Instead of an obedient wife and offspring arranged around the father, their monarch, as they had been in the portraiture of the 16th century, they were now seen engaging with everyday activities. The sitters would also be set further back in the picture space, thanks to the master stroke of the three-dimensional illusion, inviting the viewer to consider the group's home and belongings. As such, the 'conversation piece' portrait - of a family in an imagined scenario, perhaps in an elegant drawing room or garden - became the dominant mode.

There are certainly aspects of *Lord Lambton and his Family* which are consistent with these characteristics of British family portraiture. Like the conversation pieces of the 18th century, the work invites the viewer to consider the sitters' residence and their possessions. As the

conversation piece shows the family at play, so too Weight's painting reveals the Lambtons at rest. But for every accord there appears a caveat. There is a dearth of familial pride - the genesis of orthodox family portraiture. Where commonly there would be an evocation of the pleasure of childhood, here there is a degree of coldness.

Nonetheless, Lambton's young family are shown as distinct people. They are children, unlike the miniature adults of earlier aristocratic family portraits. The siblings' positions may suggest tension within their relationships. The children sit close to each other but they do not make eye contact. Edward Richard Lambton, the youngest child and only son, and his sister both sit on a red sofa. The pair are markedly still, and Edward is as far into the sofa arm as he can be. For such a young child to be depicted as so motionless is striking. Weight's treatment of Lambton's daughter sitting awkwardly on the floor at the feet of her older sister suggests a similar discomposure. Her face is strangely old, and Weight's treatment of her character almost anticipates the contorted bodies and expressions of Paula Rego's work.

Lambton is decidedly apart, and he blends into the wallpaper. His eldest daughter, sitting in the green chair, is the only person in the image with an object. As the children's mother is absent, it could be inferred that Lucinda - 22 at the time of this painting - takes a maternal role. Her youngest siblings sit closest to her, perhaps while she reads to them. Regardless, her gaze cuts across the room and her posture remains stiff. The daughter to the extreme left leans against the sofa in a closed posture, looking to the ground. Her hair falls on creased clothing, reflected in a spotless grand piano, and she puts her hands together uneasily.

Weight's unpolished portrayal perhaps suggests a sensitivity to their difficulty. As the family are in the privacy of their spacious home it is difficult to identify the cause of their discomfort. But their untidiness and awkwardness is suggestive of the artist's sympathy toward the children. Weight, who grew up in the shabby end of Chelsea, may have seen a confining absence of childhood for Lambton's children which was comparable to some of his own experiences in youth.

Where there is often menace in Weight's paintings, here there is stillness. Lambton is marginalised in the left corner of the work, his stature small. He looks across the room and past his children. Lambton was elected MP for Berwick upon Tweed in 1951. Concerned with cross-party initiatives, such as the passage of the Obscene Publications Act in 1959, and advocating the decriminalisation of cannabis, it is possible such distinctive opinions would have always disbarred Lambton from ascension within the Conservative Party. A slight presence in the back corner of the room, he is likely the last subject the viewer will turn to.

To the right of Lambton are a set of equestrian paintings and ornaments, and toward the centre of the canvas there is an enigmatic military portrait. It is only half within view, concealed by an open door. Honouring tradition, and work in the style of - or very possibly by - George Stubbs in a British aristocratic home is quite predictable. The decor is quintessentially upper-class English, and as such also includes an item from far away, an impressive chinoiserie screen, in this case. Equestrian imagery often connotes legacy, prestige and refinement - horses have featured in conversation piece family portraits to further evidence affluence and the pleasure of rural life - and the military image will likely relate to a member of the Lambton family. Weight himself was an official War Artist in Italy during the Second World War. This role afforded him travel to places such as Vietnam and Greece, and he described the experience as a 'scholarship from the army'. Lambton, on the other hand, was quickly invalided out of the army due to eye trouble. He went on to meet his wife while working in a munitions factory in 1941. Neither the subject nor the artist's war time experiences are typical.

The conventionality of the Lambtons' decor places the atmosphere of the image further off kilter. A portrayal of such a beautiful home would usually accentuate a representation of a warm family. The painting's sitters are set before their elegant background, so predictable in its tastefulness it might as well be blank, meaning total focus is drawn to the internal relations of the family.

This work is listed as *Lord Lambton and his Family*. With the character of the work in mind, and the psychological bent of Weight's work, it is perhaps of note that, when exhibited in the RA's 1998 Summer Exhibition, the work was titled as *Lord Lambton's Family*. This is a rather more charged description of Weight's painting; while Lambton is the commissioner and only named sitter, his family, as both individuals and as an indefinite assemblage of shared experiences and differing memories, are the focal point. The Lambton family settled a lengthy legal battle in 2014, but their complicated lives remain through this powerful and disquieting work.

Castlegate House Gallery Ltd  
Cockermouth  
Cumbria  
CA13 9HA

01900 822149 07920 836874