

Drawing Hoard



For years early British drawings have been neglected by the art market, making now the perfect time to collect, writes dealer Jonny Yarker

Where are the neglected areas of the market? As an art dealer, this is a question I get asked a lot. One answer is British drawings made before 1750; it may sound counter-intuitive, but earlier material is far less fashionable than the 'golden age' of watercolour painting, dominated by the titans such as John Robert Cozens, J.M.W. Turner and Thomas Girtin.

That is why, just over a decade ago, we began to put together a collection of early British drawings with the idea of mounting an exhibition and putting together a catalogue, something we are finally realising this summer.

This month's exhibition, entitled *The Spirit and Force of Art: Drawing in Britain 1600 – 1750* at London Lowell Libson & Jonny Yarker Ltd, contains almost 100



Above Isaac Oliver (c.1565-1617) *The Annunciation to the Shepherds*, watercolour on card, 127mm (5in) in diameter

Below Peter Oliver (1594–1647), a sheet of figure studies showing a seated woman and two subsidiary studies of standing figures, pen and ink, 1620s, 172 x 222mm (6¾ x 8¾in)

drawings and includes works priced from £250,000 to around £1,000. It offers an unprecedented opportunity to start collecting in a fascinating and little explored area of British art.

Early British drawings have been surprisingly neglected by the market and collectors, both private and institutional. Drawings made in Britain before 1750 are frequently not only very beautiful, but tell an important story about the development of British art in the century and a half before the foundation of the Royal Academy.

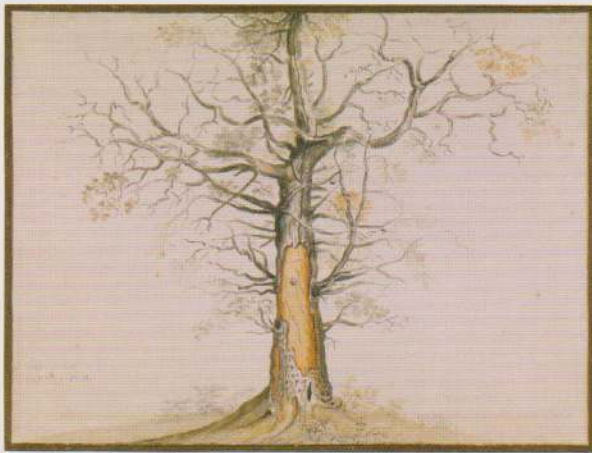
WHAT DO WE MEAN BY EARLY BRITISH DRAWING?

The key date in British art is the foundation of the Royal Academy in London in 1768. Most scholars – and collectors – focus on the decades after the foundation of the Academy, neglecting earlier artists and their works. But the Academy emerged from a rich culture of drawing. Artists drew to learn, first by copying engravings and then by drawing antique casts and, eventually, the living model.

Drawings were used throughout the artistic process, as first thoughts (or sketches), as more finished studies and even as works of art in themselves. Sixteenth-century British artists were particularly famous for their minutely finished watercolour portraits and historical scenes.

This was a technique known as limning, the most famous exponents of which were Nicholas Hilliard (1547-1609) and his pupil, Isaac Oliver (1565-1617). The term British is a little misleading. For one thing, most of the celebrated artists working in Britain in the period 1600-1750 were not, in fact, British.





**Gentlemen
ARTISTS**

The rise of drawing in Britain in the 1600s saw gentleman, many of whom had been taught to draw as part of their Grand Tour, take up art. The exhibition includes an amazing image of a tree struck by lightning made in 1718 by William Byron, 4th Baron Byron, the great-grandfather of the famous poet. The watercolour points to both the interest in recording natural phenomena and evidence for the pre-history of British landscape watercolours.

Great portrait painters such as Anthony Van Dyck (1599-1641) and Peter Lely (1618-1680) were not born in Britain: Van Dyck was born in Antwerp, in Flanders and settled in Britain permanently, working at the court of King Charles I in 1632. Lely, a native of Soest in Germany, moved to Britain in 1641.

This was a tradition that continued into the 18th century when many of the most important artistic personalities were from Continental Europe. Great figures of British 18th-century art, such as William Hogarth (1697-1764) and Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788) were taught by French draughtsman working in Britain; we can, in effect say, that they had a European training in London.



Above left William Byron, (1669-1736) *A tree struck by lightning*, 1718, watercolour over pencil on laid paper, 200 x 265mm (7 x 10½in). Inscribed and dated lower left

Above right Bernard Lens III (1682-1740) *Male Academy*, red chalk on laid paper, 467 x 325mm (18 x 12¾in). Signed and dated 'B Lens 1716 Nov 13', lower right

Left Thornhill, Sir James, (1675-1734) A study for a ceiling design, pen and brown and grey inks and wash over pencil, 245 x 195mm (9¾ x 7¾in)



COLLECT LIKE A GEORGIAN

Lots of the sheets in the exhibition have small sets of initials stamped in the corners. These are the collector's marks of earlier owners. Several of the earliest drawings are stamped: *PL*, for Peter Lely.

The immediacy of drawings appealed to early collectors, who appreciated the presence of artist at

Drawing Techniques

Typically, 16th and 17th-century artists sketched their intended composition in pen and ink before moving on to chalk to more carefully depict individual figures, and to study the fall of light and shadow. Blue paper worked well with chalk – with artists often choosing two shades from black, white or red, and sometimes all three.

Many artists used grids to assist them in creating larger or smaller-scale copies. The grid was drawn over the original study, while another grid marked out the desired scale on the surface where the image was to be reproduced. The artist could then copy the part of the design that appeared in each square at the new size. This technique is still in use today.

Once these initial sketches had been made, the artist would move on to a finished study, which would be submitted to the patron for approval. These might even have to be squared, to allow the artist to transfer a composition to canvas more easily – or, in the case of a fresco, to the wall.



Left Bernard Lens III (1682–1740) *Hercules Between Virtue and Pleasure*, after Nicolas Poussin, body colour on vellum, 380 x 300mm (15 x 11in). Signed in gold with initials and dated 1719, lower right

Right Francis Le Piper (1640–1695) *Head study of a preacher*, pen and ink and grey wash over pencil 125 x 95mm (4 x 3¾in)

Below Michel van Overbeek (1650–1680) *A view of Westminster showing Westminster Abbey, Westminster Hall and St Margaret's Church from St James's Park*, pen and ink and sepia wash, 110 x 215mm (4 x 8½in). The show contains four drawings of St James's Park and Hyde Park by the Dutch merchant and draughtsman, Michel van Overbeek. The pen and ink drawings offer fascinating evidence of London's parks before their remodelling by King Charles II



LIMNING HIGHLIGHT

Another masterpiece of limning, this time by Bernard Lens III (1682–1740), is another highlight of this month's exhibition. It was painted in 1719, after a celebrated work by Nicolas Poussin, then in the collection of the great collector James Brydges, 1st Duke of Chandos.

Lens was the son of Bernard Lens II (1659/60–1725), a draftsman and drawing master at Christ's Hospital, London. Although remembered as a painter of miniatures, the younger Lens was also a prolific draftsman and drawing master who counted among his pupils Horace Walpole and the three children of King George II (William Augustus, Mary, and Louisa).

Executed in gouache on vellum and housed in its original 'Lens' frame, this work points to Lens' fascination with the tradition of miniature painting in Britain and to the enduring appeal of finely worked miniaturised copies of celebrated old masters for British collectors.

Like all of Lens' surviving copies, this work was recorded in the auction of Lens' Collection held by Christopher Cock in Covent Garden in 1737.

work, experimenting with ideas and designs, in contrast to finished paintings.

Peter Oliver's sheet of exquisite figure studies points both to the rich visual world of Charles I's court and to the fact that unfinished sketches were highly valued. The Parmigianesque drawing, on page 53, was copied by Inigo Jones, in a sheet now at Chatsworth House and was owned by a string of early collectors. Look out for these marks, they can tell you a great deal about the provenance, or history, of the sheets.

START SMALL

I have been conscious of including in the catalogue a range of drawings for under £5,000. These include works by some very considerable figures such as Sir James Thornhill (1675–1734), Britain's greatest decorative history painter who was responsible for the ceiling in the Painted Hall at Greenwich and the dome of St Paul's Cathedral; John Michael Rysbrack (1694–1770), Britain's most influential sculptor in the first half of the 18th century and John Vanderbank (1694–1739), a talented portraitist who was a major figure, who founded the St Martin's Lane Academy.

There are also unusual sheets by rare figures such as Francis Le Piper. A 17th-century artist who was described by his early biographer: '*his genius leading him wholly to design... drawing took up all his time, and all his thoughts; and being of a gay, facetious humour, his manner was humorous or comical.*'

Only a handful of Le Piper's drawings survive and the example above has a provenance stretching back to the 17th century. It is being offered for £2,800.

The Spirit and Force of Art: Drawing in Britain 1600 – 1750, part of London Art Week, runs at London Lowell Libson & Jonny Yarker Ltd. 3 Clifford Street, London, from June 20 to July 6. To read more about London Art Week turn to page 65.

