



Ambassador's Activities

2013

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Speech by HE Bernard Emié,
French Ambassador to the United Kingdom

at the inauguration of the exhibition “The Discovery of Paris”

Wallace Collection, 19 June 2013

Sir John,

Cher Christoph Vogtherr,

Distinguished guests,

Entering the Wallace Collection always gives a Frenchman a special frisson, because this is essentially a French oasis in the heart of London, adorned with the finest creations of the Age of Enlightenment.

Cher Christoph Vogtherr, as a Berliner who has settled in London, you're the most enthusiastic spokesman of 18th-century France, where so many intellectual and artistic friendships were forged that spanned Europe!

Of course, the fact that the Wallace Collection is today an outstanding showcase of French art is primarily thanks to the fourth Marquess of Hertford and Sir Richard Wallace. But it's also thanks to the work of the Wallace Collection's curators, who, all year long, excite the interest of today's public through exhibitions of remarkable quality.

I'm thinking, *cher* Christoph Vogtherr, of the pride of place you gave to Watteau in your exhibition "Esprit et Vérité" in 2011.

I'm also thinking of the repeated incursions your curators have made into 19th-century France, honouring geniuses from "Poussin to Seurat" in 2010 and reviving the memory of Paul Delaroche.

And I hope I'm not revealing any secrets by saying that, in the autumn, the Wallace Collection will be hosting an exhibition dedicated to the male nude in 19th-century French drawings.

For the special place you grant our artists – painters and draughtsmen but also cabinetmakers and ceramic artists –, I want to express France's full gratitude to you. I know that you plan to strengthen this centre of excellence still further by establishing at the Wallace Collection a veritable research hub on 18th-century France, and that partnerships are already under way with the University of Lille. It's obviously a project very close to our hearts; rest assured of our support and willingness to help you carry it through successfully.

But this evening, it's the 19th century that is being celebrated.

You've chosen some interesting dates: 1802-1840. For those who know a little about relations between those "sweet enemies", France and the United Kingdom, it's not the simplest period to tackle!

After the Treaty of Amiens, which lasted only a few months, every year brought new battles: Trafalgar, Austerlitz, Iéna, Friedland, Wagram and finally Waterloo... and peace.

Where history and collective memory have remembered only the great battles and the victories on either side, you choose, by contrast, to dwell on the timelessness of artistic and human exchanges.

With great delicacy, you show that England and France were constantly driven by mutual curiosity and attraction.

Historians believe that the invention of the Channel as a frontier, a focus of fierce political propaganda on both sides, dates from this period.

But you rightly point out that as the middle classes began to enjoy the pleasures of tourism, the Channel became a means of transport... and an irresistible call to travel.

With the advent of peace, Paris once again became not just a stopover but much more: a source of inspiration for artists and admired by travellers from across the Channel.

We are extremely touched by the homage paid here to Paris.

We're a little in the dark about the fascination British artists had for the City of Light, the "capital of the 19th century" to use the words of Walter Benjamin.

Maybe the splendour of the Impressionists over the following decades eclipsed that period. Yet you need only look at works by Turner, Bonington and the less established watercolourists presented here to realize that the period deserves to be rehabilitated.

Stephen Duffy displays great skill in doing them justice in this exhibition, and we're very happy to be welcoming him to the Institut Français tomorrow!

Of course, whilst Paris held such fascination for British artists, it is equally fair to say how much French artists of that time were fascinated by your country: from 1820, Géricault thoroughly updated his repertoire by spending a year and a half travelling all over England. And many years later, one of Monet's finest works depicted reflections on the Thames at Westminster... but that's the subject of another exhibition!

I hope the very many visitors coming here greatly enjoy discovering these images full of poetry and history.

Thank you./.