

Is this the best provincial art gallery?

Ruth Guilding discovers a little-known public art collection, the subject of a new exhibition, and is astonished by its quality



A CENTURY ago, a civic-minded pharmacist and JP named Robert Chipperfield left the city of Southampton his picture collection, a sizeable bequest to found an art gallery and a trust fund for the continuing purchase of works to show in it. More crucially, he stipulated that the director of the National Gallery

should always be consulted in choosing them. This was the master-stroke that made what might otherwise have become a decent jobbing provincial gallery into a treasure box of first-rate painting and sculpture, now regarded as having pre-eminent national significance.

The connoisseur Kenneth Clark was first among Southampton's

*Above left: The sitter's psychological awkwardness is suggested by the detail of Gilbert Spencer's **The Rat Catcher** (1922). Above: Henry Lamb's **Portrait of Edie McNeill** (1911)*

éminences grises, making superlative acquisitions for the gallery. The present building is a handsome temple of art with top-lit galleries of an exemplary design, part of a civic complex built in the 1930s, when port

and city were booming. Miraculously, it survived the Luftwaffe, but, more recently, building and collection have lain moribund, thanks to a lack of funding, which means that it remains little known.

Estate of Gilbert Spencer/DACS 2017; Southampton City Art Gallery/Estate of Henry Lamb; Southampton City Art Gallery/Desmond Banks/Bridgeman



The Coffee House, East Finchley (1914) by William Ratcliffe

This was the problem that the London-based art dealer Jonathan Clark—the genius behind the current exhibition—recognised and hoped to resolve. Mr Clark was in the process of winding up the gallery that he has run for 31 years, having found himself 'bored for at least the last four,' and looking around for a valedictory project to mark his change of direction. He turned up at Southampton and saw the collection for the first time: 'It blew my mind.'

‘ Kenneth Clark was first among Southampton's éminences grises ’

Minutes after arriving there, I came upon a pair of abstracts by the St Ives painters William Scott and Roger Hilton, a gilt-framed cabinet piece, *Deux Chiens*, by Pierre Bonnard, a Surrealist collage by Eileen Agar, an outstanding still-life by Lucian Freud and an entire room lined with cartoons by Edward Burne-Jones—his never-completed commission for the Conservative politician Arthur Balfour.

The collection is exceptionally strong in British art of the 20th century and, when Mr Clark first thought of curating his exhibition, he combed the gallery's basement storerooms 'two or three times', sifting and sifting to produce the outstanding portraits and figurative works from this group that include some of his all-time favourites, 'although there's plenty more there'.

This makes for a very rich exhibition, comprising some 40 pictures hung at eye level and arranged in a loose chronology. It takes its name from two powerful full-length portraits hung facing each other on opposing walls, *The Morris Dancer* (1902) by Sir William Nicholson, distinguished Edwardian portrait-painter and father of the Modernist Ben Nicholson, and *The Rat Catcher* (1922), painted by Gilbert Spencer, who followed his more famous older brother Stanley to the Slade School of Art.

Spencer's expressive portrait projects psychological awkwardness, his sitter pressed stiffly into a kitchen chair on a crumpled hearthrug, large brown hands clasped protectively across pipe and crotch with a scattering of spent matches on the carpet between his black hobnail boots.

Nicholson's sitter (who danced as the 'Fool' with the Eynsham Morris, a dashing side still famous in and around their vil-

lage to the north of Oxford) is a type of noble savage, his gaze slanting yet direct, the top hat and cane of his costume invested with a dandified glamour.

The Rat Catcher was purchased in 1953, three years after the gallery had acquired Stanley Spencer's small but epic triptych, *The Resurrection with the Raising of Jairus's Daughter*, which Mr Clark has also selected to hang in this show.

Another of Spencer's contemporaries at the Slade, Harold Gilman, makes a kind of ambush of his portrait of the art student Sylvia Gosse, a splashy close-up with the arsenic-green lowlights also favoured by his then associate Walter Sickert. By contrast, Henry Lamb idealises the young Edie McNeill, sister-in-law of his Chelsea Art School master, Augustus John, in a 'swagger' portrait that is exactly contemporary, coolly abstracted against a limpid coastal backdrop.

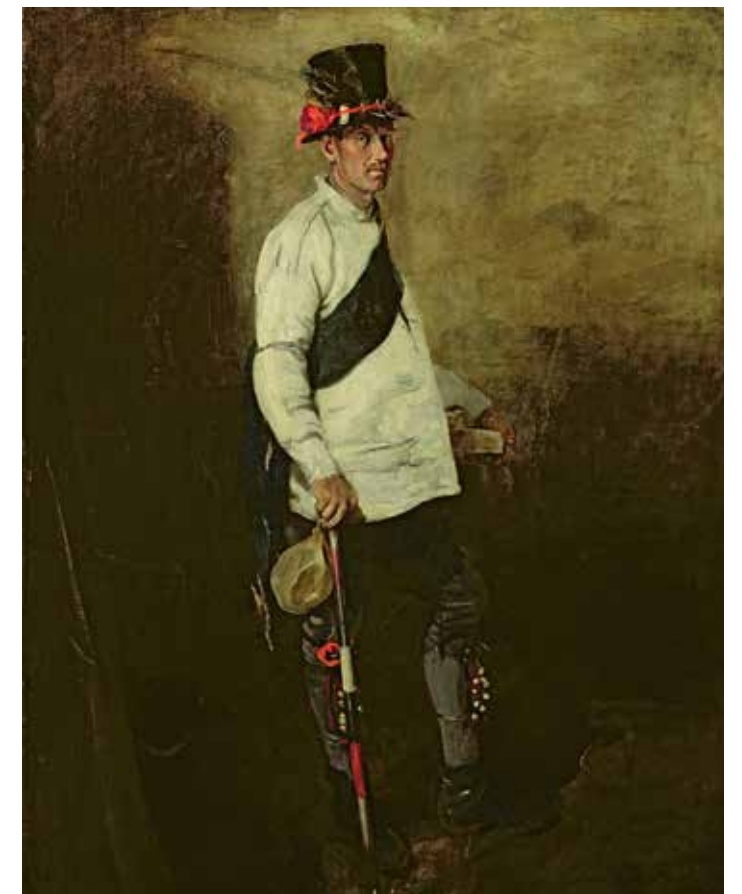
Robert Polhill Bevan overlooks horse dealers at Tattersalls using the high, Post-Impres-

ionist perspective that he had picked up while painting with Gauguin in Brittany; his fellow Camden Town painter William Ratcliffe's vivid scene of an East Finchley coffee house, painted in 1914, is more exciting than anything that ever came out of Bloomsbury.

This optimistic show signs off with fireworks: two exuberant nudes by Hilton, the painter with whom Mr Clark's career has been closely associated. If it can lure a new audience of curious metropolitans, locals, patrons and sponsors into the gallery, then his efforts will not have been in vain.

'The Morris Dancer and the Rat Catcher: Modern British Figure Paintings from the Collection' is at Southampton City Art Gallery, Commercial Road, Southampton, Hampshire, until May 13 (023-8083 4536; www.southampton.gov.uk/art)

Next week: Queer British art at Tate Britain



Sir William Nicholson's *The Morris Dancer* (1902). The subject is portrayed as a type of noble savage with a determined gaze