

113 Sir John Lavery, R.A., R.H.A.,
R.S.A.

1856-1941

A SALON - LADY CUNARD AND

GEORGE MOORE

signed: also signed, inscribed with
title and dated 1925 on the reverse
oil on canvas

64 by 76.5cm., 25¼ by 30in.

£100,000-150,000

€161,000-242,000

In 1925 Lavery produced a controversial exhibition of what was described as 'hints and addresses'. It consisted of a series of twenty-three interiors, the majority of which gave enticing glimpses of the lives of the social elite of the day. Thus we find the Oxfords and the Asquiths, the Wimbournes, J.M. Barrie and Count John McCormack in the interiors in which they have assembled. The pictures, Desmond MacCarthy wrote, '...are records of our times and significant commentaries upon that reckless changing thing called "good taste" - these pictures of charming rooms, and human and personal scenery makes the little figures in them doubly themselves'. The exhibition was thus predicated upon the assumption that possessions, the objects with which we surround ourselves, are as much as expression of our personalities as facial features in a conventional portrait.

In some cases the artist revealed his location, but not the sitter: in others, like *The Salon*, nothing is given away except the title. It was necessary therefore for MacCarthy to reveal the secrets of this intriguing show. *A Salon* thus contains Lady Cunard and George Moore in a room which 'strikes a very modern note'. 'We are', MacCarthy authoritatively declares, 'in Lady Cunard's room at the Ritz'. The room is relatively small, but it is enlarged by the mirror on the back wall, parallel to the plane of the picture, in which the bay window to the street is clearly visible, with the reflection of the artist working at his easel, above the Chinese lacquer cabinet. Lavery had deployed such a device in earlier 'portrait interiors'. Later commentators have been of the opinion that the picture actually represents the drawing room of Lady Cunard's house in Grosvenor Square. It is nevertheless the case that the room is decorated in classic English style. The pictures and the statue of Diana the Huntress on the right have yet to be identified.

In an important sense *A Salon* is a celebration of the thirty year romantic affair between Moore and Lady Cunard. Born in San Francisco in 1872, Maud Alice Burke was an early enthusiast for the novels of Emile Zola. She was often regarded by other society hostesses as an intellectual snob. When she first came to London in 1894 she sought out George Moore, because of his connections with Zola, at a luncheon at the Savoy. He had by that stage acquired a reputation as a novelist in the currently fashionable French naturalist mode. Immediately they fell into deep conversation, she declaiming at one point that he possessed 'a soul of fire'. The following year, however, she married Sir Bache Cunard, the grandson of the founder of the shipping line, and in 1896 was back in London, having given birth to her daughter Nancy. She resumed her relationship with Moore in the early years of the century, often meeting him secretly in London or Paris.

Moore wrote to her constantly throughout their lifelong friendship - letters which became something of a bone of contention after his death. Lady Cunard would not release them to his official biographer, Charles Morgan. They were only published after her death by Sir Rupert Hart-Davis, the original owner of the present picture (see *George Moore: Letters to Lady Cunard, 1895-1933*, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1957 and Nancy Cunard, *GM: Memories of George Moore*, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1956). In a letter of 1907, quoted by Moore's biographer Joseph Hone, he describes her as 'life as a work of art, I work in ink and paper, the sculptor takes a block of marble, the painter pigments and canvas...you require none of these things and the result is more astonishing'.

Kenneth McConkey, March 2000

Exhibited:

London, Leicester Galleries, *Portrait Interiors*, 1925, no.13 (as *A Salon*);
New York, Duveen Galleries, *Portraits, Interiors and Landscapes by Sir John Lavery, R.A., R.S.A., R.H.A., L.L.D.*, 1925, no.33 (as *A Salon*);
Boston, Robert C. Vose, *Portraits and Interiors of Sir John Lavery, R.A.*, 1925-26, no.23;



Pittsburgh, Carnegie Institute, *Portraits, Interiors and Landscapes by Sir John Lavery*, 1926, no.2;

London, National Portrait Gallery, *The Sitwells*, 1994, no.2.8.

Literature:

Desmond MacCarthy, 'Sir John Lavery's Portrait Interiors', *Apollo*, vol.2, 1925, pp.269-271, illustrated;

John Lavery, *The Life of a Painter*, Cassell, London, 1940, illustrated;

Robert Becker, 'Artists look at George Moore', *Irish Arts Review*, vol.2, no.4, winter 1985, no.63;

Kenneth McConkey, *Sir John Lavery*, Canongate, Edinburgh, 1993, p.173.