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ART

## Attention, 'Blue Boy' Fans: Slow Down

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Photo: J. Emilio Flores for The New York Times

WALKING through the portrait gallery of the newly renovated Huntington mansion, John Murdoch makes it clear that he would rather not discuss “The Blue Boy,” Gainsborough’s famous painting from 1770 of a British teenager in a fancy blue jacket and breeches.

Yes, it was once heralded as the most expensive painting ever sold —purchased in 1921 by the railroad tycoon Henry E. Huntington from the renowned art dealer Joseph Duveen for £182,200 (roughly \$700,000 at the time, or \$8 million today). Yes, it now has pride of place in the Huntington mansion’s portrait gallery, smack in the center of the wall you face on entering. Yes, it’s probably the biggest draw to the Huntington estate after its popular gardens. And yes, the picture is so dear to trustees that they have never lent it out.

But Mr. Murdoch, the director of the Huntington’s art collections, has tired of the focus on “The Blue Boy,” Gainsborough’s portrait of Jonathan Buttall, a merchant’s son with a courtly pose and beguiling expression. “The problem is, there’s a tendency of people to say, I don’t need to go to the Huntington because I’ve seen ‘Blue Boy,’ ” he said. “It’s like people at the Louvre running through the museum to see the Mona Lisa and missing everything along the way.”

Now, as Mr. Murdoch prepares to reopen the Huntington mansion on Wednesday after a three-year shutdown and a \$20 million renovation, his goal is just the opposite: to slow down the crowds by offering different points of interest. While the original impetus for the renovation was seismic retrofitting and the updating of electrical systems, he and his curators seized the opportunity to rethink the visitor experience as a whole.

“If we can get someone who normally spends one minute in a room to stop and spend two minutes there,” he said, “that’s the best measure we have of how well we’re doing our job.”

Mr. Murdoch hopes that visitors will relax in the new rattan chairs on the house’s rebuilt loggia, enjoying the potted orchids and Roman sarcophagi at hand and the Huntington gardens — some 120 acres in all — in the distance. He hopes that they will stop and notice the modeling on the face on Jean-Antoine Houdon’s original 1782 life-size bronze of Diana the Huntress.

In essence he wants them to luxuriate in the textures, colors, artworks and objets d’art that make up one of the great Gilded Age estates west of the Mississippi, an Italianate villa that Henry E. Huntington once called his ranch.

In 1907, when he hired the architect Myron Hunt to build the Beaux-Arts house, Mr. Huntington was newly divorced and preparing to retire from the railway business that had made him and his uncle Collis P. Huntington both millionaires many times over. He was ready to devote himself to nature, literature and art. “The heart of any of these great houses of the Gilded Age is the fantasy of a leisured, cultivated, private life,” said Mr. Murdoch, a Londoner who moved to California to join the Huntington in 2002. “The tragedy is that this so rarely happens.”

If this house was a businessman’s Arcadian dream from the start, today it remains a fantasy of another sort. The main floor still has period rooms evoking the often-bookish aspirations of Mr. Huntington and the more lavish “gout de Rothschild” aesthetic of his second wife, Arabella (who had previously, and scandalously, been married to his uncle Collis).

The Grand Library, for example, brings together numerous leather-bound books, four Beauvais tapestries, and two Savonnerie carpets that were originally commissioned by Louis XIV for the Louvre palace and were previously owned by J. P. Morgan. But generally the curators did not attempt the kind of slavishly detailed re-creations associated with historic houses.

They couldn’t have if they tried. Correspondence reveals that rooms were constantly rearranged to accommodate a steady stream of purchases from Mr. Duveen, the tireless dealer who convinced the Huntingtons, as well as the Fricks, Hearsts, Mellons and other American industrialists, that their very well-being (not to mention status) depended on acquiring the most important European masterpieces. And very few photographs of the mansion’s original interior have survived.

Instead the curators have reconceived the libraries, drawing rooms and other spaces on the first floor to convey a general sense of the Huntingtons’ tastes. They have also transformed the second floor, which originally held six bedroom suites and more recently some exhibition space, into a sequence of intimate galleries for European art. (American art is housed elsewhere on the property.)

In effect they have transformed one of the great American house-museums — that odd and theatrical genre of private spaces on public display — into more of a museum than ever before. The house now has some 1,200 wall labels as well as an extensive new audio guide. There are also two touch-screen media kiosks upstairs that explain the process of silversmithing and making ceramics.

Upstairs, one new suite of galleries features 18th-century French sculpture and decorative arts drawn from a large memorial collection Mr. Huntington assembled in honor of Arabella in 1926, two years after her death. These pieces, including a trove of top-quality Sèvres porcelain that fills what was once the master bedroom, have never before been exhibited in the mansion. (To do so, the institution had to consult trustees and secure approval from the state attorney general to change the terms of Mr. Huntington's will.)

Downstairs, the art is strategically arranged to animate different domestic spaces. The hall has some recent acquisitions, like Joshua Reynolds's 1775 "Blinking Sam" portrait of Samuel Johnson, which shows the nearsighted literary giant (who despised the likeness) squinting to make out the words on a page. And a small drawing room features charming 18th-century British portraits of women peering coyly from behind extravagant hats.

"What I have in mind with all of these rooms is: When you're taking a class of graduate students around a gallery, is the hang there useful? Do you have something to talk about?" said Mr. Murdoch, who taught the history of landscape painting when he was director of the Courtauld Institute Gallery in the 1990s. "In this gallery you might talk about the self-conscious beauty of the female form," he said, proceeding to discuss Edmund Burke's theory of the sublime, in which beauty is identified with femininity and the sublime with masculinity.

He turned the corner into the handsome dining room, lined with British landscapes from the late 18th century. In that era, he said, "the theory of propriety in picture-hanging said that you should put up something safe like flowers or landscapes. You absolutely do not want to put up pretty ladies, certainly not your wife and daughter, lest guests cast lascivious eyes." Imagine, he said, that your guests had a few drinks too many and made a sloppy comment about a picture. "This was a deadly serious thing, as a casual comment could lead to a duel."

Would the Huntingtons have known about the etiquette of hanging pictures? "They wouldn't have had a clue about how to hang," Mr. Murdoch said, explaining that most scholarship on such topics has taken place since the 1970s. The portrait gallery reflects just how dramatically the mansion has changed shape since the Huntingtons' time. In 1934, after Mr. Huntington's death, the trustees razed servants' quarters to build the space. Designed to show off the most commanding paintings, like "The Blue Boy," the portrait gallery was modeled on the esteemed Wallace Collection in London.

But for years the presentation was lacking, and Mr. Murdoch said he had been dismayed by the "salmon pink and gold" fabric walls, the harsh sunlight from above and the lack of focused lighting on the art. "There was no lighting on the

surface of paintings, so the pictures looked like a series of black holes on the wall.”

Now the damask walls of the Thornton Portrait Gallery (named after donors who gave \$5 million to the project) are a dark green, popular for old master paintings. And the paintings look lighter, with new floodlights overhead. The skylight has been partly covered to block natural light.

Another addition to the room is a set of marble busts, mainly 18th-century, by artists like Joseph Nollekens and Louis-François Roubiliac. Here too Mr. Murdoch has a bit of an agenda: to save the sculptures from being seen as mere décor. “Apart from just putting all the swanky objects in one room, you should be able to use this room to discuss portraiture in the highest media, painting and sculpture,” he said.

Visitors will also notice that the 14 full-length British portraits in the gallery have been rearranged, creating new juxtapositions and pairings. One coupling to be expected is “The Blue Boy” and Thomas Lawrence’s portrait of the young Sarah Goodin Barrett Moulton, better known as “Pinkie,” which face each other across the long space. The paintings are often twinned in the popular imagination, perhaps because of their colorful titles.

Mr. Murdoch has another take: “The two paintings have nothing to do with each other art-historically. They’re just associated because they were both controversial exports from England. Duveen talked them up, got everyone overexcited and fed the flames.”

In a less likely pairing, Reynolds’s 1784 portrait of the actress Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse, flanked by ghostly visions of pity and terror, hangs across from Gainsborough’s 1777 portrait of the Baroque composer Carl Friedrich Abel at his writing desk with his viola da gamba at his feet. Both works celebrate artists, not your usual aristocrats. And both depict the genesis of artistic inspiration.

That choice reflects a larger and bolder principle that guided the entire project. “There was nothing wrong with putting Mrs. Siddons at the far end of the gallery,” Mr. Murdoch said of her previous perch. “But whenever we had the choice of changing something or not, we’ve opted to change it. We want to help people see the collection in a new light.”