

# Princely Treasures from the House of Liechtenstein

By Wong Hwei Lian

The Princely Collections of Liechtenstein is one of the world's leading private art collections and its history can be traced back to the 1400s. However, it was only in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, after the most important political member of the House was honoured with the hereditary rank of prince in 1608 that the House of Liechtenstein speeded up its artistic pursuits in order to furnish the principality's palaces. The first hereditary prince, Prince Karl I von Liechtenstein (1569–1627), started collecting paintings and decorative objects. His passion for art continued with his son, Prince Karl Eusebius I (1611–1684), who believed that “to lavish one's means on rare and good, beautiful and noble elegant things is honourable and praiseworthy, since an everlasting, great, and truly superior memory remains behind you; but to throw away money on bad and imperfect things is plain foolishness”. Not only did he collect, but he also commissioned artworks for the collection. Prince Karl Eusebius' vision was to have an orderly display of both paintings and sculptures in separate purpose-built galleries, in contrast to his son and successor, Prince Johann Adam Andreas I (1657–1712), who juxtaposed an extravagant exhibition of automatons, sculptures and decorative objects with over 500 paintings in ten rooms.

Unlike his father, who had a predilection for works with a certain restraint, Prince Johann Adam Andreas I, the embodiment of a Baroque-era Prince, favoured large



Marcantonio Franceschini (Bologna 1648–1729 Bologna), *The Metamorphosis of the Dead Adonis*, c1692, 175x209cm

paintings with strong compositions. His personal tastes, acute sense of judgement and critical appreciation are evident from his correspondence with Bolognese artist, Marcantonio Franceschini (1648–1729), who later delivered paintings with strong compositions, impressive settings and flawless depictions of the human body. More than 80 letters (now in the Princely Collections) were exchanged between 1691 and 1709, to discuss the price of the artworks, composition, subject matter and transportation.

The flamboyant Prince Johann Adam Andreas I was also an avid supporter of architecture, having built grand palaces in Vienna – one on the Bankgasse and the other, the Summer Palace in the Rossau Quarter. He applied the Baroque style of architecture to the latter, with the help of the Austrian architect of Viennese High Baroque, Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach (1656–1723). With the transfer of artworks by Prince Johann I (1760–1836) to the Summer Palace around the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, a selection of artworks in seven galleries was on view from 1810 to 1938 and more recently, since March 2004. The countless changes to the palace and its surroundings have been documented by artists in impressive visual records (executed by either engraving or etching on copperplates). In 1694, Prince Johann Adam Andreas I's purchase of an unfinished building on the Bankgasse led to renovations by Domenico Martinelli (1650–1718). From 1705 onwards, the Liechtenstein Collections were kept in the specially designed gallery of this building, known as the City Palace, until much damage was sustained during World War II. The City Palace reopened in April 2013 after four years of



Cosimo di Giovanni Castrucci, Ottavio Miseroni and Workshop of Giuliano di Piero Pandolfini, *Pietra Dura Ornate Chest*, c1620/1623, 56x88x49cm

renovation work.

Prince Johann Adam Andreas I also played a key role in building up the Baroque collection through his acquisition of masterworks by two great Flemish masters, Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) and Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641). These include *Portrait of Clara Serena Rubens*, *The Lamentation*, and *Mars and Rhea Silvia* by Rubens and *Portrait of Maria de Tassis* by van Dyck. Rubens' study of antiquity and of the



Anthony van Dyck (Antwerp 1599–1641 London), *Portrait of Maria de Tassis* (1611–1638), c1629/1630, 129x93cm

work of Italian artists during his trip to Italy in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century had a profound influence on his diverse subjects, which ranged from religious images, mythological scenes and classical history to portraits. The richness of colour and forms coupled with dynamic compositions, attested to his extraordinary creativity, imagination and technical virtuosity. Successive princes, including Prince Joseph Wenzel I (1696–1772), Prince Alois I (1759–1805) and Prince Johann II (1840–1929) also expanded the collection of artworks by Rubens.

Van Dyck, who had worked in Rubens' atelier and formed a close friendship with him, was an accomplished portraitist. His highly expressive piece, *Portrait of Maria de Tassis*, acquired by Prince Johann Adam Andreas I in 1710, portrays a young, 19-year-old lady with confidence and charm. Van Dyck's far-reaching and lasting influence on portraiture, particularly in England (where he was the portrait painter in King Charles I's court), can be seen in *Portrait of Sir Frank Swettenham*, an oil portrait of the Governor of the Malay states by John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), currently on display in the Singapore History Gallery of the National Museum of Singapore.

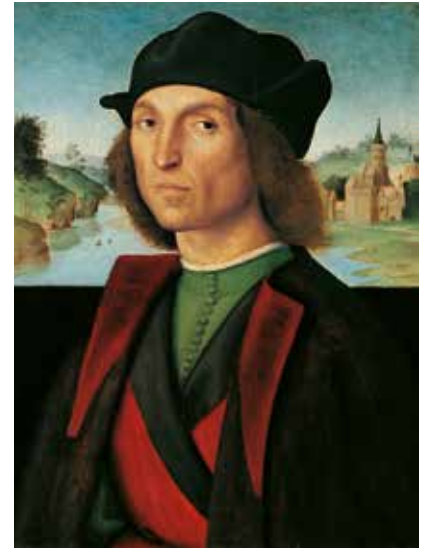
The unwavering support and financial commitment of the princes proved crucial to building a diverse collection unrivalled in depth and breadth. In 1823, Prince Johann I



Peter Paul Rubens (Siegen 1577–1640 Antwerp), *Portrait of Clara Serena Rubens* (1611–1623), c1616, 37x27cm

(1760–1836) the military leader who lived during the political upheaval brought about by Napoleon (1769–1821), acquired *Portrait of a Man* by Renaissance master, Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio). Through the use of bold colours in this painting, Raphael establishes a harmonious connection between the model and the beautiful landscape. Recent additions by the present head of

state and custodian of the collections, Prince Hans-Adam II (b. 1945), include *St Mark's Square in Venice Looking West with the Campanile* and *Flowers in a Porcelain Vase with Candlestick and Silver Vessels*. Prince Hans-Adam II's passion and commitment to his inherited treasures help 'to close the gaps' in the collection. Canaletto's *St Mark's Square* and Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller's *Flowers* are significant additions – the



Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio or Santi) (Urbino 1483–1520 Rome), *Portrait of a Man*, c1502/1504, 48x37cm

former is inspired by the Grand Tour (trips undertaken to ancient monuments by aristocratic men) and studies of statuary between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. *Flowers* is representative of the Biedermeier style, a short-lived art style (1815–c1848) which became characterised as bourgeois or middle-class. This piece is part of a growing collection of Biedermeier artworks displayed in the City Palace's newly



Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller (Vienna 1793–1865 Hinterbrühl near Vienna), *Flowers in a Porcelain Vase with Candlestick and Silver Vessels*, 1843, 47x38cm

revamped galleries.

For the past five centuries, the princes of Liechtenstein have spared no effort in assembling, preserving and taking the collection to greater heights. Each has left his distinct mark on the collection while shaping and influencing its direction through astute decisions. It is both unique and remarkable that the collection has not only survived times of adversity, but also remained under the care of its princely custodians.

The *Princely Treasures from the House of Liechtenstein* exhibition will be on view at the National Museum of Singapore from 27 June to 29 September 2013 and will be complemented with a display of 16 historical portraits titled *Art of Portraiture: Historical Paintings from the National Collection*.

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