



Portrait of a Lady; Mrs Lionel Phillips

Date

1903

Primary Maker

Giovanni Boldini

Medium

Oil on canvas

Dimensions

188.5 x 153.5 cm

Description

Lady Phillips, as she became known in 1912, was born Florence Ortlepp in Cape Town in 1863, the daughter of a land surveyor, who failed to make his fortune mining diamonds. In 1885 she married the British-born Lionel

Phillips, who had come to South Africa in 1875. He had already made and lost a fortune in mining but in the 1880s became wealthy again. Her husband's cultural and financial interests brought them to Europe and England where they lived eight years from 1898 to 1906 in a townhouse in Grosvenor Square, London and a country estate, Tylney Hall in Hampshire. During this time Lady Phillips acquired a keen interest in art and began a campaign to establish a public art gallery in Johannesburg. In Europe in 1909, she was introduced to Sir Hugh Percy Lane (1875-1915) by a mutual friend and it was this meeting that led to Lane's involvement with the establishment of the Johannesburg Art Gallery. He identified with her interest in using a collection of European art as a stimulus for local talent. She found Old Masters too expensive but Lane overcame her initial reluctance and persuaded Lady Phillips to buy contemporary works, which he said would become the Old Masters of the future. She bought contemporary works by William Orpen, William Rothenstein, Walter Sickert and Philip Wilson Steer as well as works by French Impressionists, Pissarro, Monet and Sisley and gave many of the works she had collected to the gallery. Lane was appointed as London based adviser to the Gallery and in this capacity purchased the nucleus of the collection with funds raised by Lady Phillips from her mining friends. The Johannesburg Gallery opened in 1910 in a temporary residence at the Transvaal University College and Lane travelled to South Africa for the occasion. The collection contained around 130 works, of which about half were contemporary British painters, such as Philip Wilson Steer, William Rothstein and Walter Sickert. The Irish artist William Orpen was represented by 'The Fairy Ring'. The other artists were Dutch, Belgian, Italian and French, with representations from Impressionists, Pissarro, Monet and Sisley. The gallery was housed in temporary premises and Lane suggested that Edwin Lutyens should design the permanent building. But, as was to happen in Dublin, local people objected to a foreign architect designing their public art gallery. Eventually

these objections were overcome and in 1915 the Johannesburg Art Gallery moved to its present premises, based on Lutyen's plans. This portrait of Lady Phillips was painted in Paris in 1903. A further likeness of Lady Phillips and one of her husband, Sir Lionel, were also painted at this time and both images now hang in the Johannesburg Art Gallery. The Italian painter, Boldini, settled in Paris in 1871 and quickly established himself as a painter of fashionable genre scenes and views of Parisian life. He was a close friend of Degas, with whom he travelled to Spain to study the works of Velazquez in the Prado. He was also inspired by the Swedish artist Anders Zorn's dynamic portraits. By the 1890s Boldini was the leading portrait painter in Paris producing vibrant portraits such as this one with its sense of dynamism and dramatic tonal contrasts. The head is the focal point with the face given detailed attention. The pale flesh tones contrast dramatically with the black dress and dark background. This effect is intensified by the contrast in technique, the soft modelling of the face with the long flowing strokes of the other areas, especially her large feather fan. Lady Phillips is wearing a number of diamond rings, promoting her husband's business interests at the time when diamonds were not particularly fashionable. Boldini's portraits often give a suggestion of movement, emphasised here by twisted pose of the figure perched on the edge of a chaise-longue and viewed from quite a high angle. Boldini's slashing brushwork and sophisticated elongations led Walter Sickert to describe him as the 'parent of the wriggle and chiffon school of portraiture.' MC