

Exhibiting at TEFAF Maastricht
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DIANA COOPER DESCRIBED THE INCEPTION OF THE project to her son, John Julius, in a letter in May 1950:

'I have an idea of genius, if [Battersby] can carry it out – in each panel a still life *trompe l'oeil* or trophies signifying different phases of our lives – Admiralty (dolphins, anchors, tridents, shells, wreathed horns), War, (cannons, grenades, ruins, bombs), Algiers (camels, straw hats, flowers, roofs, gazelles), Miracle (skeletons, rosaries, gothicisms, bells and books, Death's scythe, wig paste, and prompt books), Embassy (my Vendôme column, gold plate of Pauline's, *Légion d'Honneur*, books, France – England alliance document), garden (rakes, towels, flowers and baskets). Good idea?'

This explains the intensely personal iconography of the project. Battersby had worked as a decorator, then actor before becoming an artist and designer. In 1938 he designed a production of *Hamlet* with Laurence Olivier; Battersby established a considerable reputation as a stage designer working with Cecil Beaton on the 1945 production of *Lady Windermere's Fan*. At the same time Battersby's decorative painting was in huge demand in Europe and North America. He painted rooms in the Villa Favorita, St Jean Cap Ferrat for

Enid, Lady Kenmare; at the Carlyle Hotel in New York; for Mrs Verner Z Reed of Palm Beach; Mrs Elinor Ingersoll of Newport and Paul Mellon in Virginia.

The ingenuity of Battersby's highly refined, classical interiors and his tendency to litter his designs with whimsical and personal visual references must have appealed to Diana Cooper. In the late 1920s Diana Cooper had commissioned her friend, Rex Whistler, to decorate her drawing room in London with Regency *trompe l'oeil* and Battersby's panels preserve something of Whistler's spirit.

Made at precisely the moment Christian Dior launched his 'New Look', Battersby's panels celebrate the same return to classicism and post war optimism. The suite comprises five panels of grand scale and a small over-mantle. The panels themselves are a lucid mix of historicism, theatricality and romanticism. It was a taste associated with a coterie of refined French collectors and decorators, most notably Diana Cooper's friend Charlie Beistegui. Battersby's commission, to complete the decoration of the principal drawing room at the Château St-Firmin, dictated the style, which takes the form of painted trophies in grey collaged with *trompe l'oeil*

details in colour. The room itself formed the backdrop for the Coopers' social world, which included royalty, politicians and artists; Nancy Mitford and the Duke and Duchess of Windsor were neighbours and close friends. Diana Cooper's letters and autobiography are filled with encounters with a procession of all the greatest figures of the day.

The most striking panel celebrates Diana Cooper's career as an actress. Battersby created a trophy celebrating her most famous part, as the Madonna from Max Reinhardt's 1924 production of *The Miracle* with gothic tracery, the 'prompt book' and musical instruments. The decoration is disrupted by a skeleton – a character from the play, called the Spielmann – bursting through the panel, with a crown of roses and pointing at a frame containing Cecil Beaton's portrait of Diana Cooper *en role* as the Madonna.

The next three panels celebrate Duff Cooper's political career. He held various junior ministerial posts, before being made first lord of the Admiralty by Chamberlain in 1937. This period is celebrated in a grand naval trophy – the 'dolphins, anchors, tridents, shells' described by Diana Cooper – with a collaged image of the Admiralty yacht, HMS *Enchantress*, which the Coopers used to tour the Mediterranean and



Cecil Beaton
Diana Cooper in
'The Miracle', 1930
© Cecil Beaton
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Baltic. Battersby includes intimations of the impending war: a *trompe l'oeil* ration book and the ribbon of the DSO, which Duff Cooper had won in 1918. The ration book is particularly notable, as it stands in for a signature, being made out in Battersby's own name and dated 1950–1951. Duff Cooper took a principled and far-sighted stand against Chamberlain's policy of appeasement towards Hitler, denouncing the Munich agreement and resigning from the government. In 1944 Cooper was made British representative to the French committee of national liberation in Algiers. Battersby celebrates the Coopers' time in Algiers with a grisaille trophy including the symbol of the free French, the Cross of Lorraine, a palm tree, Moorish capital and Diana Cooper's distinctive, wide-brimmed sun hat. French in North Africa.

Following the liberation of Paris, Cooper was made British Ambassador to France. Battersby celebrates the Coopers' time in Paris in the largest panel, with a spectacular trophy containing allusions to France, war, peace and plenty. The Hôtel de Charost, the British residence, fills much of the iconography: it has been acquired from Napoleon's sister, Pauline Borghese – who appears in a portrait roundel at the top – by the Duke of Wellington. A collaged photograph celebrates the library created by Duff Cooper at the residence. Here again Battersby has included his signature, in the form of a letter addressed to his flat, 12a Gloucester Road.

As an over-mirror, Battersby designed a panel dedicated to the Coopers' son, John Julius. As a still-life portrait, it shows the school yard at Eton and a drawing of a stalk, emblematic of Strasbourg, where he read Russian and German at university. The guitar with its sheaf of English and French music points to John Julius's skill of singing accompanied by the guitar. The final panel celebrates the pleasures of life at Chantilly. A stag's head and horn for hunting; food, in the form of a large jelly mould, drink, in the form of bottles and a cork; entertainment in the form of playing cards, an opera programme and costume mask. The *trompe l'oeil* elements include a balloon initialled with an L, a reference to the Coopers' great friend, Louise de Vilmorin and a depiction of a unicorn, Diana Cooper's personal symbol.

Back Cover: Lady Diana Cooper's drawing room, Little Venice, London. Photograph by Dery Moore



A 'New Look' Interior

Lady Diana Cooper's drawing room from the Château St-Firmin

These six spectacular panels were painted by Martin Battersby in 1950 to decorate Lady Diana Cooper's drawing room at the Château St-Firmin in Chantilly. The panels were conceived as baroque trophies *en grisaille*, each celebrating periods in the life of Diana Cooper, her husband, Duff Cooper, later 1st Viscount Norwich a celebrated politician and diplomat, and their son, the writer John Julius, later 2nd Viscount Norwich. Battersby, who had collaborated with Cecil Beaton on stage designs, before becoming a celebrated decorative artist, worked in an elegant, neo-classical style, inflected with elements of surrealism. The panels remained in situ in Chantilly until Diana Cooper returned to London, where they were installed in her drawing room in Little Venice; they have been in store since her death in 1986 and are exhibited publicly at TEFAF Maastricht for the first time.

from left to right:

The Pleasures of Life

Acrylic on aluminium · 102¼ × 40 inches · 2597 × 1016 mm

The Admiralty

Acrylic on aluminium · 101¼ × 42 inches · 2568 × 1066 mm

The Paris Embassy

Acrylic on aluminium · 102¼ × 54 inches · 2568 × 1371 mm

The Miracle

Acrylic on aluminium · 100 × 42¼ inches · 2540 × 1070 mm

Algiers

Acrylic on aluminium · 102¼ × 40 inches · 2597 × 1016 mm

overleaf:

The Early Life of John Julius

Acrylic on aluminium · 27¼ × 57½ inches · 688 × 1460 mm

