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PREVIEW

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BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY

William Lobkowicz has undertaken the massive task of preserving his family's art collection, acquired over seven centuries. He explores this extraordinary treasure trove with Anthony Thorncroft

Some are born to great art collections; some achieve great art collections; and some, a very few – have great art collections thrust upon them. This was the experience of William Lobkowicz, a mild mannered real estate executive from Boston, Massachusetts.

As a boy he heard from his grandfather idyllic stories of Roudnice, a 250-room palace in Bohemia. It was one of dozens of great mansions, furnished with treasures, that the family acquired over centuries of service to the Habsburg emperors, only to lose twice in a decade, once when the Nazis invaded Czechoslovakia in 1939 and then with the Communist takeover of 1948.

Suddenly, after the Velvet Revolution of 1989, the wheel of history turned again and the Lobkowicz family had a brief opportunity to reclaim their inheritance. William, at 30, was best placed to retrieve and manage the collections. He moved with his young family to Prague and is now immersed in the process of preserving and displaying 1,500 paintings, 20,000 objects and a library of 65,000 books and manuscripts.

It is a remarkable collection because it remains largely intact. It contains both everyday objects and great masterpieces, notably Pieter Brueghel the Elder's *Haymaking* from 1565 and two views of London painted by Canaletto in 1746, including the celebrated *The River Thames on Lord Mayor's Day* bought by the sixth Prince Lobkowicz. He had come to England to buy horses, but was smitten by the wife of the Venetian Ambassador, who introduced him to her artist compatriot.

The paintings are now displayed in 'The Princely Collection', a permanent exhibition that opened last year at the 16th-century Lobkowicz Palace on Castle Hill in Prague. It is as much an exploration of the family history as of their collecting taste. Among the portraits of princes is one of the most famous faces in art history, that of the Infanta who dominates Velazquez' *Las Meninas* in the



Prado. She was married, aged nine, to her uncle, the Emperor Leopold I, who appointed the second Prince Lobkowicz president of his privy council.

The third Prince was the most active art buyer, adding Rubens' *Hygieia and the Sacred Serpent* and Veronese's *David with the Head of Goliath*. His successors, however, were more interested in music.

The seventh Prince acquired an anonymous manuscript copy of Handel's *Messiah*, which, later, Mozart covered with hand-written 'improvements'. He was also the friend and patron of Beethoven, who dedicated to him, among other works (including the Fifth and Sixth symphonies, Triple Concerto and Opus 18 string quartet) the third Symphony *Eroica* – its manuscript is William Lobkowicz's favourite object in the collection.

His passion for music ensures that every day there are concerts in the palace. The hope is that these can eventually feature works from the vast, and still not fully investigated, musical archive, which along with the books and manuscripts, represents one more strain on the family's limited resources. The library is located in yet another Lobkowicz residence, a castle at Nelahozeves, fifteen miles north of Prague.

William Lobkowicz and his wife Alexandra, along with their English collections curator John Somerville, have made a success of this unexpected family bequest, especially given the restraints that bind him. Under Czech law, nothing can be sold abroad and the survival of the collection depends on his own revenue raising initiatives.

And the task is endless. Later this year the palace at Roudnice will be given back to the family. Lobkowicz is considering every option for it, from an educational centre to a hotel, but his young son has other plans: he has pledged to make Roudnice his challenge, and to keep it in the family.

Anthony Thorncroft served for over 40 years as art critic of the Financial Times.

Overlooking the city of Prague, the Lobkowicz Palace is one of the most beautiful and significant cultural sites in Europe, which finally reopened to the public last year. In addition to this wonderful palace, the Lobkowicz family owns Nelahozeves Castle, 15 miles north of the city, which was William Lobkowicz's first challenge upon his return to the Czech Republic and has been open since 1997. For further information about visiting the collections visit www.lobkowiczevents.cz

