

The Maas Gallery

WALFORD GRAHAM ROBERTSON

(1866-1948)

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A glance at the famous Sargent portrait of Walford Graham Robertson, ‘an image of understated panache’, and one might think of Oscar Wilde’s description of the slender young men he called ‘exquisite Aeolian harps that play in the breeze of my matchless talk’ (Avis Berman, ‘Not Just Another Pale Victorian Aesthete’, *New York Times*, 23 September 2001). But Robertson was more than just the flâneur he appears here, for he was a painter, theatrical designer, writer and a critic, and he moved amongst the cultural and theatrical sets of London. As a young man he was a companion of Wilde and knew Burne-Jones, and later part of the circle around Noël Coward. He was an acolyte of both Ellen Terry and Sarah Bernhardt, as happy in Paris as he was in London. He was an early collector of paintings by Whistler, and by the age of twenty, Robertson owned 20 pictures by William Blake, the nucleus of an extensive collection which he left to the Tate Gallery. He lived in the village of Witley in Surrey and had a house amongst the Holland House Set (including Prinsep, Leighton, Watts, Burgess, Stone and Fildes), near to the home of writer Kenneth Grahame. Robertson remained unmarried with no children.

Two tragedies deeply affected Robertson, who loved children, although childless himself. First, the loss of his friend the Scottish painter Arthur Melville at the age of 49 in 1904. Melville left a daughter, only one year old, called Marion (possibly after Robertson’s mother), but known as Binkie.



John Singer Sargent  
(1856-1925)

*W. Graham Robertson*

Oil on canvas

230 x 119 cm

Tate



Robertson gave up painting to devote himself to entertaining Binkie, and wrote for her a children's play called *Pinkie and the Fairies* which, directed by Herbert Beerbohm Tree and starring Ellen Terry, became a West End hit in 1908. Robertson's watercolours for the published book were so popular, he was inundated with commissions for illustration. The second tragedy was the loss of Kerrison Preston's son Hugh, Robertson's much loved godson, born in 1913, who died at Tobruk in 1942.

This exhibition consists of a unique and personal collection of pictures, books and objects from the family of Robertson's friend, the Hampshire lawyer Kerrison Preston, who was also Robertson's literary executor, which are for sale. Amongst the Preston things is the jade handled cane which Robertson sports in the Sargent painting, and a 1908 first edition of *The Wind In the Willows* with a frontispiece by Robertson, inscribed with a dedication to him.

Interspersed amongst the Preston things in this exhibition are pictures from the Maas Gallery relating to Robertson's world and time, also for sale, whilst other pictures and photographs are not for sale and are from the collection of Annabel Watts, Head Gardener at Munstead Wood, and an expert on Surrey artists.

She has written the essay on Robertson which follows.

RUPERT MAAS

Walford Graham Robertson RP, RBA, ROI 1866-1948

A poster design for *Pinkie and the Fairies*

Watercolour; signed

29 1/2 x 21 inches

## AN ESSAY by Annabel Watts

Annabel Watts is an independent art historian with a special interest in Surrey artists. She is the author of *Helen Allingham's Cottage Homes Revisited*, 1994, and *An Artist's Surrey Eden: The Neighbourhood of 19th Century Witley*, 2004



The Surrey village of Witley, near to where I live, has long been associated with the artists Birket Foster and Helen Allingham, but also with Walford Graham Robertson who was born in London on 8th July 1866. His father had a successful career in shipping and spent many years in India before returning to London to marry at the age of 51. His wife, Marion was a spirited woman despite the fact that at the age of 14 she brought up her 11 brothers and sisters, following the death of their mother. Robertson was raised in a comfortable home in Bayswater next door to his maternal grandfather. Although an only child, he was never short of company; his numerous uncles and aunts introduced the youngster to the wonders of astronomy, art galleries and the pantomime. By the age of 12 he was considered old enough to attend a production of the Merchant of Venice and there he fell for the charms of the actress Ellen Terry, blissfully unaware that she would become a life-long friend. Unsurprisingly, the young boy developed a deep appreciation of the whole spectrum of the arts which remained with him for the rest of his life.

The first encounter with the world of art took place at much the same time; one aunt, a friend of the early feminist Barbara Bodichon, took the young boy to Walter Crane's studio. This privileged glimpse into the world of unfinished canvasses, oil paints and models left a lasting impression.

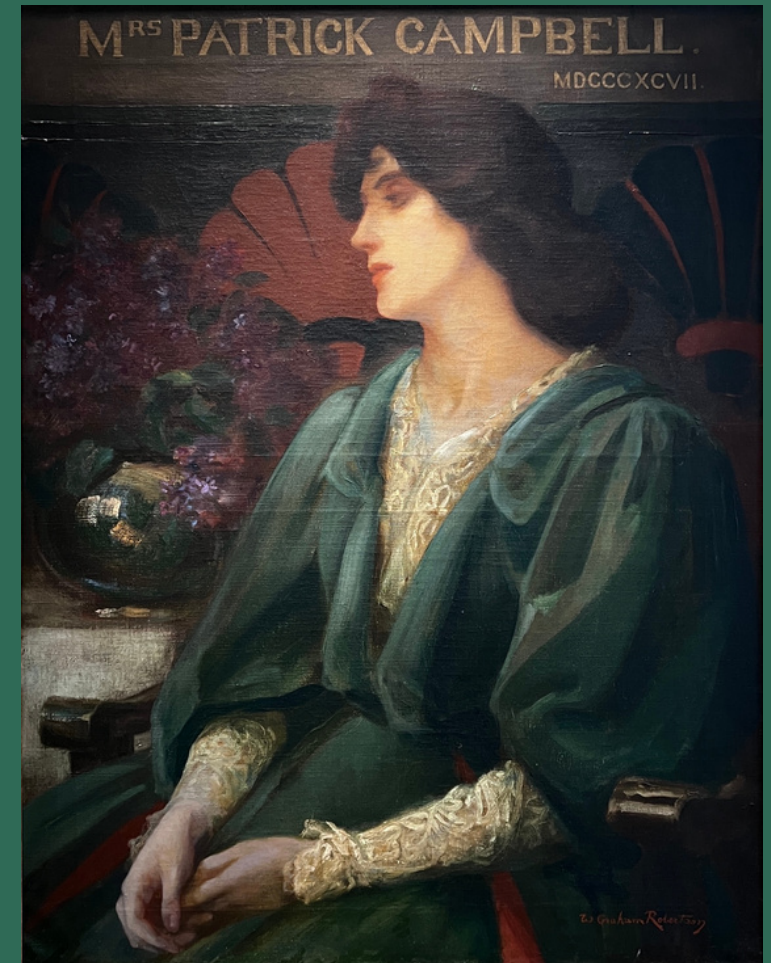
From an early age Robertson's mother recognised her son's natural drawing ability and encouraged him as best she could. Together they visited the new Grosvenor Galleries where he saw paintings by luminaries such as Burne-Jones, Whistler and Rossetti. Young Robertson was spellbound. Schooling however took precedence, and he was packed off to prep school and later to Eton.

Graham Robertson's preferred education took place during the school holidays. It was then he attended the South Kensington schools where he concentrated on his drawing technique. His continued interest in art prompted his mother to secure him the position of studio pupil with Albert Moore. The experience confirmed what Robertson knew all along - he was destined to pursue a career in art. By the time he left Eton, he was sufficiently qualified to do so.

Robertson was 18 when his father died. As a dutiful son he took responsibility for his mother and soon after they went to Paris for a year where he was introduced to Sarah Bernhardt. On their return to London Robertson spent a further 2 years with Albert Moore before acquiring a studio of his own in nearby Melbury Road, Kensington, the street of the Victorian Holland Park Circle, an informal group of 19th-century artists, including William Burges, Luke Fildes, Frederic Leighton, Valentine Prinsep, Hamo Thornycroft, and George Frederick Watts

By the 1890s Robertson established himself as a portrait painter and through his theatrical connections he painted the portraits of many leading actresses including Sarah Bernhardt, Mrs Patrick Campbell, Julia Neilson and Ada Rehan. By the age of 24 three of his paintings hung in the Summer Exhibition of the New Gallery and the following year he was invited to send work to the inaugural exhibition of the Society of Portrait Painters. Robertson also exhibited at the New English Art Club and was elected a member. As a result of this publicity his paintings sold well and the demand for portrait commissions increased.

When it did not interfere with commissioned work, Robertson never turned down a chance to digress. He was approached to design posters, and costumes for theatre productions in London and New York. Oscar Wilde invited him to design the scenery and costumes for his new play *Salome*. This would have been Robertson's most daring achievement but the controversial play was banned by the censor and never took place



Walford Graham Robertson (1866-1948)

*Mrs Patrick Campbell*

Oil on canvas; titled, signed and dated 1897

36 x 27 1/2 inches



Watercolours from this time often have a poetic theme, or a mystical quality reflecting his admiration for both Rossetti (who died before Robertson could meet him) and Burne-Jones. His creative abilities branched out again when two of his designs for needlework were illustrated in the *Art Journal*. These embroidered pictures were worked and grounded in silk by the embroideress Miss Una Taylor. One entitled *The Angel* was priced at £20 and exhibited at the Arts & Crafts Exhibition in 1903.

In 1893 the celebrated society painter, John Singer Sargent, asked Robertson to model for him. The composition Sargent had in mind was of a young man dressed in a long coat, holding a cane with a dog lying at his feet. Even though he recognized this as an honour, Robertson was obliged to stand still for hours encased in a tight coat at the height of summer; on one occasion he recalled the heat being such that he almost fainted. The painting however was well received and attracted a great deal of attention.

As well as a home in Kensington, the Robertsons owned the lease of Sandhills, a comfortable Victorian house near the village of Witley, Surrey which had, until 1888 been the home of the poet and artist couple, William and Helen Allingham. Mother and son occupied the house at weekends but by 1896 Robertson made Sandhills his permanent base. With an ever-present sense of fun, he was rarely without house guests and entertained his many London friends who readily accepted an invitation to stay in the country. One particular guest, fellow artist Arthur Melville, was so enchanted with the area that when Robertson bought a nearby farmhouse, Melville and his wife moved in. The two artists used a neighbouring barn, which they shared with a large black sow, in which to paint, design theatrical costumes or construct stage scenery. In time large windows were added to let in much-needed light and the barn took on the appearance of a studio; a tiger-skin rug lay on the floor, canvases decked the wall, and there were a number of comfortable chairs for visitors. This happy period came to an abrupt end in 1904 when Arthur Melville died of typhoid contracted whilst on holiday in Spain.

Walford Graham Robertson (1866-1948)

*The Tower of Turquoise*

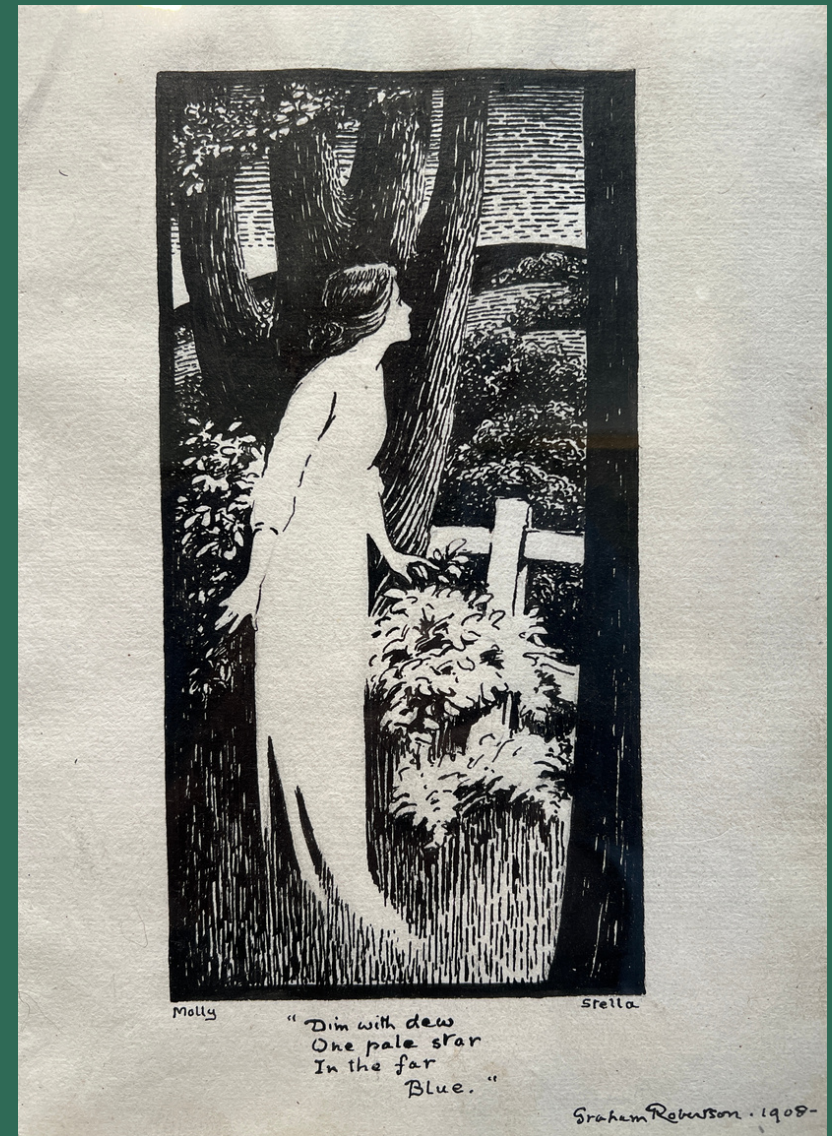
Watercolour; initialled and labelled

11 x 5 ½ inches

This tragedy affected Robertson badly and he completely lost the will to paint; but it soon dawned on him that his friend's death had opened up a new focus in his life. To entertain Melville's young daughter Binkie, Robertson made up stories of elves and fairies that inhabited the neighbouring fields and woods. These tales of an enchanted fairyland delighted his young companion, and to prevent her from straying into the woods alone, he warned her that it was the fairies' territory and no one under the age of four should go beyond the gate. On the child's fourth birthday Robertson had to decide whether to reveal the truth or else create a birthday to remember – he chose the latter. At dusk he took her to the woods where he staged an elfin party in a glade lit by coloured lights and decorated with exotic fruits and flowers. Binkie was utterly entranced and convinced of the existence of the little folk in his stories. He later elaborated his phantasy into a Christmas play called *Pinkie and the Fairies*.

Inspired by this event and combining local legends and folklore, it fired Robertson's imagination and he began to write verses and plays for children, accompanied by his illustrations. His distinct style and bold, eye-catching colours were much admired and requests poured in for illustrative work in both colour and black and white.

After his mother's death in 1907, Robertson concentrated on expanding *Pinkie and the Fairies* into a full length play. The idea was encouraged by Herbert Beerbohm Tree who offered to stage it at Her Majesty's Theatre, London. On hearing of the forthcoming production, Ellen Terry insisted on playing the part of Aunt Imogen. With an unrivalled cast the play was a resounding success; largely due to its appeal to both children as well as adults. It was re-run the following Christmas and in subsequent years *Pinkie and the Fairies* toured the country.



Walford Graham Robertson (1866-1948)

An illustration to *Pinkie and the Fairies*

Ink; signed, inscribed, and dated 1908

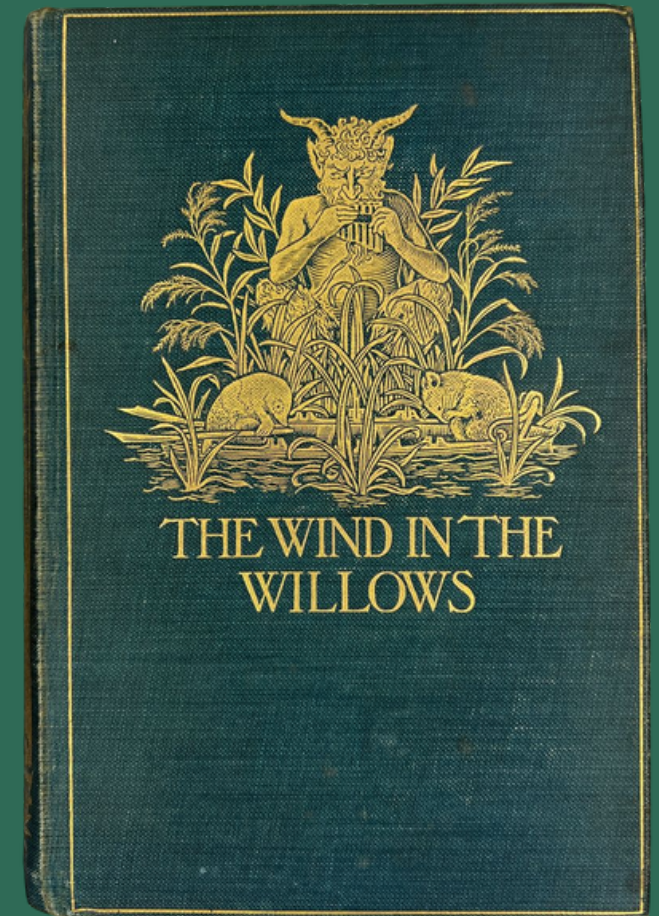
10 ½ x 7 ½ inches

His lucrative career coupled with a private income meant that Robertson was indeed a wealthy man but he preferred to lead a simple existence, he saw no reason to spend money unnecessarily, least of all on his house. The house at Witley remained bereft of modern equipment, even as a child he had no empathy with anything mechanical. He privately enjoyed the surprise expressed by visitors, when they discovered that Sandhills had no electricity or running water. He created himself a safe haven, surrounding himself with inherited furniture and items that would have been considered out of date. Yet this timeless quality never failed to charm visitors to the house. 'Perhaps you realized that you left London in 1942 and arrived some time in the 1890s' wrote Robertson to the young John Gielgud, Ellen Terry's great nephew, following his visit to Sandhills. The house was run by a loyal staff, who doted on their master, and in return he looked after them well and considered them his family. The Allingham's nurse, who took care of Carlyle during his last illness and had served tea to Tennyson, came with the property, and was Robertson's housekeeper.

Graham Robertson owned many paintings by artists he admired but the one that drew most attention was *Proserpine* by D.G. Rossetti. He also had a fine collection of 140 paintings and drawings by William Blake, whose work came to his notice when he was in his mid-teens. Blake's bizarre illustrations fascinated him and over the years Robertson became an acknowledged authority on the artist. His Blake collection was admired by Kenneth Grahame who was a London neighbour. As a result of his friendship not only was Robertson asked to provide an illustration for the frontispiece to *Wind in the Willows* but Grahame was so taken by Portly, one of Robertson's Bobtail Sheepdogs, that 'Portly' became immortalized as the lost baby otter.

For Robertson's generation, life after the First World War was very different. He knew that there would be no demand for his paintings or illustrations and that his career was virtually over. The slump in property prices enabled him to acquire some nearby land which he turned into a small farm; it was not purchased for profit but purely to provide the household with dairy produce, eggs and poultry. Corn was sown and scythed in the traditional way, no machinery was permitted, he insisted it was all done by hand. He also bought over a dozen cottages in the hamlet, many of which were occupied by people he employed.

Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows*  
With a frontispiece by Graham Robertson.  
London: [William Brendon for] Methuen and Co., 1908





Although he was good company and enjoyed a wide variety of friends, Robertson was at his happiest walking in the country accompanied by his dogs. He had a deep love of the Surrey countryside which had lured him away from the bright lights of London in his mid 30s. Robertson still retained his Kensington house and tried to visit the theatre on a regular basis; nevertheless he was always glad to return to the peace of Sandhills. His Surrey neighbours benefited from his theatrical knowledge when he formed The Chiddingfold Players for whom he wrote plays and pageants. Robertson's infectious enthusiasm rubbed off on his troupe who regularly met at his barn studio for rehearsals. The Chiddingfold Players provided welcomed entertainment on stages in nearby towns and villages for many years.



Walford Graham Robertson (1866-1948)  
Sandhills (detail from undated letter)  
Watercolour and pencil  
24 x 25 inches

In 1931 the versatile Robertson was persuaded to write his reminiscences by the publisher Hamish Hamilton in a book entitled *Time Was*, recording his memories of the many significant personalities he befriended in earlier days. His book generated much interest amongst up and coming young actors and writers, and in particular Americans, who sought out his friendship to learn more about Oscar Wilde, Sir Henry Irving or the great Victorian painters.

His charmed life could almost have come from one of his own fairy stories. He achieved success in everything he set out to do and financial stability provided him with a comfortable way of life, allowing him to do exactly as he pleased. He was also generous to a fault. Robertson bequeathed cottages to four staff, sums of money to other employees and he left selected paintings to the Tate Gallery and Sandhills Common to the National Trust.

To this day the spirit of Graham Robertson still seems to haunt Sandhills. It retains a curious tranquility, a sense of timelessness remains; at dusk one almost expects to see him resplendent in his cloak and hat, with his ever-faithful Bobtail sheepdogs, cross the common and head for home.