

JOHN CRAXTON

A LIFE OF GIFTS





John Craxton by René Groebli, 1983

We must attain a new humanism or else the world will collapse into slavery for years and years. As you said, there is no man in the street. Everyone is very terrible but very wonderful too. Just as life is.

Peter Watson to John Craxton, 1942



A little farther
we will see the almond trees blossoming
the marble gleaming in the sun
the sea breaking into waves

a little farther,
let us rise a little higher.

George Seferis, from *Mythistorema*



Not having a motorbike made me feel like a centaur turning into a rocking horse.

John Craxton to John Piper, 1985

Note: Unless otherwise listed, John Craxton quotes are from conversations with the author between January 2000 and November 2009.

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Carnival Horse, Poros, 1954 Oil on canvas, 53.25 × 60 cm. John Craxton Estate

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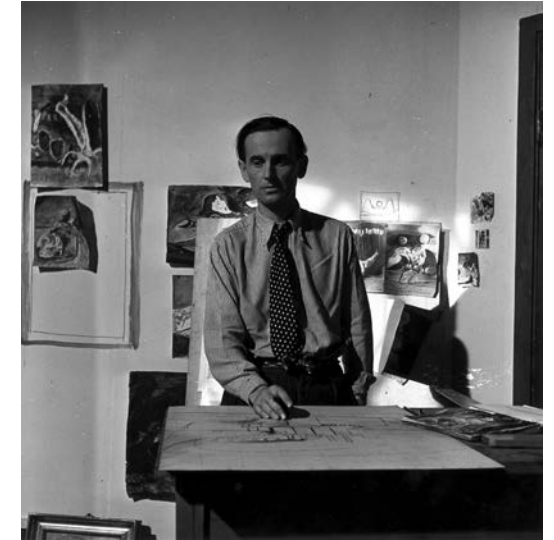
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Self-Portrait, 1942
Ink on paper laid on
card, 48.2 × 38.7 cm.
Private collection



Boy in Bed with Fruit
by Lucian Freud, 1943
Ink on paper, 33 × 22.3 cm.
Private collection

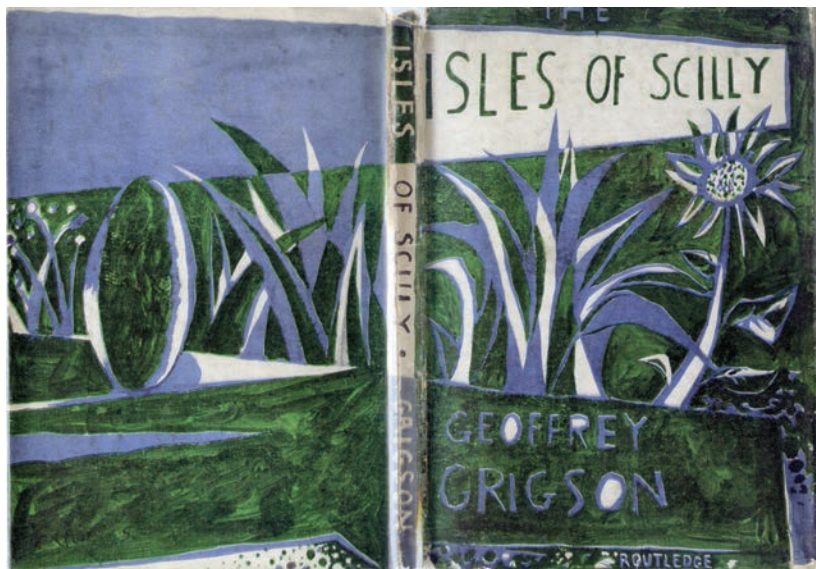
Graham Sutherland by Lee Miller, 1943
National Portrait Gallery



John had a ‘total crush’ on Graham Sutherland from first sight of his art. ‘I felt such sympathy with the anguish in the pictures’, he said. ‘His war drawings were very exciting, too. His was a wonderful use of colour, so personal to him, impossible to copy. But he was hugely influential.’ After gifting the Sutherland painting, Peter presented the painter too – arranging a lunch with the artist and his wife in The Ivy restaurant. Wearing a black woollen suit, pink shirt and green tie, the handsome hero was dressed like one of his pictures. ‘I sat next to Kathy and she spent the entire meal talking about Graham, when all I wanted to do was talk to him’, John said. They met again in Palace Gate, where the older artist paid close attention to the Craxton drawing *Poet in Landscape*. ‘I wish I’d been able to do something like that when I was your age’, he said. Graham Sutherland’s manners were as good as his appearance, but beneath the surface charm he was more contradictory, with all the later prickliness of his pictures in his nature from the start. His warming to a young painter was a compliment since he tended to be wary, moody or worse where others were concerned. As Peter wrote to John in February 1942:

Graham came to tea yesterday. He disconcerted me by stating his hatred of people in general. This is of course the reason why he never wishes to paint people. It is an attitude I am convinced is wrong. We must attain a new humanism or else the world will collapse into slavery for years and years. As you said, there is no man in the street. Everyone is very terrible but very wonderful too. Just as life is.

Peter then set up visits to the studios of Paul Nash in Oxford and John Piper near Henley-on-Thames. John loved the symbolism and mysticism in Nash imagery, but most of all the individuality defying rigid labels. He also admired the way in which Piper’s modernist sensibility had been drafted from abstraction in the late 1930s to record an architectural heritage in danger of being destroyed by war. John stayed with the Pipers at Fawley Bottom soon after the famous royal inspection of the painter’s dark views of Windsor Castle – metaphors for Britain at war. The artist had been amused by George VI’s comment: ‘You’ve been pretty unlucky with the weather,



Jacket for *The Scilly Isles and Other Poems* by Geoffrey Grigson, 1946

Calvados with the crews. Such vessels had been used for wartime missions to the French coast and the visitors had already been impressed by the heap of empty gin and whisky bottles left behind by agents staying in Point House. Now they plotted to become stowaways to get to Brest and then Paris, to see the *Picasso Libre* exhibition and even the artist himself. Two escape bids were foiled by harbour police. In the end they returned to London, after John wrote to E.Q.: 'you may think that England's a Free Country it is perhaps until you try & leave it!'²

Three years later, with artist and model so easily diverted by life, John embarked on his magnificent *Portrait of Sonia*. It was incomplete in 1956, when Sonia married the writer Peter Quennell, after they met on a train. She was his fourth wife and gladly gave way to a fifth. They parted as friends, Sonia taking the portrait that John had eventually finished as a belated wedding present (the background foliage like a bridal garland) and the nickname 'Spider', given by Peter because he thought she looked like a spider monkey.

Spider had been a great success with Peter's friends such as Cecil Beaton and Cyril Connolly. 'I had no pretensions', she recalled, with habitual candour. 'I was completely superficial and it charmed them.' She claimed never to have read a book – prompting Cyril to declare, 'I'm going to do what Spider does, and arrange all my books in colours'.³ She was to live in Munich and Rome with the producer and screenwriter Wolfgang Reinhardt, who bought the rights to *The Sound of Music* for \$9,000. The couple lived in style until Reinhardt's death on profits from the stage and screen adaptations though, typically, Spider saw neither. Based latterly in New York and London, and dabbling in interior design, she remained the image of her Craxton portrait – the youthful, jazz-

loving figure with the briefly penetrating gaze before the renewed flight from boredom. In their eighties, decades after they had ceased to see Lucian, Spider and John shared a birthday party.

The trip to the Scillies had dire consequences for Lucian Freud. Letters from the girl he pursued when Sonia rejected him were discovered by Lorna. She dropped him when he had also taken up with the actress Pauline Tennant, and refused all entreaties to renew their affair. 'I thought I was giving you up for Lent', she said. 'But I'm giving you up for good.' John believed that Lucian seduced Michael Wishart, Lorna's son, in a bid to get at Lorna. He was certain that his friend vowed thereafter never again to love a woman as much as she loved him.

Near the end of the war, through the ever-helpful offices of *Horizon*, John and Lucian met the Greek Surrealist writer Nanos Valaoritis, whose first poems had been published in 1939 when he was just 18. Plans for a rendezvous in a Piccadilly restaurant were muddled by messages passed to the wrong people, so the trio swapped identities to match the errors for surreal entertainment. Nanos anyway had amazing stories to tell – from his recent escape to London via Turkey and Egypt to the family saga, or myth, of how the *Venus de Milo* statue lost her arms in a tussle while being stolen from one of his ancestors. The friendship flourished. John decorated the 1947 Valaoritis poetry collection



Portrait of Sonia, 1948–57 Oil on canvas, 76 × 76 cm. Tate



PART THREE

27 AEGEAN ADVENTURE

Back stage, after an early performance, Freddie, John and Margot drank champagne with two American visitors – dancer and choreographer Ruth Page and her wealthy lawyer husband Tom Hart Fisher. They were not so much drowning their sorrows over tepid reviews as looking to sunnier times. Steering the conversation to summer holidays, John announced that Margot longed for a Greek island cruise. Margot and Freddie feigned shock at such a brazen idea in front of generous Americans who had fêted the company on a recent visit to Chicago. But Tom Fisher’s diary and wallet were already open.

When the party assembled in Athens, John had a further manoeuvre in mind. The Fishers had chartered a battered caique – the only available ‘yacht’ in Piraeus. The *Eliki* and its scratch crew had been made almost fit for purpose with the addition of a British Embassy steward, a Hotel Grand Bretagne cook and several cases of champagne and green chartreuse (reflecting what Freddie called his ‘tart’s taste in drinks’). John knew what was missing. In an open-air café he arranged an accidental meeting with Joan and Paddy, who, of course, charmed the caique charterers. As the couple were being waved off, Tom said on cue what fun it would be if they had been free to join the cruise. John then hared after his friends with news that they could come on board.

Eliki set sail amid waves of laughter, reaching hilarity when it transpired that no one had a clue where they were heading. Guided by John and Paddy, the party then glided towards Poros. Within a day the cook had taken to his bunk with a fish bite and the captain was confessing to a loathing of the sea. Margot – drenched by a wave crashing through her cabin porthole, and having sat on an octopus while swimming – rose above every adversity. There was a happy meal at the Mastropetros house and a repayment of John and Paddy’s debts, probably with Joan’s money.

They sailed on to the Ghika island of Hydra, to set in motion the holiday pattern of swimming, walking, church-visiting and feasting in quayside tavernas, before sleeping on the boat. In a cavernous space lined with wine barrels, they shared the late-night dancing of sponge-divers – one balancing backwards over a chair and another lifting a table with his teeth, while an octogenarian gyrated with a tumbler of water on his forehead. ‘Margot and Freddie joined in at once’, John said. ‘They danced amazingly well, picking up the steps so easily.’ Freddie was ever watchful for work ideas. The spectacle of Margot swimming was playing in his mind – to resurface, seven years later, in his water-nymph ballet *Ondine*. The storm scene re-creates his feelings



John and Paddy dancing on the beach, Serifos. Photograph by Joan Leigh Fermor, 1951

when *Eliki* plunged into an Aegean tempest and he was sure they were about to drown. Once again, Margot was fearless.

Tacking between islands and mainland, they moored in the lovely Peloponnesian port of Nafplio, first capital of modern Greece. On Bourtzi island, where the Venetian fort had been converted into a hotel, they lay on the roof in swimsuits – Margot then stretching out naked for a siesta, with her feet taut in points position even in sleep. Paddy’s photographer friend Costas Achilopoulos arrived for an excursion to Epidaurus, where they tested the acoustics in the ancient theatre and posed for a group picture. For all the mishaps, the voyage was a runaway success. The artists on board were relaxing and absorbing every new experience by working in their own ways. John drew and painted; Paddy made notes for a travel feature to be illustrated with Joan’s photographs; Freddie led Margot through a rigorous regime of daily exercises with the ship’s railing a ballet barre.

One morning the captain said a storm had blown the boat off course, so he had found shelter at the Cycladic island of Serifos, where an old friend could give him a guineafowl lunch. Cue more gales of laughter.



Two Figures and Setting Sun,
1952–67
Oil on canvas, 122 × 244 cm.
John Craxton Estate

painting octopus fishers, whether solo divers or paired boatmen. Here was the apotheosis of them all – an emblem of humanity in the highest state of being: living with and from nature, golden in sunshine and the glory of youth. Less noticeable at first, but actually claiming much of the scene, a third figure reclined in foreground shadows. He covered his face – a gesture perhaps owing more to sorrow than shading from the sun, since he was mostly in the dark though still outlined in light. A weight-bearing leg was bent at the knee; the other lay casually or uselessly extended with an idle foot on which he might no longer be able to walk.

After staying at the Ghika house with Joan and Paddy, Isabel Lambert wrote that it had been ‘stunning watching the sponge divers’.⁴ John never spoke of their work let alone depicted it, although they were his friends, companions and possible lovers from harbourside bars. He adored their wildness. It came from having more free time and cash to fritter than other Greek labourers, but also from deeper desperation. Sponge fishermen dived to great depths and came up so quickly that some never made it to the surface alive. The bends, striking with apparent randomness, might kill or twist a diver’s leg so that the limb would never work again. Hydra in the

1950s held handsome cripples. Safety equipment was available even then, but divers viewed mechanical assistance as an assault on their manhood and on their innate belief in bravado. They were hooked on the Mediterranean equivalent of Russian roulette. John hated it – just as he could enjoy a bullfight only if there was no risk of the bull being harmed.

So the horizontal figure suggests one of the last of Hydra’s sponge-divers – whose ancient, perilous profession was vanishing due to over-fishing, a virus rendering stocks off the African coast unexploitable and the advent of cheap synthetic alternatives. Many Craxton paintings are studies in opposites, and the contrast in this picture became more acute when the squatting sailor, along with his basket of fruit, was deleted. *Two Figures and Setting Sun*, as shown at the Whitechapel Gallery, has the octopus catcher waving his prize of life and light at the supine figure in the shadows – the tentacles resembling the multi-headed Hydra serpent of Greek mythology, or the Medusa head with snakes instead of hair whose gorgon gaze turned living beings to stone.

As John said, his pictures comment on life but implicitly – he felt his art would be diminished by deciphering. *Two Figures and Setting Sun* is most

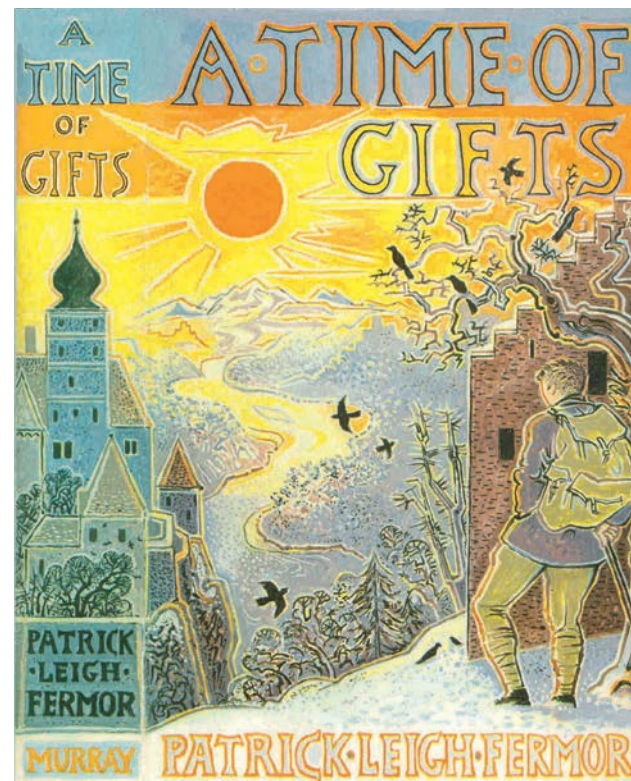
40 A TIME OF GIFTS

Personalities of the Greek junta kept shifting in a macabre game of musical chairs, as policies altered from martial law to more capricious oppression. When strongman George Papadopoulos was ousted, late in 1973, the sinister new power behind the presidency, Dimitrios Ioannidis, plotted a final act of hubris. The assassination of Archbishop Makarios was to bring the union of Cyprus with Greece; but, in July 1974, the Cypriot leader escaped from his burning palace, Turkish forces invaded 40 per cent of the island and the humiliated despots of Athens gave way to restored Greek democracy.

For once John watched a political situation closely, but any hope that he would return with other exiles was quickly dashed. The policing and judicial framework behind seven years of dictatorship was not so easily dismantled, and John's name remained on a list of undesirables. Stanley Seeger, with influential contacts in Athens and Crete, pressed for an amnesty. Konstantinos Mitsotakis, back from Paris, helped too. But the grudge of a police officer in Chania, and those rumours of espionage typed in a security file, ran deep into the administrative fabric of Greece. One philhellene was still unwelcome.

After another two years of lobbying by his friends, John was finally able to return to Greece – taking Richard and calling at Athens and then on the Mastropetros family on Poros on the way to Crete. At first glance the gently crumbling character of Chania seemed unaltered, but there had been a blitzing of bohemians. Allen Bole was dead and Charles Haldeman was locked in legal battles. Dorothy Andrews had married Nikos Stavrolakis in order to claim a Greek passport and stay put and Betty Ryan had moved on to calmer Andros, where, through ensuing decades, she painted abstracted landscapes populated by tame and wild animals, chain-smoked and poured out letters to old friends. Fred Perles and his wife had been expelled. They lived on Cyprus for a few years until displaced by the Turkish invasion when all the writer's papers were looted and lost. Friends enabled an onward move to Somerset suburbia. Fred changed his name to Alfred Barret but kept his sense of humour. It had protected him all along.

At the back of Dorothy's building, in the courtyard above Lithinon Street, there was now the haven of the Hogan house. Kilkenny-raised Eileen Ryan, coming to Chania as an English tutor, had met American diver Harold Hogan – Ernest Hemingway's double – on the beach at Stavros. Ousted under the Colonels, Eileen and Hoge were again providing a refuge for feline and human waifs. One lodger was CIA agent turned novelist Edward Whittemore, who



Jacket for *A Time of Gifts*
by Patrick Leigh Fermor,
1977

wrote part of his Jerusalem Quartet at their table. His haunted presence fuelled rumours of intrigue in the naval town that returning democracy did not dispel.

Going home to Chania was among the greatest gifts of John's life, and he set about working with renewed vigour and insightful imagination on what may yet be seen as his best paintings. The moment is captured in the finest of the book jackets for Paddy Leigh Fermor: *A Time of Gifts*, recalling the author's youthful walk across Europe. Richard Riley posed with a rucksack for the figure entering a world of promise.

The traffic of naval conscripts through 1 Moschon was now resumed – positively increasing when the law changed so that ordinary clothes were allowed in place of military uniforms during social outings. While this diminished the aesthetics of the harbour from John Craxton's point of view, there was a silver lining to the discarded blue and white tunics and trousers, many of which were now removed and stored in his studio until partying sailors changed back when returning to their ships. He also acquired motley sets and mismatches of uniforms for his models. The line of caps and helmets that had unnerved wartime visitors to John and Lucian in Abercorn Place was now replicated in Moschon, alongside an awesome array of shepherds' and soldiers' boots.

One new friend and neighbour was Ross Daly, who had called in on Crete en route to India and stayed to become the foremost exponent of the Cretan lyra.