

ARTY-FACTS

Discovering one of the *Hidden Gems* of Bournemouth

With a beautiful backdrop of sandstone cliffs, the sea front and beaches of Bournemouth are thought by many to be the finest in England. There is a genteel sophistication to Bournemouth that contrasts greatly with the boisterous bustle of Blackpool. Bournemouth's popularity as a holiday destination has evolved from the Victorian era when it was fashionable to holiday by the seaside. This, however, is not the home of the "Kiss me Quick" hat. With numerous hotels, bars and restaurants Bournemouth has become synonymous with buzzing nightlife. Alcohol, music and dancing attract the night owls but in keeping with Bournemouth's genteel nature I wanted to know what the town could offer the fledgling culture vulture looking to impress a sophisticated lady.

The Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum, situated on top of the East Cliff overlooking Bournemouth's pier and award-winning beaches, is one of the world's most uniquely fascinating repositories. This beautifully decorated building, nationally renowned for its lavish interior, was constructed to the personal specifications of Sir Merton Russell-Cotes. The house is an eclectic mix of Renaissance, Italian and Scottish Baronial architecture. Originally built as the family home of Sir Merton and Lady Annie Russell-Cotes the building and its contents were donated to the town of Bournemouth to be opened to the public. Sir Merton, a former mayor of Bournemouth and local philanthropist, travelled extensively with his wife collecting cultural artifacts.

As a student the words ‘free admission’ always have an allure to them so I was delighted to discover that The Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum offers free entry. This seemed an ideal opportunity to ‘treat’ my friend Anne Dulieu and broaden my cultural horizons at the same time. Anne agreed to accompany me and offer a knowledgeable perspective to the experience in return for tea and cake. As we approached the building from the cliff path I was struck by the outward appearance of what Guardian columnist Simon Jenkins calls the “most eccentric small museum in England”. My lack of architectural knowledge blatantly shone through as the Scottish Baronial turrets came fully into view. I compared the building to the house featured in the television show *The Addams Family*; I won’t be the first or the last to make this comparison.

A short but pleasant walk through the museum gardens led us to the main entrance that was reminiscent of a medical reception area with its clinical décor. Whilst Anne has been a regular patron of the Russell-Cotes for many years my own experience was limited to a glimpse of the website, subsequently I was quite taken aback as we exited the lift to the first floor to be met with the deep scarlet walls of the contemporary Samurai gallery. For those uninitiated in cultural artifacts, myself included, there are reference catalogues in each room to help identify the pieces. The fascinating Japanese collection comprising of metalwork, sculptures and ceramics is brought to life by the impressive suit of Samurai armour and the adjacent warrior swords.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the Russell-Cotes, as I was about to discover, is what Dorset Magazine describes as the hotchpotch “pick-and-mix look”. The transition, by means of a modern circular staircase bypassing the children’s play area, to the high Victorian elegance of Sir Merton and Lady Annie’s showpiece dining room typifies this eclectic mixture. The sumptuous red and gold colouring combined with the hand-painted peacock frieze allows the visitor to imagine the splendour of Victorian fine dining. As the museum’s website states “the room is a dark red, traditional in dining rooms to show meat on the plate at its best.”

Accustomed as we are to air travel it is almost inconceivable that Sir Merton and his wife travelled so extensively in their quest to acquire ‘objets d’ art’. The sheer diversity of artifacts is testament to the different personalities and characteristics of the couple. Merton’s memoirs indicate that his penchant was for decorative and fine art while Annie’s passion was for cultural and natural history. It is clear that the Russell-Cotes’ had the means and the opportunity to both pursue their dreams and indulge their individual tastes. This would certainly account for the “kid-let-loose-in-a-sweetshop” description of the venue by Dorset Magazine. With a personal ignorance of fine art I did find myself attracted to some of Annie’s more unusual and eye-catching exhibits. Pieces such as a Russian child’s sleigh, a five stringed lyre made using a crocodile head and a full size Maori canoe cannot fail to appeal to my child-like imagination. The influence of Sir Merton’s preference for fine art is evident throughout the building.

The Russell-Cotes is celebrated for its extensive collection of fine art, most notably the Pre-Raphaelite Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Venus Verticordia and a large Edwin Long collection. My particular highlight was the deftly flirtatious glance of a beautiful girl known simply as The Venetian Water Carrier, a painting by Eugene de Blass whose speciality was the depiction of Venetian beauties. The photographic style clarity of this painting can only be truly appreciated in the flesh.

A key factor in the success of The Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum lies in the fact that "it is a great place to come and look around as it is always changing" as described in the visitors book. The latest temporary installation in the formal gallery is entitled Hidden Gems: 20th Century Faces. This is a collection of contemporary portraits of people of varying and unknown backgrounds. Visitors are encouraged to speculate on the lives and backgrounds of those depicted on the 'wall of faces'. Occupations represented include sailors, soldiers and nurses, clergymen, newspaper boys and school children.

Within a creative activities area in the gallery visitors of all ages can create their own self-portraits and improvise using a range of dressing up props and a mirror. The contributions effectively become an extension of the exhibition. There is a welcoming charm and sense of community about this project that openly encourages participation regardless of perceived artistic ability. It is not uncommon to find enthusiastic local artists around the gallery sketching and

finding inspiration. I felt ashamedly intrusive as I interrupted Steve from New Milton who was deep in concentration, pencil in hand, to ask what he felt was unique about the venue. He responded, “ It is just a wonderful wonderful gallery!” and added, “There is a continuing sense of wonderment about this place.” Steve’s comments reminded me of a quote on the Russell-Cotes website by journalist Jeremy Paxman who said “If only I’d known the Russell-Cotes Museum was there, it would have made all those political party conferences I had to cover in Bournemouth a lot more fun. The place is a feast.”

In overall reflection I would have to share Jeremy Paxman’s enthusiasm, especially when you consider that The Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum has free admission. The diversity of the exhibitions and cultural artifacts on display hold a fascination for all age groups. Whether you are a fledgling culture vulture or a tough talking political journalist the experience is an enduring one. As my culturally experienced friend Anne states “ it is like having a miniature version of The Victoria and Albert Museum on my doorstep.” Lets face it is not every day you can experience such an eclectic mix of culture and art. The Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum is open from 10am to 5pm Tuesday to Sunday and Bank Holiday Mondays.

Word count 1250

TARGET PUBLICATION AND AUDIENCE

The intended publication for this feature article would ideally be The Dorset Magazine: Dorset Life. The magazine is dedicated to the people, culture and history of the county of Dorset. It is hoped that the readership of Dorset Life would appreciate the cultural and historical significance of the content and subsequently be able to locate the feature to one of the principle towns of Dorset. The feature could work equally well in both printed and online formats of Dorset Life.

<http://www.dorsetlife.co.uk/>

