A Crime Writer’s Collection

A murder mystery combines with the 20th century art collection of award-winning crime writer Frances Fyfield at an unusual new exhibition in Bournemouth, Jeremy Miles went to investigate.
MOONLIGHT is falling on a country house party deep in rural Dorset. Hortensia Huntingdon-Smyth has been holding court, entertaining an intriguing selection of guests.

Suddenly the mood changes. Conviviality turns to horror as a body is discovered in the hall. Self-made millionaire and inventor, Reginald Maudeville, appears to have been the victim of murder most foul.

But who killed him and why? This is the fascinating puzzle presented to those visiting A Question of Guilt - a unique new art exhibition which plays out as a murder mystery at Bournemouth’s Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum.

It bears the subtitle A Crime Writer’s Collection and that is exactly what this fascinating and fun show is based around - the extraordinary and eclectic collection of 20th century British paintings owned by best-selling crime novelist Frances Fyfield.

For decades the award-winning author has been an assiduous collector of oil paintings, portraits and drawings by British artists, mainly from the first half of the last century. The result is a showcase for an era and style of painting that for many years was considered deeply unfashionable. With its emphasis on Bloomsbury and British modernist art, it is a wondrous collection of characterful portraits and scenes whose original narratives have long become lost in the mists of time.

The perfect material, in fact, for would-be detectives studying the case of the dead inventor.

As well as being the author of 24 page-turning crime novels Frances Fyfield has also enjoyed a successful career as a criminal lawyer.

No wonder that she has long felt that each painting could have its own potential story, that each character or scene may play a part in a mysterious murder.

For A Question of Guilt - a title shared with Fyfield’s 1988 debut best-seller - she has written her own captions to the sometimes anonymous paintings and invites visitors to the show to turn detective.

So who did kill Reginald Maudeville? The first character you encounter is the senior detective - a gaunt, anxious looking woman with a long neck, tilted hat and hollow eyes. Could she be harbouring any secrets? Other characters include the spinster, the enforcer, the good wife, the blackmailer, the gangster’s new moll, the avenger, the eavesdropper, the security officer asleep on the job and the exotic guest in disguise.

As you are prompted to move from the hall to the conservatory, the kitchen and the bedroom there are clues galore. We learn that the blueprints for Maudeville’s latest breakthrough invention, the Perpetual Motion Machine, have gone missing, and there are signs that he has been frantically trying to change his will.

A former lab partner from whom he parted for reasons unknown is among the guests; so too are several other characters whose plans for the evening may be less than innocent.

With the opportunity for gallery visitors to dress up in detective gear, examine the evidence with magnifying glasses and take advantage of other props, this exhibition is above all else fun. As Frances Fyfield said, in her opening address at the launch of this exhibition, “Laughter in an art gallery is a greatly underrated pleasure.”

It also offers a chance to engage uncommonly closely with the paintings on show. There are 53 works from Fyfield’s collection, augmented by a handful of appropriate pieces from the Russell-Cotes archive.

It offers a compelling snapshot of the social concerns of early and mid 20th century Britain. It is also a rare portal into the painting world
disciplines imparted by an education during the classic era of English art schools.

Declaring the exhibition open, Professor Stuart Bartholomew, the vice-chancellor and principal of Bournemouth Arts University, described A Question of Guilt as “a great show” saying that it communicated the immense standard of figurative painting that once came out of British art schools.

Many of these paintings - the earliest of which Fyfield claims to have bought to cover the cracks on her student bed-sit wall - may be by unknowns. But certainly not all. The collection also contains paintings by Frank Dobson, Duncan Grant, Evelyn Dunbar and even Gwen John and Walter Sickert.

The latter, of course, had his own associations with the world of murder mystery.

Not only did he paint the shadowy world of Victorian London, the music halls, dancers and prostitutes, but one of Sickert’s most famous series of paintings concentrated on the notorious murder of a street-walker in Camden Town.

That it seems was enough for another crime novelist, the American author Patricia Cornwell to spend years trying to prove that Sickert was none other than the serial killer Jack the Ripper, who terrorised Whitechapel in the late 19th century. After buying dozens of Sickert’s paintings, employing forensic scientists to carry out exhaustive tests and spending a reputed $7 million she still doesn’t have a case that would stand up in court.

Happily Frances Fyfield’s A Question of Guilt exhibition inhabits a slightly more innocent world and concentrates on the subjects of the paintings rather than the artists. When asked if her years as a criminal prosecutor influenced her love of a murder mystery she told me: “I think it’s more likely to be influenced by my love of crime fiction - the world of Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers.”

Too modest to mention her own award-winning novels, she seems content to have found a way of sharing with whodunnit fans the delights of her curiously wonderful collection of paintings and the characters who populate them.

And where better to stage this country house murder mystery with an artistic twist than within East Cliff Hall, the beautiful but eccentric late Victorian Bournemouth mansion that is the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum. It’s an environment where the characters gathered in Frances Fyfield’s collection of paintings seem very much at home. ◆

LET’S GO!

A Question of Guilt: A Crime Writer’s Collection is at the Russell-Cotes until 15 April. Associated events with this exhibition include:

15 March: An Evening with Crime
View the Question of Guilt exhibition with the curatorial team, then listen to a panel of crime writers discuss their craft. Starts 6.30pm

24 March: Bournemouth: Crime and the Underworld
A guided-walk at 1.30pm led by photographer, writer and local historian Hattie Miles exploring the towns crime connections with the Great Train Robbery, and Jack the Ripper as well as other dark secrets, includes entrance to the exhibition and tea and cake in the Russell-Cotes cafe.
To book tickets for either event call 01202 451800 or visit russellcotes.com