

The Economist

Winston Churchill

The art of power

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Courtesy of Anthea Morton-Saner / Churchill Heritage Ltd

"YOU have a medium at your disposal which offers real power," wrote Winston Churchill in his essay "Painting as a Pastime", "if you can find out how to use it." Britain's wartime leader came late to the hobby he used to relax, first picking up a brush in 1915 to distract himself after the disasters of Gallipoli. Over the next half-century he painted more than 500 daubs, as he called them, giving a few to lucky friends such as Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Dwight Eisenhower.

Now the largest exhibition of them in America since 1965, according to Churchill's great-grandson, Duncan Sandys, has opened at the Millenium Gate Museum in Atlanta. Thirty-three pictures appear on the walls of the building, itself lavishly designed to resemble Rome's Arch of Titus, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the statesman's death in January 2015. Their appearance in Georgia is linked both to Mr Sandys's current residence in the state and the family's past there. James Oglethorpe, Georgia's founder, learned military tactics from John Churchill, eventually the 1st Duke of Marlborough, in the eighteenth century. Churchill himself visited the state several times, delighting in what he saw. "What lovely country surrounds the city of Atlanta! Its rich red soils, the cotton-quilted hills and uplands, the rushing, turgid rivers, all are alive with tragic memories of the Civil War," he enthused in "Land of Corn and Lobsters".

One painting on display, "Lake Geneva, Switzerland," has been loaned by Chequers, the country retreat of British prime ministers; another arrived from the home of Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie. Their work, "The Tower of the Katoubia Mosque" (pictured), is the only one Churchill completed during the second world war. It was painted on a trip to Marrakech with Roosevelt, the British leader having persuaded his American counterpart to visit after a summit meeting in 1943. The burned orange of the mosque's exterior warms the wall on which it hangs; blurred streakings of colour suggest the haze and the heat of North Africa—Mr Sandys recalls his grandfather explaining that Churchill often "splashed on the paint."

The year Churchill was born, the first Impressionist exhibition took place in Paris. The leader's landscapes in particular flirt with the colourful legacy of that movement, allowing a sense of place but little concept of time. The most striking work on display, however, proves an exception. "The Beach at Walmer", painted in 1938 as Europe rolled towards war, shows a coastal scene in which a hard, shelf-like beach runs into water composed of teal and navy. Three bathers in a row, all wearing caps, and two in the distance, frolic in the sea. None seem to mind the huge, black, Napoleonic-era cannon dominating the work's foreground. General Hastings Ismay, Churchill's chief of staff during the war, asked for the painting when his prime minister offered him a reward for his services. He felt it best represented Churchill as a leader—a constant, looming guard over Britain's shores.