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# HORACE MANN LIVENS

1862 - 1936

*Van Gogh's English friend*

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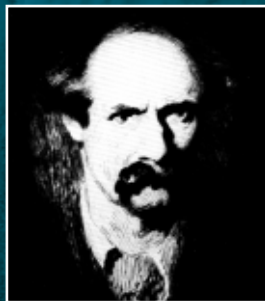
## H.M. Livens - A Curator's Tribute

By Jane Howard, Curator of the Honeywood Museum

My first contact with Livens' work was in the early 1990s when I joined the London Borough of Sutton Museum Service, and had the opportunity to become familiar with the Borough Art Collection. My attention was caught by a watercolour of the Hackbridge on the River Wandle near Carshalton dated 1904. The eye is drawn to a heavily laden horse drawn cart crossing the iron bridge, over a sheet of water against an Impressionistic background of trees. I was intrigued; who was this artist, whose work held such subtle power? I resolved to discover more.

I found that Livens had been born in nearby Croydon, and had lived in Alfred Road, Sutton with Gertrude, his wife, from 1902-1912. During this time they had raised two children, Leo and Evangeline, and Horace had produced a significant body of work, including pastels, watercolours, oils, and dry-point engravings.

The quality of his drawing shines through, from the poignancy of happy scenes of domesticity, capturing his family in a few lines of pastel with a tenderness which glows from the paper.



The painting of the Hackbridge is, as I came to realise, very typical. Drawn in black chalk on his trademark coloured paper, he uses a muted watercolour palette of greens and browns with an economy which only serves to strengthen the composition. His rapidly drawn landscapes heightened with colour have a joyful freedom of expression and spontaneity.

Frederick Wedmore describes the effect of Livens' work in his book *Some of the Moderns*, published in 1909. "You are indifferent to his things – more than indifferent perhaps, for you may actually dislike them – or you are seized by them, and they hold you, and their hold upon you will never be relaxed". For myself I realised a long time ago that I am held by them.

Jane Howard

**The Honeywood Museum in Carshalton houses one of the best public collections of Livens' work.**

## Horace Mann Livens

*Van Gogh's English friend*

In 1909, the Edwardian art critic, Frederick Wedmore, was asked to choose the ten most 'original and important' artists of his generation - those that best struck the 'new note' of the century - for his book, *Some of the Moderns*. As a prediction of subsequent reputation, Wedmore's litany of Edwardian greats was pretty spot on: Sickert is there, along with the 30-year-old Orpen, William Nicholson, Steer and Muirhead Bone.

*"Livens was, (in Wedmore's view) a great artist"*

One name in Wedmore's pantheon, however, is not so familiar today – that of Horace Mann Livens. But even here, Wedmore was prescient. He predicted that, although Livens was, in his view, a great artist: "a master of extreme accomplishment", he would, in the end, "avoid popularity, with all its evils" and build a reputation instead among the cognoscenti – or what he called a "*clientèle d'élite*".





Livens was as quiet and unassuming a man as he was an artist; a grammar school boy and the son of a colonial broker from Croydon, his art didn't involve glamorous set pieces or shocking and surprising subject matter. His unpretentious material was the warp and weave of quiet, ordinary suburban life and everyday domesticity, but it was a life that he transfigured into art with subtlety, style and individuality. One of his obituaries noted that "pictures by him were highly appreciated, particularly by artists."

*"the first member of this painterly fan club was Vincent Van Gogh"*

The first and most illustrious member of this painterly fan club was none other than Vincent Van Gogh, an artist whose own whirligig of fame has followed a very different course from that of his English friend. At the time when the Dutchman met Livens – the winter of 1885/86 – however, Van Gogh's life and career were at a low ebb.

Both men were enrolled at the Antwerp Academy to study art: Livens, a talented and enthusiastic 23 year old fresh from evening classes at the Croydon School of Art, experiencing his







first taste of continental life and Van Gogh, already a care-worn and troubled man, losing his teeth and looking much older than his 32 years.

It was here, in the conservative atmosphere of the Academy (students were not permitted to work from nude models) that Livens made what is the earliest-known portrait study of his new friend. This work is known only from a reproduction in an obscure Flemish magazine, remembered mainly for producing the first-ever article on Van Gogh and his work. Another contemporary, Richard Baseleer, described Livens' sketch as the Dutchman's "spitting image".

Despite the difference in their ages and background, the pair had much in common. Both loved Japanese prints and English literature and Van Gogh, something of an anglophile, was familiar with Livens' home county of Surrey, having lived in nearby Isleworth and preached regularly as a lay preacher at Richmond Methodist Church.

Van Gogh matriculated in 1886 and left Antwerp for Paris. He soon wrote to Livens, inviting the young Englishman to share his lodgings and studio, praising him in the strongest possible terms: "I have often thought of yourself and your work. You

St Mary's in Wyndham Square (*detail*)



Morning in Berkeley Square





will remember that I liked your colour, your ideas on art and literature and I add, most of all your personality."

Van Gogh goes on to remind Livens of their shared belief that "true drawing is modelling with colour", an artistic manifesto that the Englishman abided by throughout his life and which can clearly be seen in the watercolours, pastels and oils exhibited here.

*"I have often thought of yourself and your work. You will remember that I liked your colour, your ideas on art and literature and I add, most of all your personality."* Van Gogh

Livens' use of modelled colour is most apparent in his subtly unusual watercolours, which, the critic Wedmore believed would "form the surest basis of his reputation". Invariably using dark paper, Livens used lines of black chalk to form a very loose and free structure, into which he liberally smeared Chinese white and bold, thickly applied gouache. Wedmore accurately described his use of colour as "a little 'abstract', a little generalised" but "brought always into singular and satisfying harmony" - with all the harmony, in fact, of the Japanese prints that Livens and Van Gogh both admired.







The watercolours and pastels exhibited here constitute one of the largest and most representative collections of Livens' work to have been seen for many years. Despite being quite prolific during his lifetime, two destructive fires – one during the Blitz and another, later, at his widow's home – significantly reduced the quantity of Livens' extant work.

So the recent discovery of a large cache of watercolours and oils that had never been framed or – presumably – seen by a wider public, was a wonderful surprise. Some of these works relate to Livens' known projects, such as his fertile collaboration with the writer, E.V. Lucas, whose books about London were one of the publishing hits of the Edwardian period. In one typical scene, a gaggle of figures appear to be filing into a Far Eastern temple; in fact, they are visitors to the India Pavilion at Wembley's British Empire Exhibition of 1924.

These, and other delights, such as the charming pastel of Livens' daughter (see back cover) and the highly unusual oils of racecourse bookmakers and regattas, present exciting new insights into the work of this highly individual and underrated British artist.

*Andrew Sim, December 2011*

Racecourse Bookmakers



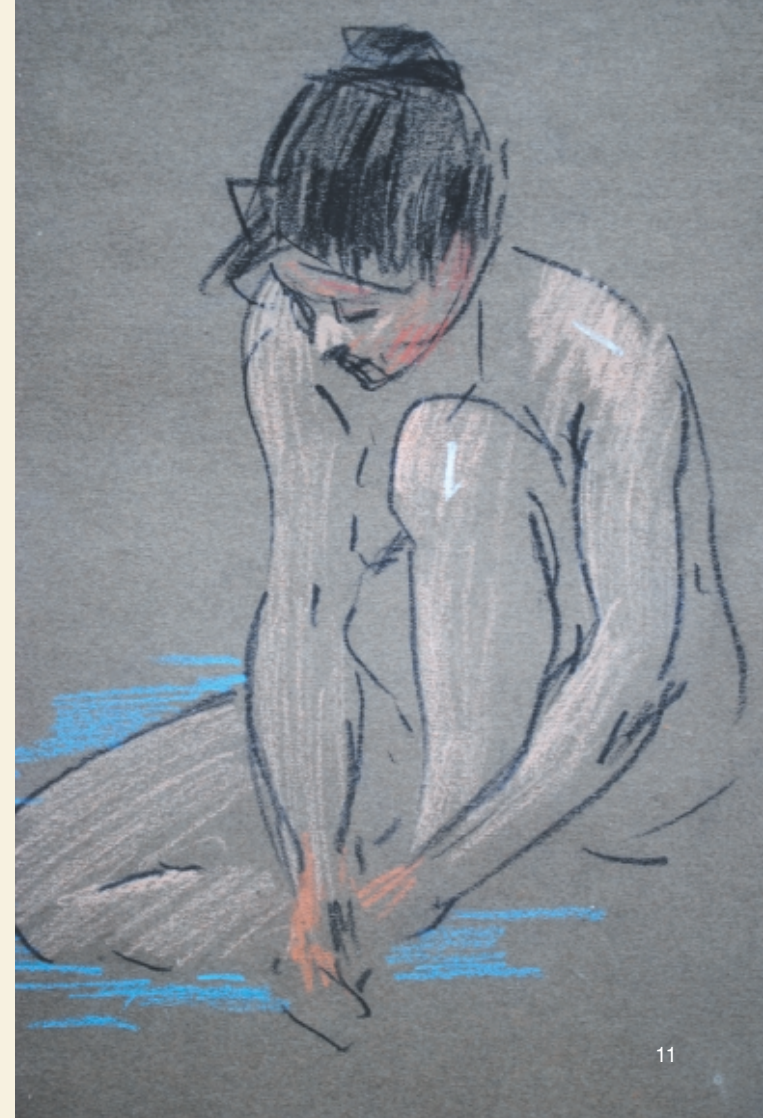
Gertrude Sewing (artist's wife)



Street Characters Fighting



The Newspaper



Seated nude





The Coal Cart, Connaught Square, 1920 (Detail)

## Letter from Van Gogh

Since I am here in Paris I have very often thought of your self and work. You will remember that I liked your colour, your ideas on art and literature and I add, most of all, your personality.

I have already before now thought that I ought to let you know what I was doing, where I was. But what refrained me was that I find living in Paris is much dearer than in Antwerp and not knowing what your circumstances are I dare not say Come over to Paris, without warning you that it costs one dearer than Antwerp and that if poor, one has to suffer many things. As you may imagine. But on the other hand there is more chance of selling. There is also a good chance of exchanging pictures with other artists. In one word, with much energy, with a sincere personal feeling of colour in nature I would say an artist can get on here notwithstanding the many obstructions. And I intend remaining here still longer. There is much to be seen here — for instance Delacroix to name only one master.

In Antwerp I did not even know what the Impressionists were, now I have seen them and though not being one of the club yet I have much admired certain Impressionist pictures — degas, nude figure — Claude Monet, landscape. And now for what regards what I myself have been doing, I have lacked money for paying models, else I had entirely given myself to figurepainting but I have made a series of colour studies in painting, simply flowers, red poppies, blue corn flowers and myosotis. White and rose roses, yellow chrysanthemums — seeking oppositions of blue with orange, red and green, yellow and violet, seeking THE BROKEN AND NEUTRAL TONES to harmonise brutal extremes. Trying to render intense COLOUR and not a grey harmony. Now after these gymnastics I lately did two heads which I dare say are better in light and colour than those I did before. So as we said at the time in COLOUR seeking life, the true drawing is modelling with colour. I did a dozen landscapes too, frankly green, frankly blue. And so I am struggling for life and progress in art. Now I would very much like to know what you are doing and whether you ever think of going to Paris.

If ever you did come here, write to me before and I will, if you like, share my lodgings and studio with you so long as I have any. In spring — say February or even sooner — I may be going to the south of France, — the land of the blue tones and gay colours. And look here, if I knew you had longings for the same we might combine. I felt sure at the time that you are a thorough colourist and since I saw the Impressionists I assure you that neither your colour nor mine as it is developing itself, is exactly the same as their theories but so much dare I say, we have a chance and a good one of finding friends.

I hope your health is all right. I was rather low down in health when in Antwerp but got better here.

Write to me, in any case remember me to Allan, Brit, Rink, Durand, but I have not so often thought on any of them as I did think of you — almost daily.

Shaking hands cordially.

Yours truly,

Vincent

My present address is

Mr Vincent van Gogh  
54 Rue Lepic  
Paris



Portrait of Van Gogh by Livens





## Horace Mann Livens - A Life

- 1862 Born in Croydon
- 1882 Took evening classes at Croydon School of Art under Walter Wallis
- 1885 Student at Antwerp Academy under Charles Verlat. Met Van Gogh
- 1889 Painting in Paris
- 1890 Exhibited at the Royal Academy for the first time
- 1894 Started to exhibit at the New English Art Club
- 1895 Married (Gertrude Brock)
- 1896 First child, Leo, born. Leo became a virtuoso pianist and composer
- 1897 Second child, Evangeline, born
- 1906 Produced illustrations for 'A Wanderer in London' by E.V. Lucas
- 1907 Member of the International Society
- 1911 First one-man exhibition at the Goupil Gallery (again in 1914)
- 1923 Exhibition at the Grosvenor Gallery
- 1936 Died on 5th October, aged 73

## Livens' work can be seen in the following museums

Tate Gallery (Tate Britain), British Museum, V&A, Government Art Collection, National Museum of Wales - Cardiff, The Honeywood Museum - Carshalton, Worthing Art Gallery, City of Bradford Museum & Art Gallery, Walsall Museum & Art Gallery, Brighton Museum, Oldham Art Gallery, National Gallery of Canada - Royal Borough of Kingston

