

A SHORT HISTORY OF DORA HOUSE

HEADQUARTERS OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF SCULPTORS

A place where the creative congregate

Dora House has always been a place where the creative congregate. For over one hundred years, it has been a home – and studio space – for sculptors, photographers, painters, architects and designers.

The sculptor Cecil Thomas OBE FRBS lived and worked here from 1919 until his death in 1976 when the building, named after his beloved wife, was bequeathed to the Royal Society of Sculptors. Since its foundation in 1904, the Society had never had a permanent base. With their generous gift, the Thomas family fulfilled a long-held intention to secure the future of the organisation.

The Society has called Dora House home ever since and is currently working to restore the building and create an exciting space to see, experience and enjoy sculpture.

The architectural story

The architecture of Dora House is highly individual and catches the eye in an area dominated by stuccoed Italianate villas. It is built in red brick with a pair of steep curved gables, classical details in stone in the Flemish manner and tall leaded light windows on three floors.

Dora House is one of the oldest buildings in Kensington and was originally constructed by the



Dora House, 108 Old Brompton Road

builder and bricklayer William Blake in 1820. It started life as a pair of early Georgian semi-detached villas but the ornate frontage dates from a 1885-1886 remodelling. The building was refashioned to create a grand studio for Court photographers Elliot and Fry.

The two principal ground floor rooms – the Entrance Hall and the Salon – were enlarged and decorated with plaster ceilings, fine stone fireplaces and strapwork panelling. These elegant rooms would have been hung with paintings by contemporary artists, as Fry was an important patron of the arts. A new north-light studio was also added, with a brochure at the time highlighting the ground floor location which would “prove a convenience...especially to Ladies in Court Dress or other elaborate costume.”



Cecil Thomas at Dora House

The project was undertaken by the young Scottish architect, William Flockhart (1854 – 1913) who trained at the Glasgow School of Art. He demonstrated a finely considered delicacy and careful use of historical style, combined with a quality craftsmanship. Writing about the work, Flockhart commented, “an effort has been made in the treatment of the front elevation to recall the character which prevailed in English work towards the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century.” Meanwhile, The Survey of London describes Dora House as, “an attractive composition on red brick with stone dressings which, perhaps, owes more to seventeenth-century Dutch sources than any actual English building inspired by them.”

Flockhart’s other well-known work in London includes a commission from art collector Sir Edmund Davis. Lansdowne House on Lansdowne Road near Holland Park is a dramatic tower-like block of studios and living accommodation, first occupied by the artists Charles Ricketts RA and Charles Shannon RA.

A home and studio for Cecil Thomas

In 1919 the house was taken on by the sculptor Cecil Thomas (1885– 1976) who worked and lived here with his wife Dora and son Anthony. With a vast career all over the world, Cecil Thomas was celebrated for his bronze memorials, medal engraving and coin commissions. He received the OBE for his Coronation Commonwealth Coinage and became a Master of the Artworker’s Guild in 1946.

Cecil Thomas initially rented Dora House and later bought it. He loved the house and commissioned a careful restoration of the front elevation. For some time after WWII, the attic floor and part of the first floor were let as an architect’s office to Christopher “Kit” Nicholson, whose father and brother were painters. His partner was Sir Hugh Casson PRA who wrote, “We loved the Dutch house (as we called it) and were very happy there.”

Thomas founded the Dora Charitable Trust, in commemoration of his wife who died in 1967, to advance British sculpture. In his will, he left the house and studio to the Royal Society of Sculptors.

Today, the Society continues to champion contemporary sculpture and the artists who create it. As an artist-led, membership organisation, we support and connect sculptors throughout their careers and lead the conversation about sculpture today through exhibitions and events for all.



Cecil Thomas in the studio

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