



# APPRECIATIONS: LUNCH WITH CECILY LANGDALE



*This page: Lucien Freud and Roy Davis  
conversing in a gallery at the Metropolitan  
Museum of Art. Opposite page: Cecily  
Langdale and Roy Davis, the husband and  
wife team behind Langdale & Davis.*

**TABLE FOR TWO** for three. That's what my meal with Cecily Langdale at Le Veau d'Or turned into—as I suspect we both knew it would, as we both knew it would have to be, when we made the date. When she arrived, striking and elegant as ever despite the use of a cane necessitated by recent knee surgery, and sat down, the first words out of my mouth were “I feel Roy’s with us today,” and Cecily smiled and nodded.

“Roy” is Cecily’s late husband Roy Davis, her mentor, partner, soulmate, collaborator, love of her life for 50 years until his death in 2014. Their eponymous gallery, Davis & Langdale, which succeeded other dealing partnerships in which Roy had been enmeshed, was literally adored by its clientele. With his passing, things must

change; two hands, pairs of eyes, and intellects will now take over work that four did for decades. Be certain, however, that Cecily’s fans will insist, echoing Tancredi in *The Leopard*, that the spirit and character of the enterprise must remain, in essence, the same.

Without Roy, the to-and-fro of a busy gallery open full-time to the public is just too much. Accordingly, Cecily has decided to become “semi-private”: open to the public, say, on Saturdays and open by appointment at other times, because as Cecily puts it, “I don’t want to scare people away. While we shan’t be doing one-person exhibitions (though I might even change my mind about that) we will have “hangs” that change every month—with new acquisitions—and I am eager

for people to come in. One of the greatest pleasures of having a gallery is the interactions with others, from which one learns easily as much as one teaches.”

She’ll also run a first-class website; she’ll send out emails that matches work that comes in with the known tastes of certain collectors; she’ll continue to get out and look at art, but she says she won’t be adding to her roster of artists.

I met Cecily and her husband in the mid-1970s when they had opened a gallery on Madison Avenue under the name “Davis & Long” on a sweetheart lease from the late Joan Whitney Payson. Mrs. Payson, a classy dame by any standards, would populate her buildings with tenants she liked. A London friend staying with me, the incomparable John Saumarez Smith



(moving spirit of the legendary Curzon St. bookshop, Heywood Hill) had visited Davis & Long and rushed back to report that his friends, Cecily and Roy, had a drawing of Evelyn Waugh by the English artist Henry Lamb. I then collected Waugh first editions, so back I rushed with John, and the drawing became mine. Thus began a lovely long friendship.

The "Long" in the name of the Madison Avenue gallery was Meredith Long, a well-regarded Houston dealer. As I got to know Cecily and Roy, and my appreciation of how rare and inventive was the way they saw and thought about works of art, I decided that there was no way this apples-and-oranges partnership could work. And in due course, it didn't—Davis & Long became Davis & Langdale. I should add that Joan Payson, and her discerning regard for what Cecily and Roy were up to, was one of a number of Davis & Langdale patrons bearing the most resonant names in a certain highly refined (but never precious) category of American collecting. Mellon, Engelhard, Lehman, Carter Burden are others.

Cecily will be the first to tell you "Roy shaped me." What an amazing training that must have been for a young woman just out of Swarthmore. Roy had started out as a painter, and a damn good one, trained at the Tyler School of Art at Temple University; he'd studied with that irascible genius Dr. Albert Barnes; he knew his way around. Roy figures in one of my favorite paintings: John Koch's monumental 1956 portrait "A Cocktail Party," his is the well-groomed head at the lower left-hand corner of the baroque painting on the wall. He's talking to Aaron Shikler, a fellow Tyler graduate, and one of Davis & Langdale's best-served and best-serving artists for many years (Aaron died just a year after Roy). Of course, as is the case of relationships that are both professional and connubial, as time went on the shaping became reciprocal and the partnership more equal.

When I reflect on the Davis-Langdale manner of dealing, I find myself recalling a wonderful line from the first iteration of Mike Nichols and Elaine May: "There was proximity—but there was no relating." Cecily and Roy got it entirely the other way round. They related. The work they showed connected. Much of it was



modest in scale. The artist and his craft could be embraced. It was strictly about what could be seen right there on the wall. Externalities didn't seem to matter. When Cecily declares, "You'd never hear Roy or me say something would make a good investment," she means it—and if you think that way, you're probably not the right client for Davis & Langdale.

In their stable of artists, you get the feeling that the materiality of the work—the imagination and refinement that are put into its surfaces—counts for almost as much as the image. Or, to put it vulgarly, that the medium bears as much weight as the message. I have a tough time figuring out what Albert York, one of Davis & Langdale's leading lights, is getting at, but by God the art he makes is physically wonderful to look at, visually compelling. Three years ago, I went to Davis & Langdale to see a show of collages by a painter named Robert Ohnigian. These works simply would not let me go; seized by what I call "Lot's wife syndrome," I bought one. I look at it perhaps a dozen times a day. What it may be of, or about, or that I got it for a price that the inhabitants of \$30 million condominiums consider derisory, doesn't matter. Its facture, its presence, is simply...well, seductive, irresistible. If I had to sum up in a word what I feel is the dominant quality of the work in their gallery, it would be: original.

It's no surprise, therefore, that an artist to whom Cecily feels especially close in a whole palette ways is Lucian Freud. He was never a gallery artist. "Simply too expensive for us," Cecily says. But a close

close friend he was—even though Freud, by most accounts, wasn't the easiest of people to deal with. The man's road-way to Olympus is littered with busted relationships. But with Cecily and Roy, he appears to have been loyal, constant, dazzling, open; the key, Cecily appears to think, is that Freud was fiercely protective of his artistic space—his projects, his separateness, his genius—and woe betide anyone who ambled unthinkingly (or aspirationally) across those boundaries. We observed those boundaries, she intimates, and were repaid in the coin of friendship. Davis and Langdale participated in the first Freud exhibition in the United States in the early 1970s. But they backed off a proposal for a show of "secondary" holdings of Freud's work when it seemed likely to endanger the friendship.

"It's very, very difficult to move with the times," Cecily observed at one point. But her tone and expression were hardly elegiac. Losing Roy has challenged her. But there'll always be a place for the kind of art that Cecily specializes in: discreet, well-made, and doesn't shriek its price from the wall. In today's noisy Chelsea world, the quietists seem to be losing ground. That's what concerns Cecily. Everything's so big, clamorous, self-validating, derivative, and loud today. The taste for art that needs to be savored up close seems to be eroding. And yet, how can one get through life without it? Or without the likes of Cecily Langdale, of Davis and Langdale? The answer's easy: we can't—and we shouldn't. ♦