

ONE reason for the popularity of the Fitzwilliam Museum, both with visitors and benefactors, is that it feels more like a private than a public institution. Founded out of the bequest in 1816 of an 18th-century nobleman and housed in a 19th-century palace of art, it feels like a connoisseurs' club enriched by a succession of generations of interlocking collectors.

That is so because in this century it has attracted a succession of remarkable directors who have left their different stamps on it and also more numerous generous friends than a virtually penniless institution might reasonably expect. Part of its private character is due to the way the original building was enlarged by Sir Sydney Cockerell, director from 1908 to 1937, and his attitude to the display of works of art. It was he who introduced the custom of furnishing the galleries with oriental rugs as soon as the new Courtauld Galleries were completed in 1931. That has become one of the distinctive hallmarks of the museum and one of the subtle reasons for its special appeal.

However, increasing numbers of feet, which have leaped 25% to 300,000 pairs in the past couple of years, growing concern for the conservation of all kinds of objects, rising prices and declining supply of carpets all combine to make the continuation of Sir Sydney's idea a problem for the museum. Over the past five years, rugs that were thought too good to be treated as furnishings and walked on have been withdrawn, and others less good have become too worn to be left out. The result is that the number of rugs left in use has been considerably reduced: none are now left in the 19th-century French Room and the Upper Marlay Gallery with the early Italian pictures. The effect of their loss can be seen when a view of the latter gallery today is compared with a view showing rugs set out in a way similar to the traditional arrangement.

Therefore it seemed worth considering the nature of the contribution rugs and carpets make to the galleries, what Sir Sydney had in mind and how that could be maintained in the future. The original acquisitions were made in 1932



(Top) 1—The Upper Marlay Gallery at the Fitzwilliam Museum as it is today. (Above) 2—The gallery as it used to be, with carpets

## FURNISHING THE FLOORS OF THE FITZ

by JOHN CORNFORTH

*The carpets at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, which added such an intimate charm to the place, must be replaced.*

as a result of a fund provided by Mr Arnold D. Power of Queen's College: 19 were bought by the director with the advice of Mr C. E. C. Tattershall of the Victoria and Albert Museum and, as the annual report for that year said: 'They have been spread on the floors of the Courtauld Galleries, the beauty of which they greatly enhance.' Thirty more were

played. That works particularly well in the bay with the founder's Veronese hanging over a great 17th-century Italian table and in the Venetian bay where Pittoni's *Monument to Sir Isaac Newton* hangs with four Venetian views over five pieces of Venetian furniture (Fig 3).

Large expanses of narrow, and what now appear to be often rather orange,

acquired the following year through the generosity of the same donor. And since then they have continued to be acquired, two being given for use last year. However, there is no stock left to draw on, and the museum needs strong, tightly-knotted carpets of different types and sizes with reasonable pile that it can use, good quality furnishing pieces that do not need an acquisition number.

In Sir Sydney's day it was possible to choose rugs to relate to individual pictures, but that is no longer practical, because placing has to be influenced by the pressure of use and the need to turn and switch rugs. Moreover, they serve different functions in the galleries. In the British Gallery at the head of the main stairs, the adjoining 17th-century French Gallery, the Broughton Gallery (Fig 5) at the head of the stairs and the Islamic Gallery (Fig 4) at their foot, large carpets are used to provide a base of pattern, colour and texture that pulls all four walls together to create a sense of unity and space and also to underline the sense of a succession of varied spaces in the building.

Also in the British Gallery the bold design of the carpet with a lot of red in it complements the colour of the wall-hangings. In the Broughton Gallery the carpet is a foil to the large number of flower paintings and the not-over-large pieces of fine furniture: in the Islamic Gallery the design reads particularly well as one descends the stairs and looks across to the Iznik and Persian ceramics and the fine rugs that hang over the cases.

Smaller rugs and runners help to concentrate the eye on groups of pictures and objects in the big bays that are a feature of the galleries. In the large Courtauld Gallery the centre of the floor is now almost bare of rugs, but in each of the bays rugs are used to provide a visual base and foreground for the pictures and furniture displayed.



(Top left) 3—The Courtauld, or Italian, Gallery. The carpets help to concentrate the eye on groups of pictures and objects in the big bays. (Top right) 4—The Islamic Gallery. (Above) 5—The Broughton, or Flower, Gallery. The series of carpets underlines the sense of a succession of varied spaces in the picture galleries

boards are not flattering to the furniture that is also an important part of the museum's display. The Upper Marlay Gallery suffers particularly, because the Japanese gilded paper that was hung when the gallery was first opened and has been such a sympathetic background for the early Italian pictures is now passing beyond the state of mellowness. The

patterns and colours of carpets made the floors virtually invisible and the state of the walls less obvious. Also they invited the visitor to linger and look, enjoying each section in turn. Now the bare boards seem to propel one onward more rapidly to the Courtauld Gallery.

Not all the Fitzwilliam's Friends are specialist collectors or acquisitive

connoisseurs who can give or bequeath fine objects to enrich the collections, but there may be a few who have respectable furnishing carpets that they might give or bequeath knowing that theirs would not be long-life gifts but would help to maintain the special character of the Museum for another generation to enjoy.

*Photographs: June Buck.*