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Masterpieces from Buckingham Palace

Marie-Sylvette Boré

The Queen's Gallery, Palace of Holyroodhouse, Edinburgh
Curated by Desmond Shawe-Taylor and Isabella Manning
May 17, 2022—September 25, 2022

Marie-Sylvette Boré graduated in art history and also completed her first master's degree Sorbonne University in Paris. She subsequently came to the University of York to further delve into her interest in the last generation of the Pre-Raphaelites through completing a second MA in History of Art, specialising in British art. Under the supervision of Dr Luke Uglow, she wrote her dissertation on the reception of Sir Edward Burne-Jones in the symbolist circles of Paris at the end of the nineteenth century.

The *Masterpieces from Buckingham Palace* exhibition offers an occasion to explore a selection of objects from the Royal Collection with a new gaze. From the intimacy of a peasant's cottage in Ostade, to one of the most fantastic self-portraits by Artemesia Gentileschi, to three rare landscapes by Peter Paul Rubens, the exhibition captures the viewer with a variety of works and their singularities. The private tour explores over sixty-five paintings selected carefully by Desmond Shawe-Taylor and Isabella Manning, curators of the Royal Collection. This exhibition allows the visitor an intimate glimpse of the Royal Collection which is normally held in the Picture Gallery at Buckingham Palace. The curation of the three rooms, which each represent different schools of painting—Italian, Northern and Flemish—take the viewer on a journey through an array of techniques, subjects and time. In this triptych of schools, we are offered a closer look at these artworks through genres, points of view, nationalities, and gazes on the subject. For me, this is the strong point of the exhibition.

The exhibition encourages the visitor to think and reflect on the notion of “masterpieces” and what we understand of Western royal collections. Highlighting the history of royal collecting, the curators ask: what is the designation of a masterpiece and what role did the power and taste of the monarch play? The viewer can spend time in front of the artworks and observe their most delicate features and details. The selection of paintings gives the viewer the chance to see the richness of the meticulousness of the painter's work. In *Pallas Athene* by Parmigianino, we observe the fine details of the gilded plaster on the breastplate of the figure of Athena (Fig. 1, 1531—1538). The details echo her golden hair, executed exceptionally by the painter with a thin brush in order to pick out shimmering strands.

On a critical note, more detailed information on the collection's curation under George III and Queen Charlotte on their acquisition of Buckingham Palace in 1762 would have enhanced the experience and tied in to Shawe-Taylor's analysis of the curation in the exhibition catalogue. It would perhaps have added another dimension for the viewer if the curators had contextualised the artworks through panels and documents such as this plan from the King's Dressing Room from circa 1766 (Fig. 2). As the curator Shawe-Taylor wrote: “Hanging plans were used to work out later displays in other rooms at Buckingham House, and their rare survival brings the picture arrangements to life. In keeping with eighteenth-century approaches to picture hanging, the King and Queen grouped paintings by school and by genre.”¹

On the display of the collection and its features, Isabella Manning wrote in the exhibition catalogue: “In 1844, the art historian Anna Jameson declared the arrangement unsuccessful, the space ‘too lofty’ and the lightning ‘not well contrived for such small and delicate pictures’ and lamented that some of the pictures ‘hang so high, almost out of sight.’ The busy and confused display departed entirely from the ordered symmetry of its



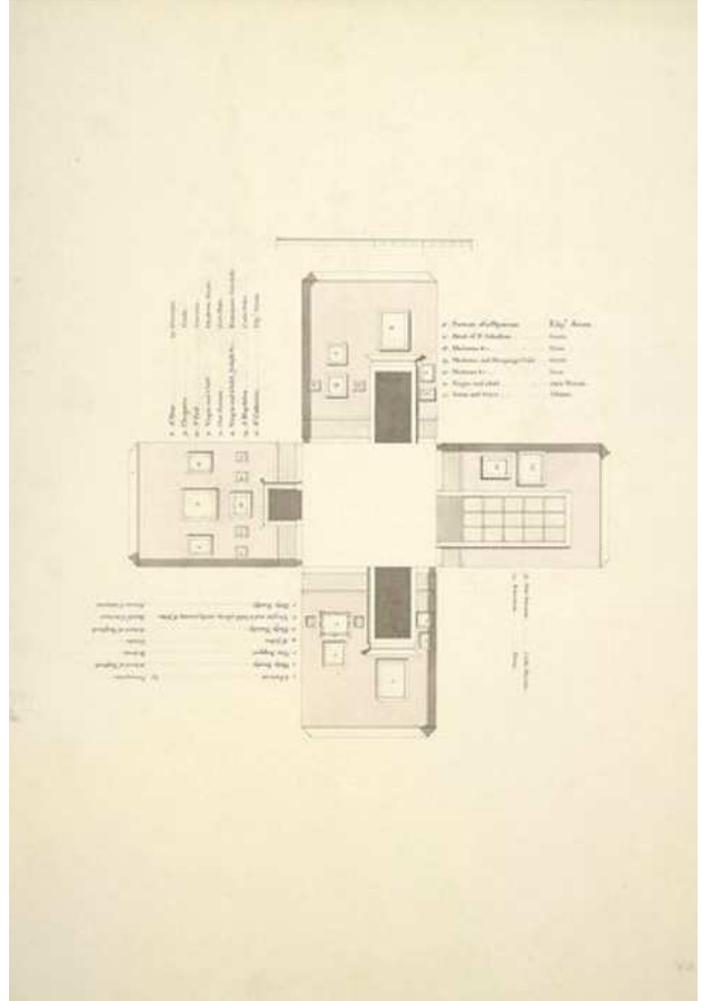
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predecessors at Buckingham House and Carlton House and from contemporary London galleries.³² The exhibition's display avoids the distraction of the ornate walls or luxurious furnishings seen in the Picture Gallery in Buckingham Palace. In a photograph from 2018, the pink wallpaper and the ornate carpet interfere with the focused contemplation of the paintings (Fig.3).

Figure 1. Parmigianino, *Pallas Athene*, c.1531—38, Oil on canvas, 64.0 x 45.4 cm, RCIN 405765 Royal Collection Trust. © His Majesty King Charles III 2022



Figure 2. Anonymous, *Buckingham House, King's Apartments, King's Closet*, c.1766, No.6d. c.177452.1 x 37.0 cm, RCIN 926315 Royal Collection Trust. © His Majesty King Charles III 2022



In the catalogue, the curator Desmond Shawe-Taylor points out that he wishes that there could be a “discussion on ‘Masterpieces’ produced by ‘Old Masters’; neither term is especially helpful, and to some they are off-putting.”³³ He continues:

They are used here (for want of an easy alternative) to mean “esteemed painting produced by artists of both gender [sic] working before 1800.” The fact that Old Masters here are all men and all European reflects the history of display at Buckingham Palace rather than the composition of the collection as a whole. But what made these paintings esteemed? Should they continue to be and if so, why? What do they have to offer a modern visitor?⁴

In response, as a visitor to this fantastic exhibition, I welcomed the opportunity to study and compare the techniques of the artists. Whether Canaletto (Italian) or Jan Maes (Flemish), they each have something to tell us about invention and mastery of brush and light. The light on *Agatha Bas's* clothes, considered one of the greatest portraits by

Rembrandt, the fineness of the embroidery, the glow of her porcelain skin, and the detail of her acne marks are exquisitely executed (Fig. 4, signed and dated 1641). The opportunity to compare paintings such as *Pallas Athena* and *Agatha Bas* allowed me to appreciate the fine details and nuances in the works. Comparison is the centre of this exhibition; our mind analyses and compares while appreciating the variety of expressions on each of these painted characters.

Figure 3. Current display of the Picture Gallery in Buckingham Palace, 2018, Photograph, Royal Collection Trust. © His Majesty King Charles III 2022



Figure 4. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Agatha Bas*, 1611–1658, signed and dated 1641, Oil on canvas, 105.4 x 83.9 cm, RCIN 405352 Royal Collection Trust. © His Majesty King Charles III 2022



References

- 1 Desmond Shawe-Taylor, "Looking at Old Masters Painting," in Desmond Shawe-Taylor and Isabella Manning, *Masterpiece from Buckingham Palace* (London: Royal Collection Trust, 2020), 9.
- 2 Isabella Manning, "Old Master Painting at Buckingham Palace," in *Masterpieces from Buckingham Palace*, 14.
- 3 Shawe-Taylor, "Looking at Old Masters Painting," 21.
- 4 Ibid.