

FX 333

DIETER RAMS BARS FX AWARDS FLETCHER PRIEST NPG

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ANOTHER DAY, ANOTHER RENOVATION



Often wrongfully eschewed in favour of its more well-known cousin, the National Portrait Gallery has undergone a massive renovation and has flung open its doors to visitors once more. Stephen Hitchens takes us on a tour

Below

Long a home for the famous and impactful, the NPG houses many busts of influential figures





TUCKED AWAY like an awkward relative behind its more illustrious neighbour, the National Portrait Gallery was founded by an act of parliament in 1856, having first been proposed by the eccentric Philip Stanhope, the 5th Earl Stanhope. A bust of the earl sits above the entrance alongside the idea's main supporters, the writer and historian Thomas Macaulay, and a central figure in Victorian culture, Thomas Carlyle. The collection, such as it was, began life with just a few dozen pictures, moved between Westminster and Exhibition Road (where it found a home in a Royal Horticultural Society building), and later the Bethnal Green Museum before the government finally provided the site in St Martin's Place. At one time, it had been proposed to house the collection 'in a couple of rooms' under the same roof as an enlarged National Gallery.

The plans for this new and permanent home were begun in 1891, before an Italian Renaissance-style building designed by Ewan Christian and JK Colling was finally opened in 1896. The building was funded to the tune of £80,000 by a Canadian lawyer and politician,

William Alexander Henry. Appeals to expand the site came as early as 1903. By 1924, the collection had doubled in size since 1896 but the government could not or would not find the money to pay for it.

In 1933, the first major extension was funded by Joseph Duveen who, according to his former partner, Bernard Berenson, 'stood at the centre of a vast circular nexus of corruption that reached from the lowliest employee of the British Museum, right up to the King'. Duveen's success was famously attributed



to his observation that 'Europe has a great deal of art, and America has a great deal of money', as he bought works of art from the declining aristocracies of Europe and sold them for exorbitantly inflated prices to gullible millionaires in the United States. His fortune, built on the doubtful provenance of many of the works he sold, and in some cases fakes, nevertheless made him enormously wealthy and led to philanthropic donations resulting in the Duveen Galleries at the British Museum to house the Elgin Marbles, the Duveen Galleries at the Tate Gallery on Millbank, and the west wing of the NPG (designed by Richard Allison and JG West).

In the 1980s, the Duveen Wing was gutted to provide a single room for temporary exhibitions. The top floor galleries were refurbished and at the end of the decade a striking revamp of the original entrance hall and staircase was commissioned from Roderick Gradidge and the decorator Christopher Boulter. In 1988, Stanton Williams was commissioned to create plans for housing the archives and library, new 20th century galleries and a restaurant, as well as

Left Built upon Victorian ideals, the NPG initially displayed the portraits of deceased British notables

Right The NPG now also hosts the portraits of more contemporary figures

Below left The NPG's new entrance and forecourt on the gallery's north facade

Below Aside from paintings, the NPG is also home to a collection of more than 250,000 original photographs

'Europe has a great deal of art, and America has a great deal of money'

creating a piazza in front of the original north elevation facing up the Charing Cross Road, a £30m proposal that became too complex, too costly, and was eventually dropped. In 1993, John Miller redesigned the ground floor of the original building into galleries for the 20th century collection, and to develop a new temporary exhibition gallery, overall increasing display space by 30 percent. To accommodate the offices that Miller's design did away with, three adjacent buildings on the corner of Orange Street and Charing Cross Road, acquired in 1989 were converted by Alex Murray and Neil Morgan of Grimley JR Eve. In 1996, Piers Gough of CZWG remodelled galleries on the first floor, and then the big one was back on and being seriously reconsidered. At last, the long-planned, and always postponed, second major extension may finally happen.

This occupied former service yard, a narrow strip of land between the National Gallery and the NPG, was completed in 2000. It was funded by the Sri Lankan-Canadian businessman, adventurer and philanthropist Christopher Ondaatje, cost £13.2m and was designed by



Jeremy Dixon and Edward Jones. The result was shortlisted for the Stirling Prize in 2001. The project was only completed 20 years ago, and yet now the NPG is being made over once again. This time, at a cost of £41.3m, and the experienced gallery team of Jamie Fobert, Max Fordham et al were brought in following a competition. Even before the last extension was in place, the gallery had struggled with its Victorian inheritance to attract people to visit its superlative collection – other than when Roy Strong was director. And it appeared a poor and at times shabby neighbour beside its illustrious neighbour.

Enter Charles Saumarez Smith as director, and the building rose via a spectacular escalator that went on forever as one rose to its fine rooftop café, and CSS rose with it. Smith was at the Portrait Gallery from 1994 to 2002, the National Gallery from 2002 to 2007, and the Royal Academy for eleven years after that. At the first he presided over the Dixon Jones project; with the same architects he saw a new ground floor entrance, shop, coffee bar and self-service restaurant at the second (a Neil MacGregor

project, but Smith garnered the laurels); and then, forced out of the National when it became known he had applied for the job at the RA, he brought in the long-discussed (over 30 years) enlargement of the third, working with David Chipperfield. Like it or not, he has been involved in and, to a varying degree was to some extent responsible for, big budget building projects in three major galleries.

Development of them all arose through making use of hidden spaces, forgotten over the centuries. Transforming problematic 19th century buildings, rethinking circulation and adding new galleries and ancillary areas that

'Like it or not, [Charles Saumarez Smith] has been involved in...big budget building projects in three major galleries'

museums now require, all in space that apparently only the architects could see. The key to unlocking their potential, those discovered spaces at the NPG in 2000 benefitted it to the tune of two galleries, an IT gallery, a bookshop, lecture theatre and that rooftop café, bypassing the 20th century in terms of gallery provision and leaping directly into the 21st. Daylight carved its way to the ground floor, bounced off the walls illuminating the entrance hall as that escalator drew visitors up towards the source of that light. It was clever. The first floor gallery appeared to hang in space. Viewed from the eatery, one experienced a dramatic

Clockwise from left The complete facelift and redesign has increased the NPG's capacity by a fifth, allowing for more items on display at any one time. Along with increased space, the gallery has improved lighting and protection for the artworks on display and relied upon modern technology to do so



view across Whitehall and could see the temples of politics, art and religion whose chief exponents graced the walls of the gallery. It made an under-visited gallery into a must-see venue, that escalator working rather like a department store drawing people effortlessly upward.

Now, Jamie Fobert has masterminded the biggest redevelopment of the gallery since it first opened its doors, a beautiful building that for much of its history suffered from benign neglect. Given Grade I listing in 1970, Fobert is inevitably collaborating with Purcell, the historic building specialist. Purcell has been

working with the National Gallery for over 30 years on a conservation management plan of the building's estate, the creation and refurbishment of galleries, and is currently employed with Selldorf on updating the Sainsbury Wing that will open next year. At the NPG, working on an extremely awkward and constricted site, his involvement has been critical to discovering that tantalising rarity – space. Framed by the National Gallery and two main roads, the footprint offered little to no room for expansion, so any changes needed to adapt the existing spaces and material – and the building's listed fabric limited anything but the most sensitive approach. This century-old

architectural oddity created a central pinch point by placing the principal entrance and stairway between the East Wing and Palazzo. This footprint, already hindered by a non-existent forecourt, congested the entrance and exit points, ticketing halls and visitor facilities, and hindered level access. The gallery spaces needed refurbishment and reconfiguration as, despite all the previous work, illogically disjointed galleries struggled to create a harmonious experience for the unwary visitor. Key facilities including the learning centre, toilets, and cloakroom lacked essential space. The overall architectural aim of the project was to physically open up the building, and to make the collection and programme more visible, accessible and welcoming.

Overall, the redevelopment includes, yet again, a new 'public forecourt' in St Martin's Place, a new entrance hall, new retail and catering facilities, a new learning centre and two additional studios, and – oh yes, that gallery must have – a cocktail bar alongside the return of its Portrait Restaurant. There is also a major education and outreach programme: a nationwide scheme aimed at teachers and lecturers, schoolchildren, students and disadvantaged young people, focusing on history, citizenship, literacy and art.

The East Wing is reopening as the Weston Wing with office space converted into top-lit galleries, overall gallery space has been increased by 20 percent resulting in a complete re-hang and reinterpretation of the extensive collection across 40 refurbished galleries, to present an updated and more diverse selection of portraits. This latest scheme is meant to work for generations to come – but then they said that before. Along the way, there has been a most unexpected acquisition, a ticket office on a small traffic island outside the new entrance below which lay a public lavatory unused since the 1970s.

Donors do not always get their wishes fulfilled. The original donor wanted the entrance to be on the east side. This will now become a side entrance. The new main entrance will face north, something William Alexander did not want as it would mean pointing towards that den of iniquity, Soho, and the slums around Seven Dials. Seventeenth century maps show a workhouse and the new entrance falling there on a street called Dirty Lane.

Other than government funds, the main source of money to pay for the renewal and enlargement is the Blavatnik Family Foundation, together with significant but smaller sums from Julia and Hans Rausing, the Ross Foundation (the new entrance), Clore Duffield (the learning centre), and Garfield Weston (the east wing). Len Blavatnik is a billionaire Ukrainian-born American-British business magnate whose fortune arrived courtesy of the collapse of the USSR, and is now one of the most generous philanthropic benefactors in the UK. You name it, he has supported it, from the Royal Opera House,



JIM STEPHENSON

LEFT AND FAR LEFT: GARETH GARDNER / NISSEN RICHARDS STUDIO

and the Courtauld Institute, to Tate, the British Museum, V&A, the Imperial War Museum, Theatre Royal Haymarket and even Oxford University.

The new Lightroom space in London that was launched with David Hockney's (Bigger and Closer, not smaller and further away) was backed by a group of investors led by Blavatnik. And, in the US, his support ranges from Carnegie Hall and the New York Academy of Sciences, to Harvard and Yale, from Obama and Biden to a fistful of Republican candidates. He has a lot of money and is not afraid to spend it. Through his family foundation, the charitable contributions to leading academic and research institutions, and to world-class art and cultural institutions, Blavatnik donations amount to over £1bn. The generosity is overwhelming and just keeps coming.

Whatever your political viewpoint and wherever your interests lie, as inflation plunges the arts world into fresh and ever deeper crises, it is clear that in the UK the arts can only be saved if we stop sneering at big business. Large philanthropic organisations are generally known for their safe choices. Respectable, perhaps staid, efforts in various cities around the country, but delve deeper and you can see that Blavatnik brings artistic flair to philanthropy. He could have played it safe, and did, and does. Safe choices, respectable organisations, incredibly generous, but look closely and his foundation does a great deal more. And at the Portrait Gallery, when the Sacklers bowed out, Blavatnik came in.

Also, he bought that former Victorian public lavatory for the gallery for around £3m. Underground, this strange edifice has space six times larger than the ticket kiosk that was on the site of the entrance to the toilets. It is hoped that, subject to planning permission from Westminster Council, it could be completely refurbished, providing a venue for changing gallery displays, or performance and

film relating to portraiture.

The area around the new north entrance will soon be very different, creating an enhanced public space halfway between Trafalgar Square and Leicester Square. It is to be named Ross Place, acknowledging David Ross, the co-founder of Carphone Warehouse who paid for it, and is now chairman of the Portrait Gallery.

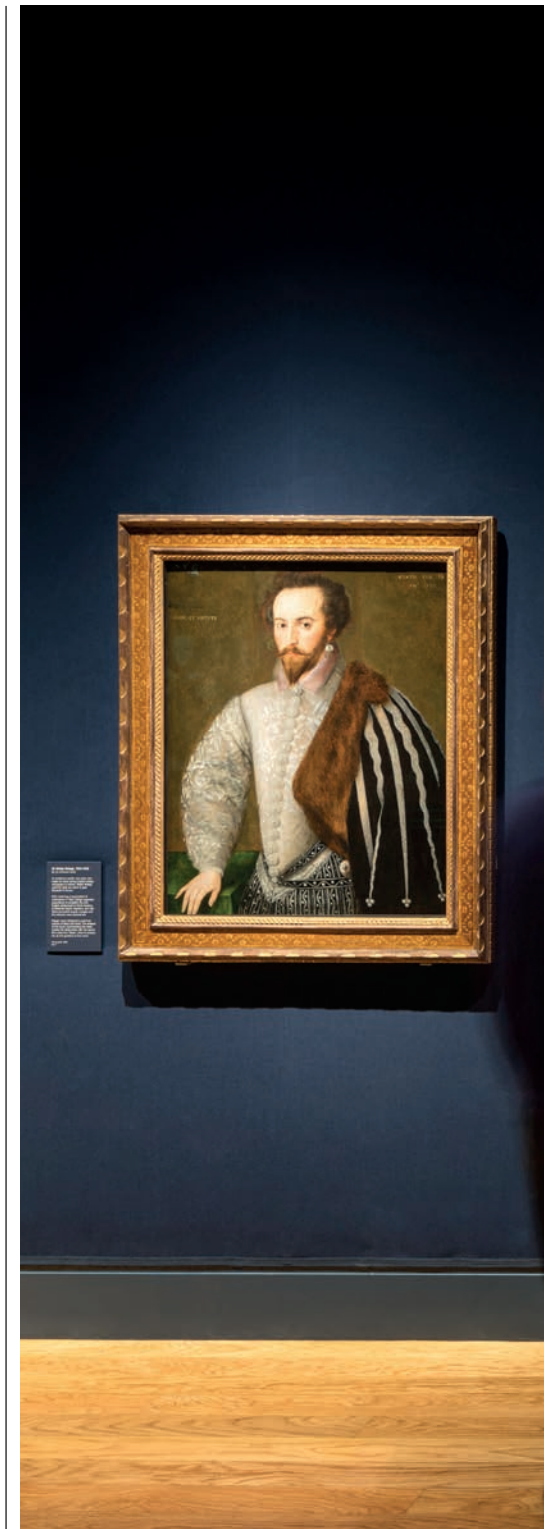
Rehanging over 1,000 works in 34 rooms has been a massive undertaking, a complete re-display and reinterpretation of the gallery's collection across 40 refurbished galleries, presenting a greater and more diverse selection of portraits than ever seen before. The hope is that by maintaining a chronological approach, this comprehensive top-to-bottom re-hang will display works that are relevant to a wider range of audiences and present missing or hidden stories from our history. Set amongst the gallery's best-loved paintings will also be many more works from its collection of 250,000 photographs, ranging from 1840 to the present day.

As is always the case with building galleries and museums today, the mechanical and electrical design is critical – it has to focus on maintaining appropriate environmental conditions for the preservation of art and minimising the use of energy in ways that are sensitive to the original features of a historic building, with energy saving measures adopted wherever possible, such as including heat recovery on ventilation systems. Here, the lighting design will give more presence to the entrances, introduce daylight into the galleries, and address the recurring problem of visitor fatigue that will, in theory, create a flexible, characterful, energy efficient and healthy gallery. Bringing daylight to the galleries will be controlled by low-transmission blinds to protect the art from exposure to sunlight. Lighting in the learning centre will be occupant-controlled to prevent glare, with the inclusion of low-energy lighting. The provision of acoustically absorbent finishes to some gallery spaces should improve the experience for busy events and functions, with the new entrance and multi-storey atrium having been modelled in 3D acoustic ray-tracing software that included assessment of noise from the nearby Charing Cross Road and vibration from underground trains. Max Fordham has been responsible for the M&E having previously worked with Fobert on Tate St Ives.

Fordham provides a link to Nissen Richards. Both worked with Witherford Watson Mann on the redevelopment and transformation of the Courtauld at Somerset House. At the NPG, Pippa Nissen and her team have been responsible for both the interior and exhibition design in one integrated package. A variety of colour schemes have been employed on each floor and in each wing of the building, with a sequence of related colours tonally shifting through chronological periods and through each suite of rooms to reinforce the visitor's sense of place in what is now

a very large and complex gallery that has been built up across four eras of architectural intervention. People need to know where they are as well as where they are going. Information panels, digital screens and picture captions have all been incorporated to help visitors; plinths, vitrines and tables have been specially designed, together with wall cases and screens in a conscious echo of Carlo Scarpa's celebrated work at Castelvécchio in Verona.

The current director of the NPG is Nicholas Cullinan who, in 2015 at the age of 38, became the second-youngest director in the Portrait



NOT TO BE MISSED

Anne Boleyn, Henry VIII's second wife with those eyes that were said to be 'black and beautiful'; Elizabeth I (the Ditchley portrait); William Shakespeare as a ruff-wearing, quill-brandishing, long-haired rake ingrained in our perception of him, whilst we really have very little evidence of what he looked like; Anthony Van Dyck's self-portrait; Lord Byron, not looking particularly as his lover Lady Caroline Lamb described him – 'mad, bad and dangerous to know'; Pauline Boty's self-portrait in stained glass; Chris Ofili; Grayson Perry's Map of Days; Kelly Holmes by Craig Wylie; Amy Winehouse (Amy Blue) by Marlene Dumas

Below Portraits of some of Britain's most iconic historical monarchs, poets and playwrights hang at the National Portrait Gallery

Below, left Educational outreach programmes have been instituted, creating links between the NPG and teachers and students alike

Gallery's 159-year history. While finishing his graduate studies at the Courtauld Institute of Art, he had worked for the museum part-time as a guard ('visitor services assistant'), a career trajectory that has only helped endear him to the staff. His previous curatorial career stretched from Tate Modern to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. In a way, Cullinan has said being director at the Portrait Gallery takes him away from the art world, since the museum prized the importance of sitters over the stature of the artist, celebrity has always trumped artistic





merit. Roam the galleries and, as ever, you will immerse yourself in a glittering parade of British high achievers — monarchs, writers, politicians and dandies, from Henry VIII to Margaret Thatcher, from the famous to notorious, remarkable to glorious, if they are part of the national identity then they will be found in here, soon to be joined by Joshua Reynolds' Portrait of Mai (Omai) the country's first grand portrayal of a non-white subject acquired in partnership with the Getty Museum at the end of April.

'Sitter first' has always been its guiding principle, and 'One of the things about this place that makes it so special,' he says, 'is that it's not just about art and art history but also history, British culture and society. I really enjoy having that bigger picture.' When he got the job in 2015, the transformation was already underway. 'It's very rare you get the chance to

rethink an institution top to bottom,' Cullinan said. 'This is about making the whole institution more relevant, more open and more accessible. We have an enormous didactic, educational, scholarly purpose. The redisplay is partly about doing something very beautiful, improving the hang and the lighting; it needs to be an aesthetic experience. But in another way, we are going back to what Roy Strong did, which is to give the galleries more social, political, cultural and historical context.' Aspiring to emulate Roy Strong is a challenge.

From 1967 to 1974, he was a real agent of change. At the age of just 32, a succession of great events took place: a new department of film and photography opened, portraits of living people were accepted for the first time, Pietro Annigoni's second painting of the Queen attracted a quarter of a million visitors in two months, and female warders were appointed for the first time. The NPG was the place to visit and the place to be seen. If anyone modernised museums, it was Roy Strong, a man who always believed visitors should enjoy 'martinis with their Bellinis'. Hence the new cocktail bar. Private Eye's Pseuds' Corner once published a photograph of him holding a champagne glass. No quotation, just the picture.

Originally conceived at a time of burgeoning Victorian confidence, industrialisation and empire – the gallery was established to inspire public emulation of 'persons most honourably commemorated in British history as warriors or as statesmen, or in art, in literature or in science'. Today, however, many are much less comfortable with some of those Victorian values. And since the Brexit vote in 2016, British identity has never been so contested. A year after Cullinan returned from the Met in New York, Britain split itself in two over the EU referendum. 'We're not political,' Cullinan says. 'But this makes everything we're going to do all the more important, because whatever our beliefs, backgrounds, perspectives, politics, we need a strong, unifying, inclusive message about British

identity.' That doesn't mean, he says, avoiding difficult questions. Alert to the complexity of his job during this moment of transition, of representing Britain's past to a confused and divided contemporary audience in a time of change, and of lingering controversies surrounding BP and Sackler, and the role of the gallery in 21st century Britain, he has said: 'We live in a time of heightened feelings and political debate. I have no problem with airing these topics. If we didn't, we'd become a kind of Beatrix Potter cottage industry.'

'The collection is a visual history of Britain – it's about people who have made an impact on British history. That means you don't have to be British to be here.' And that is why the faces that confront you range far and wide, from work of the German Holbein the Younger and the Flemish Anthony Van Dyck, to the South African Marlene Dumas, Pauline Boty, Chris Ofili, Grayson Perry and Craig Wylie.

Interestingly, it was decided to close the gallery during its restoration. This has meant



FUTURE EXHIBITIONS

Along with a revamped website, the gallery has now unveiled its 2023–24 programme of major exhibitions. These will include a celebration of the photographer Yevonde Middleton – Yevonde: Life and Colour (22 June – 15 October), exploring her pioneering work immortalising sitters like Vivien Leigh in colour, and Margaret Sweeney who in 1951 became the Duchess of Argyll – ‘the dirty duchess’ of great notoriety; Paul McCartney Photographs 1963–64: Eyes of the Storm (28 June – 1 October) showing his never-before-seen photography; and David Hockney: Drawing from Life (2 November 2023 – 21 January 2024), a celebrated exhibition that was previously cut short after 20 days, when the gallery was closed by the pandemic in 2020. Looking ahead to 2024, visitors can expect shows like The Time is Always Now: Artists Reframe the Black Figure (22 February – 19 May 2024), spotlighting contemporary artists from across the African diaspora; and the work of two ground-breaking female photographers Francesca Woodman and Julia Margaret Cameron: Portraits to Dream In (21 March – 30 June 2024).

‘Let’s hope we can all enjoy a transformed gallery in the years to come [that] will not require yet another revamp so soon after the last one’

it has been shut since 2020. Controversial to say the least, it has meant that hundreds of works from the collection have been on tour during construction. Transforming the gallery’s profile has meant a new logo that has been in use since 25 January. Designed by Peter Horridge, it was based on a sketch from 1893 by the gallery’s first director, Sir George Scharf, which was discovered in the archive. Together with the logotype, a new typeface NPG Serif has been created by Monotype. A brand strategy has been devised by Edit together with Boardroom Consulting. Horridge’s work has most recently been seen on the emblem of the coronation for Charles III, an update of the eagle symbol and script logotype of the brewers Anheuser Busch, and the logo for Terra Carta, King Charles’ sustainable markets initiative.

Let’s hope we can all enjoy a transformed gallery in the years to come and that this latest effort will not require yet another revamp so soon after the last one, and yet another search for a philanthropist. **FX**



Clockwise from top left The spacious exhibition rooms allow for a careful, meditative quality to exploring the gallery’s collection, enhanced by sensitive use of both natural and artificial lighting to ensure the best experience possible for visitors

ALL IMAGES: GARETH GARDNER / NISSEN RICHARDS STUDIO