

The New Criterion

Features December 2021

For Queen & country

by Nicola Shulman

On “Masterpieces from Buckingham Palace” at the Queen’s Gallery, London.

Somewhere in the history of Buckingham Palace, there lies discarded a little-known counterfactual in which I, your writer, can declare a personal interest. My husband’s direct ancestor Catherine Darnley (1681–1743) was once married to John Sheffield, the Duke of Buckingham (1648–1721) and the original owner of Buckingham House, which later became Buckingham Palace. It was her second marriage. Her first had been to the Earl of Anglesey, whose death she marked with the commission of a singular portrait of herself, which still hangs over our fireplace. She wears widows’ weeds and points at the earth where, we are to understand, the earl now resides, and there is written over her head the rhyming couplet: “Puis que le Comte d’Anglesey mourut sans remords/ J’avoue que mon deuil n’est qu’en dehors” (“since the Earl of Anglesey died without remorse, I confess that my mourning is only on the outside”). She had separated from him for cruelty some years earlier, a feat requiring an Act of Parliament. She later enlarged the painting, bolting on a view of Buckingham House, then the most splendid private residence in London. The reason for this was that the duke had died, and so had the sons she bore him; she spent much of her remaining life pursuing a ruinous legal case to maintain her rights to Buckingham House against the rival claimant, Sir Charles Herbert, the duke’s illegitimate son. She lost. If she’d won, the house might never have become a royal palace, and I would not be writing about the show of masterpieces currently on display in its purpose-built exhibition space, the Queen’s Gallery.¹

The duchess’s Buckingham House was a thing of infinitely greater beauty than the dull and pompous Portland stone block at the end of the Mall today, where the soldiers change the guard. It was built of rosy-red brick, had murals of Diana and Actaeon by Louis Laguerre in its elegant double staircase, and stood between two pavilions connected by a curving colonnade to the central house. One of them was a library pavilion, in which the books were so clearly marked that “even an Irish footman” could fetch what the duke required. When the duchess died, Herbert sold the building to King George III, who wanted it as a house for his wife, Queen Charlotte.

It was the next king, the late-coming George IV, who decided to adapt and enlarge it for palatial use. He engaged the architect John Nash to do the arduous conversion, and it was Nash who

conceived a picture gallery as an integral feature of the state rooms, thus seeding a point of future contention he could not have imagined, but which is vigorously alive in the twenty-first century. To illustrate, here's a quotation from Olivia McEwan, reviewing the current exhibition in the Brooklyn-based *Hyperallergic*:

In contrast to the usual display [in the picture gallery at Buckingham Palace], the exhibition offers the chance to view the works at eye level in a modern gallery format that allows proper perusal, as opposed to double-stacked and hung as if the paintings were more part of the furniture than individual artworks. When in the palace, they “make a grand, splendid ornamental impact,” as curator Desmond Shawe-Taylor claims in a Facebook video. Their usual function *in situ* is to provide a grand backdrop for diplomatic and special visits, forming surely the most art historically rich wallpaper in existence.

McEwan also deplores the “exorbitant” entrance fee you would pay, as a member of the public, to see these paintings in their usual home in the palace, in contrast to the free admission we have come to expect from museums such as the National Gallery.



The Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace, London. Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2020.

It is unquestionable that from a scholarly perspective the pictures are not hung to best advantage in the picture gallery, with its smoked-salmon flock wallpaper and swan-neck picture lights hanging over the frames, bouncing glare off the varnished surfaces. This, however, is not the result of the Queen's rapacity, as implied here, so much as her frugality. When Sarah Ferguson, the ex-Duchess of York, wrote her memoir of coming to Buckingham Palace as a royal bride-to-be, the detail revealing most about the Queen's household management was the omnipresence of the forty-watt light bulb in all the private rooms.

Clearly the underlying concern for McEwan, and those who share her misgivings, is the complicated question of ownership, wealth, and the rights of the British taxpayers, who pay for the monarchy via the Sovereign Grant, to look at its pictures. We will come to that. As for her ostensible complaint, that a modern, brightly lit gallery is the “proper” environment in which to view these paintings, not everyone agrees. Sir Nicholas Penny, Britain’s preeminent scholar of Old Master paintings and lately Director of the National Gallery, looks at it another way. “It is a fiction,” he said,

that very rapidly develops in art-historical minds, that collections have perfect environments. In the days before electric light, it was obviously considered a very big plus for the paintings to be in the same light as you, the occupant of the room, were in. It made it more real.

We can see this principle in action in the first comprehensive inventory of royal paintings, those of Charles I, compiled *circa* 1639 by the Dutchman Abraham van der Doort, the original overstretched keeper of the king’s art collection. Van der Doort, who had imperfect English, describes the light in each picture: “painted in the right light” or “in the wrong light.” This means with the light in the picture falling from respectively the beholder’s left or right. The information was an aid for someone coming to hang them so they looked like they were sharing the room with you—and especially pertinent, says Penny, in the case of double portraits. These would very often be hung not side by side, as they are now, but facing one another, with the light painted to come in on opposite sides, like daylight through the windows.

It is also not quite true that this exhibition, which takes advantage of internal works to “reservice” the Buckingham Palace picture gallery, gives us our one opportunity to see these paintings. Even an intermittent visitor to the Queen’s Gallery will know half of them already, as they have often been diligently repurposed as reference points for the kinds of thematic shows in which the gallery excels. Furthermore, the Royal Collection is exemplary and generous in its loans to other museums. Even so, the chance to see them all together in the excellent lighting and conditions of the Queen’s Gallery, and without the customary rope to keep one at a distance, is an undiluted aesthetic pleasure. To put your nose up to these familiar paintings is to feel, I imagine, something like waking up on the morning after a cataract operation. The shock is finding that all this—these colors, this detail, this clarity, these little marks—has been here *the whole time*, without our being able to see it.

If we were only to see the two Rembrandt portraits in the first and second rooms (of three: the gallery is compact, preventing the onset of masterpiece-blindness), it would be worth the £16 entrance fee. One of these is the Portrait of Agatha Bas (1641), the poster girl for the show. Agatha has had her thin hair crimped and is dressed in her best clothes: she has on a sharply laced gold-embroidered bodice under her black vlieger, the open-fronted gown worn by married women, and her white cambric cuffs, miracles of the starchers’ art, are scalloped with eyelet lace. A pearl necklace has been wound three times around her neck, and over her shoulders a folded square of pristine white linen, scalloped like the cuffs, has been placed. She’s standing within a painted inner frame, in a space Rembrandt has manipulated so that her gold-lace fan appears to be extending

over the frame's edge, as does her left hand, which grips the fictive surround like a doorjamb, as if to steady herself.



Rembrandt van Rijn, Portrait of Agatha Bas, 1641, Oil on canvas, Buckingham Palace, London. Photo: Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II .

These clothes bespeak an elevated level of familial grandeur and expectations, which they fulfill much more effectively than their occupant, poor Agatha. Rembrandt has painted a young woman with a homeliness of feature that all this gussying-up, with crimped hair and the gorgeous Rembrandt gleam, sparking light from the accumulations of gold thread, has only accentuated. She looks like a sad poodle. Rembrandt's sitters often have worn-in human faces, startlingly at odds with the brilliance of their linen, but they seem unaware of, or untroubled by, the contrast. With

Agatha Bas, it's different: it seems that both she and the portraitist are painfully conscious of her failure to live up to the clothes. Up close, you can also see she does not look well. A web of rash—rosacea, perhaps, or psoriasis—is creeping over her cheeks. There are shadows under her lashless, guileless eyes, and a sore-looking puff of skin has been raised beneath her left eyebrow. And while the painting is halfway to a diagnosis, there is nothing clinical in this masterpiece of imaginative sympathy.

On the far side of the doorway hangs another Rembrandt (there are five on show): a self-portrait made in his young, prosperous years, before penury overtook him, the artist sporting low-thread-count whiskers, a splendid velvet cap, and heavy gold chains to clasp his cloak. What you can't see, unless inches away from it, is the handling of his earring: the way the miniscule blob of white paint that forms its tiny pendent pearl stands away from the surface of the painting. A detail, but with ramifications for the whole picture: this raised point of light controls and balances the composition. It's like the note of the triangle in a symphony, the only instrument that can be heard clearly over the entire orchestra.

That's just two Rembrandts. To reach them, you will have already passed the dwarfish stateliness of Hendrick Pot's circa 1632 family portrait of Charles I, Henrietta Maria, and their son Charles, with its lilac-pink and russet background, and a wall of spectacular Dutch cabinet pictures from the Golden Age. There's one de Hooch courtyard scene, his light-washed interior with card players, then two celebrated pictures where the figures are not posed but happened upon. They distill an atmosphere of transgression, and we, the beholders, have an uncertain sense of whether we should rightly be looking at this. Jan Steen's *Woman at Her Toilet* (1663) shows a feminine bedroom, glimpsed through a fictive stone arch. A young woman is sitting on the bed, oblivious to us, stripping off her stockings, the same blue as her silk bed hangings. Her shoes are lying on the floor, and she's unlaced her fur-trimmed jacket so it gapes open over her corset, trapping, we are invited to imagine, wafts of warmth and scent from her body in the space between corset and cloth. On the threshold of the bedroom, Steen has painted a reproving *vanitas*, so we can rest easy that the woman has been found out in her vanity and materialism, but the skull is not so large as to impede a gentleman's view of, for example, the pliant young flesh of her legs that still bears the impress of the garter in her hand.



Johannes Vermeer, The Music Lesson, early 1660s, Oil on canvas. Buckingham Palace, London. Photo: Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II

Nearby hangs Vermeer's enigmatic *The Music Lesson* (early 1660s), where an adolescent girl is playing the harpsichord under the eye of her instructor. The picture has obsessed, among others, a Texan inventor called Tim Jenison, who decided to paint it himself using the camera obscura technology Vermeer used and that some, like David Hockney, believe holds the whole secret to the Dutch masters' realism. The result can be found in the Marianas Trench of YouTube, where the documentary *Tim's Vermeer* (2013) still lurks. In reality, Jenison's efforts produce no solutions to Vermeer's mysteries, just multiplying questions. And for me, a new question did arise about this painting, with its curiously low viewpoint, almost from behind the table-carpet in the foreground that hangs to the floor: are we seeing through the eyes of an imagined child who has strayed into the room?

The collection can be seen as an appendix to the biographies of British monarchs. Sometimes the paintings confirm what we think we know of the princes who acquired them. In the third room, consecrated to Italy, there are two glowing paintings by Claude Lorrain (ca. 1600–82). These belonged to Frederick, Prince of Wales (1707–51), an early and active adopter of the “new style” of gardening popularized by William Kent, known to us now as the English landscape manner. This “new style” had sprung from admiration for Claude’s idealized views of the Roman Campagna, with their soft undulations, their choreographed trees and animals, and their pale pavilions, models for the follies or “eyecatchers” in the new painterly garden schemes. For Frederick, these paintings would have been companion pieces to the changes he was making in the gardens at Carlton House, in London, and at Kew. He died of gardening complications (a chill contracted while out surveying his plantings) and never acceded. You could say his Claudes were the death of him.

The paintings can also act as a corrective: for most visitors, the great surprise of the present exhibition will be the number of paintings acquired by George IV (1762–1830), the man who, as Prince Regent, presided over the excesses of the Regency period, and whom we know from the satirical prints of Gillray and Rowlandson as a coarse-cut pudding of a man, stuffed to bursting with self-indulgence, lust, greed, and folly. But thanks to him and

his advisor Charles Long, first Baron Farnborough, who was known to contemporaries as “the King’s Spectacles,” the collection enriched itself with almost all the paintings in Room One and many of the Van Dycks and Rubenses in Room Two. Though the market was then awash with Italian Renaissance works that had come loose in the aftermath of the French Revolution, Prinny, as the Regent was known, inclined more to the paintings of the Dutch Golden Age: Cuyp, de Hooch, Steen, Hobbema. He also acquired three of the five Rembrandts on show.

George IV bought back some of the paintings that had belonged to the greatest of all British royal collectors, Charles I. Before Charles, the English throne owned few paintings of note; when he died, it possessed a collection to compare with any European royal house. He had educated his taste for such things in Spain, where, as Prince of Wales, he’d been on a hubristic wooing expedition. There, he was exposed to the Spanish treasure house of paintings. He sat to Velázquez for his portrait (now lost but which, it is still hoped, might one day emerge in a junk shop, or forming the ceiling to a chicken coop in a Welsh farm) and returned home carrying no princesses but two great Titians and a Correggio, gifts from the young Philip IV. On Charles’s accession, he managed to buy a really important collection: that of Vincenzo Gonzaga II, Duke of Mantua, who owned the largest holding of Titians in Italy as well as works by Correggio, Caravaggio, Raphael, and Giulio Romano, painters whose works had never been seen in England.

For most visitors, the great surprise of the present exhibition will be the number of paintings acquired by George IV (1762–1830).

Little of the Mantua purchase remains. The sums Charles spent on art were one of many controversial undertakings that led to the day in January 1649, when he, as King Charles I, stepped out of a first-floor window in the Banqueting House in Whitehall, with its ceiling by Rubens exalting his father's reign, onto a raised scaffold. There, an executioner hacked off his head before a crowd of amazed onlookers, who half-expected that God would retaliate against the regicide with bombardments of aerial brimstone. God did not. The Commonwealth government, however, did continue its assault on the legitimacy of kings, and one of the ways they did so was by selling off Charles's artworks.

The ostensible rationale for this was that the fruits of the king's recklessness and extravagance should be seen to pay for his colossal debts. But the sale also achieved a more pernicious and enduring erosion of monarchy's mystique, in that it put a price on kingship. As Jerry Brotton remarks in his indispensable 2006 book on the subject, *The Sale of The Late King's Goods*, "the sale itself transformed the royal paintings into worldly commodities, destroying forever their royal exclusivity [by] removing them from the privacy of the royal palace and releasing them into the world of public sale." At a stroke, London became one of Europe's busiest art markets, with canner buyers liquidating their purchases at once, for fear of their being recalled in the event of a reversion to monarchy—as did in fact happen, within days of the restoration under Charles's son Charles II. No compensation was offered.

For those in charge of the collection today, we might say that their guiding principle is almost the exact reverse of monetizing. It is not in the interest of the Queen or her curators to think of it in terms of money, and every effort is made to weaken the association between the works of art and their market value. One reason for this is that the collection can't be sold: the works are inalienable; they belong to a charitable trust. It is clearly thought unhelpful if, whenever a Leonardo drawing is sold at auction, it is noted that the Queen's "worth" has gone up by that amount times the number of Leonardo drawings in the collection (about six hundred). Unhelpful to her treasurer, because he cannot sell it, and offensive to her curators, who don't estimate their charges with a pocket calculator.

This aim—to erase the link between the collection and the market—may be behind the decision by the Royal Collection Trust, which is one of the five departments of the royal household, to take no money from the Sovereign Grant (a government grant to support the Queen's official duties and maintain the occupied royal palaces). Instead, it pays for itself with money from entrance fees and sales from its shops, cafés, and similar commercial enterprises. It is not paid for by British taxpayers and hence, you could argue, can put up some resistance to their demands to look at its holdings whenever they want.

The situation of the royal collection is certainly anomalous. All royal collections of comparable stature have formed the foundations of national museums like the Louvre, the Prado, and the museums throughout the old Habsburg Empire. Penny points out that when the National Gallery was founded, in 1824, there was “certainly an expectation” in some quarters that the royal paintings would go there. Optimistic contemporary allusions to a “Royal National

Gallery” also point to the hope that George IV would lead the philanthropic charge—a call he appears to have ignored, preferring to develop the collection in his own way, by selling in order to buy. In recent years, there has been little appetite for a transfer of ownership to the state. The biggest change has been in access: frequent loans to other galleries, an imaginative program of exhibitions at the Queen’s Gallery and Holyrood House in Scotland, which aims to show the full range of objects (the next one will be on the courts of Britain and Japan), and the opening of Buckingham Palace, Hampton Court, and Windsor Castle to a paying public.

Lately, covid-19 has sucked revenue from the trust. Last year it lost £64 million, with the result that it has had to retrench drastically, putting into “abeyance” the post of Surveyor of the Queen’s Pictures, a position held since Van der Doort in Charles I’s time, and one later notoriously occupied by the Soviet spy Anthony Blunt. As the art historian and broadcaster Bendor Grosvenor remarked in *The Times*, “It has taken covid to end the continuous presence of the surveyor, which even the treachery of Anthony Blunt did not achieve.”

The Royal Collection doesn’t belong to the monarch. It belongs to that mysterious entity “the Crown,” which does not die but passes on successive breaths from a dying monarch to her heir. To posit an awkward question: what would happen to it if the Crown itself ceased to exist and Britain became a republic? Could the royal family claim the paintings as theirs? When I put this to Penny, his expressive eyebrows lifted a fraction. There are, he said, some historical precedents for absconding with royal paintings: Queen Christina of Sweden (1626–89) prudently sent ahead of her abdication some eighty choice artworks looted from the great connoisseur Rudolph II; the small but select collection of King William II of the Netherlands (1792–1849) was eventually sold at the Hague. The world lacks recent examples, and the most likely fate for the collection under a republic is that it would pass to the state. Should the monarchy survive the death of the present Queen, Prince Charles has declared that on his accession he will throw open Buckingham Palace to the public for free. Unlike his mother, he cares for art; how that will affect the Royal Collection remains to be seen. Sometimes there is a case for benign neglect.

It is not in the interest of the Queen or her curators to think of it in terms of money, and every effort is made to weaken the association between the works of art and their market value.

1 “Masterpieces from Buckingham Palace” opened at the Queen’s Gallery, London, on May 17, 2021, and remains on view through February 13, 2022.

Nicola Shulman, a writer living in London and North Yorkshire, devised and curated the exhibition “Fashion and Gardens” for the Garden Museum, Lambeth, London.

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 40 Number 4 , on page 33

Copyright © 2024 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<https://newcriterion.com/issues/2021/12/for-queen-country>