

The National Gallery's Acquisitions Policy November 2012

Our principal aims in making acquisitions are threefold:

1. Obtaining masterpieces of outstanding quality
2. Developing the Gallery's uniquely coherent narrative of Western European painting beyond the canon established during the nineteenth century
3. Building on the Gallery's strengths

These aims can be elaborated as follows:

Obtaining masterpieces of outstanding quality:

These are pictures by painters who are widely recognised (both within the scholarly community and by the general public) as having changed the direction of the history of European art, by their exceptional genius, and as acting as continued points of reference for subsequent generations. Such pictures should have achieved wide public recognition; or they should be works, which may have been previously unknown, but which show celebrated artists at the height of their artistic powers.

Developing the canon

In recent decades the Gallery has continued to make conscious attempts to expand through purchase the aspects of the collection which did not form part of the nineteenth century canon, particularly in acquiring works from Northern Europe and Spain, as well as paintings from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Gallery now also seeks to represent paintings in the Western European tradition, rather than those solely made by artists working in Western Europe.

Building on strength

In addition to the coherent narrative offered by the Gallery's collection, there are areas of particular strength where the collection matches or surpasses the best in the world. These include large areas of the Italian Renaissance, 17th-century Dutch, and early modern French collections. Certain individual masters are particularly well represented as well, including Raphael, Rembrandt, Velázquez, Rubens, Poussin, Claude and Degas.

The main criteria for proposing acquisitions to the Board of Trustees are the following:

1. Quality – is the painting of sufficient quality to be eligible for inclusion in a collection of the standard set by the National Gallery?
2. Narrative significance – does the painting enhance the way the National Gallery tells the story of art?
3. Association with the Gallery – has the painting been on long-term loan and established a relationship to the collection and become familiar to visitors?
4. Condition – is it in sufficiently good condition, especially when compared to other paintings of a similar period in the Gallery's collection?
5. Price – is it affordable and does it represent reasonable value in the context of the international art market?
6. Provenance – can the Gallery be certain that it will have good title to the picture, and, in particular, has due diligence been done with regard to any possible restitution claims if the history of the painting between 1933 and 1945 is in any way unclear?