

Hidden Histories of the Museum

Women Transforming Art Collections

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About the Conference

Susanna Avery-Quash

Senior Research Lead:
Partnerships, Networks and
Initiatives at the National Gallery

Jon King

Research Fellow at
the National Gallery

Hidden Histories of the Museum forms part of the annual programme for the Women and the Arts Forum, a research strand at the National Gallery. Following last year's conference, *Widening the Narrative*, which looked primarily at women artists, this year's conference explores the multifaceted roles women have played in shaping museums, both nationally within the UK and internationally, particularly institutions that specialise in historic art. We examine how women have entered museum spaces as visitors, benefactors, patrons, collectors, trustees and staff, including curators and photographers. These contributions, although often shaped by existing institutional and societal structures, have changed museum cultures in subtle and significant ways, sometimes by challenging established norms, and at other times by working within them to expand what museums could be and do.

Centred on the idea of 'hidden histories', the conference asks how women's work in, with and around museums has been recorded – or overlooked – within dominant narratives of art and institutional history. What forms of labour have gone unrecognised? What social and economic conditions enabled certain women's participation, and what connections, whether familial, financial or colonial, made that participation possible? And how might uncovering these histories shift our understanding of museums themselves: not simply as neutral repositories of art, but as cultural systems conditioned by gender, power and care? The day's papers explore how women's contributions have been remembered, marginalised or erased, and how attending to these complexities can reframe our understanding of both museum history and art history today.

The Women and the Arts Forum is generously supported by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona in honour of her mother, Stacia Apostolos

Schedule

Keynote

- 09:00 **Arrival via Sainsbury Wing Entrance**
Tea & Coffee served outside the Pigott Theatre
- 09:30 **Welcome and Introduction**
Christine Riding, Director of Collections and Research
Jon King, Research Fellow
- 09:40 **Women and Museums 1850–1950:
Hidden, Ignored or Undervalued?**
Kate Hill, University of Lincoln
- Introduced by Susanna Avery-Quash, Senior Research Lead
at the National Gallery

Panel 1

- Women as Museum Professionals:
Photographers and Record Keepers**
Chaired by Alan Crookham, Chief Librarian and Archivist
at the National Gallery
- 10:30 **‘Expert assistance’: Women’s Hidden Histories
in Museum Catalogues**
Meaghan Clarke, University of Sussex
- 10:50 **Isabel Agnes Cowper: Official Museum Photographer
at the South Kensington Museum**
Erika Lederman, Victoria and Albert Museum, London
- 11:05 **In Secret Service: Suzanne Severn and the Photographic
Documentation of the National Gallery Collection in
Wartime Wales**
Carlo Corsato, National Gallery
- 11:20 **Questions (15 mins)**
- 11:35 **Break with Tea & Coffee (25 mins)**
Served outside the Pigott Theatre

Panel 2

Women as Museum Professionals: Curators

Chaired by Laura Llewellyn, Curator of Italian
Paintings before 1500 at the National Gallery

- 12:00 **Early Women Curators:
Making the Museum in the 20th Century**
Rachel Esner, University of Amsterdam
Laia Anguix-Vilches, Utrecht University
- 12:20 **Loud Shoes: Sixty Years of Art Curation
in Regional Collections**
Emma Roodhouse, Colchester & Ipswich Museums and Tate Britain
- 12:35 **‘One Woman Show[s]’: Lillian Browse’s
Exhibitions in Britain, 1940–1945**
Isobel Muir, Tate Britain
- 12:50 **Questions (15 mins)**
- 13:05 **Lunch (1 hour)**
Not provided

Panel 3

Transforming Museums through Philanthropy:
Women as Patrons, Collectors and Donors

Chaired by Susanna Avery-Quash, Senior Research Lead
at the National Gallery

- 14:05 **The Discovery of Women: Searching and Researching
Women in the Modern Museum**
Theresa Kutasz Christensen, Pennsylvania State University
- 14:20 **Interwoven Histories: Female Donors and Museum
Employees at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen (1918–1956)**
Bram Donders, Royal Collections of the Netherlands
and the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
Eva van Bladel, the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam
- 14:35 **Dismantling Patronage: Exploring the Evolution
and Influence of Female Collecting and Philanthropy
through National Trust Collections**
Gabiella de la Rosa, National Trust and Sulgrave Manor
Alice Strickland, National Trust

Keynote Abstract

Panel 4

14:50 **Who Have We Here? Women, Imperial Violence and Collecting at the British Museum**

Hannah Cusworth, Royal Museums Greenwich and UCL

15:05 **Questions**

15:20 **Break with Tea & Coffee (30 mins)**

Served outside the Pigott Theatre

Transforming Museums through Institutional Influence: Advocacy and Intervention

Chaired by Jon King, Research Fellow at the National Gallery

15:50 **Recognising Women's Contributions to the Parliamentary Art Collection in the 19th and Early 20th Century**

Caroline Babington, Independent Researcher
Cara Gatherer, UK Parliament Heritage Collections

16:10 **Sarah Purser and the Development of Ireland's Public Art Museums**

Logan Sisley, Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin

16:25 **Behind the Artist's Eye: Bridget Riley at the National Gallery**

Richard Johns, University of York

16:40 **Questions (15 mins)**

16:55 **Conclusion**

17:00 **Drinks Reception**

Served outside the Pigott Theatre

18:00 **End of Conference**

09:40

Women and Museums 1850–1950: Hidden, Ignored or Undervalued?

Kate Hill

Professor of History,
University of Lincoln

In the century roughly between 1850 and 1950, women were increasingly to be found in art and other museums, and increasingly effective in changing the shape and direction of those museums. If you entered the National Gallery, or another art museum in another part of the country, during that period, the chances are that you would have seen plenty of women in the building. There would also be women behind the scenes and beyond but linked to the museum – employed, donating, supporting in various capacities – who were nevertheless not really hidden.

What caused such women to disappear from histories of their institutions is above all a lack of perceived value in their role and contribution. Women could be ignored because they appeared to be peripheral, menial or otherwise unimportant. Alongside the evidence of women's various contributions to shaping modern museums and galleries, we need an investigation of the mechanisms which devalued those contributions. How was it possible to ignore women when they were so present and so active? How did women navigate a system which was so reluctant to acknowledge them? And what does the undervaluing of women's contributions tell us about art institutions in the period? I will examine not only the National Gallery and national art institutions, but look out across the UK, and to museums and galleries of different sizes and types, to examine how different types of value, including economic, social and cultural, intersected with gendered opportunities.

Panel Abstracts

10:30

**'Expert assistance':
Women's Hidden
Histories in Museum
Catalogues**

Meaghan Clarke

Professor in Art History,
University of Sussex

The 19th century coincided with new professional modes of operation in museums. As collections grew, museums developed more complex organisations and structures. Museum documentation, classification, accessioning and cataloguing practices were part of modern professionalisation within the museum.

Whilst women were generally excluded from salaried roles, such as Keeper or Curator of collections, they helped to establish new ways of identifying and attributing works of art, alongside the recording of information about objects, within the museum and in exhibitions. These specialised modes of record keeping, and more specifically the transformation of the museum catalogue, make the contributions of women more traceable. Whilst catalogues were historically often ephemeral and anonymised texts, they became increasingly significant for several reasons: they functioned as resources for studying art; and for the modern art market, they were seen as a way of promoting exhibitions and tracing the provenance of objects.

How did catalogues make women's work legible? Names of women appear in the archives of public institutions, such as the National Gallery, the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Wallace Collection, and in the catalogues themselves. In some cases, women were employed as 'expert' assistants while in others they were credited as writers or producers of catalogues. Women gathered visual evidence and worked as photographers. Moreover, their names were ever-present in catalogues as lenders to temporary exhibitions, as donors to museums and as committee members. This paper will consider the overlapping networks and varied contributions of women to museum and gallery catalogues.

10:50

**Isabel Agnes Cowper:
Official Museum
Photographer at the
South Kensington
Museum**

Erika Lederman

Cataloguer of Photographs,
Victoria and Albert Museum,
London

This paper reconstructs and investigates the unrecognised career of Isabel Agnes Cowper, Official Museum Photographer at the South Kensington Museum, London (now the Victoria and Albert Museum, or V&A) between 1868 and 1891. It focuses on the extensive archive of Cowper's work at the V&A and critically analyses it within the social and professional contexts in which she lived and worked at a time when the status of women in the UK was rapidly changing. It identifies Cowper's substantial contribution documenting the V&A collections and her influential role in international Victorian networks of knowledge production.

Excavating Cowper's professional narrative reveals that, despite social barriers, women photographers were practising institutional photography, working as embedded members of organisations. This paper defines Cowper's relationships with key players in London's 19th-century artistic circles. Uncovering these relationships enriches our understanding of visual culture networks of influence and demonstrates how women negotiated access to them.

This paper also reveals that being a woman museum photographer in the 19th century was not uncommon, and Cowper was one of many documenting science and art collections in institutions across Europe and the USA. Their photographs were widely collected and circulated and remain in major international collections, including the V&A. I will briefly introduce these other professional women institutional photographers, challenging prevailing histories of photography regarding women in the 19th century (most of which focus on 'lady amateurs'), and adding nuance to narratives of professional women of the period.

11:05

**In Secret Service:
Suzanne Severn and
the Photographic
Documentation
of the National
Gallery Collection in
Wartime Wales**

Carlo Corsato

Project Curator – Digital Dossier
Programme, National Gallery

Based on a previously unstudied collection of personal correspondence and official documents from Suzanne Severn (1909–1993), this paper uncovers the crucial contributions of female photographers to the National Gallery's wartime preservation efforts. Severn's letters provide a window into the operations of the Gallery's photographic department during the critical period of 1939–40, when she worked alongside colleague Marjorie Rickeard (1911–c.1960) to document the evacuated collection in Wales.

Drawing on Severn's accounts, the paper examines their work at Penrhyn Castle, Bangor University and the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth, where they photographed paintings under wartime conditions, including improvised darkrooms and limited equipment, while maintaining high standards. Severn, who trained at Regent Street Polytechnic, worked with Rickeard under the supervision of F.I.G. Rawlins, Head of the Scientific Department, and Martin Davies, Assistant Keeper, who oversaw wartime operations in Wales.

Through Severn's perspective, we see how these women navigated professional and personal challenges within the institutional framework. Significant is Severn's concealment of her 1939 marriage to maintain her position – reflecting Civil Service employment policies in force until 1946. Her story shows how women negotiated professional and personal lives, including concealing her wedding ring on a chain beneath her clothing before entering the Gallery each morning. This examination of Severn's service, which also illuminates Rickeard's contribution, enhances our understanding of women's roles in cultural heritage preservation and collections management during WWII, and sheds new light on the Gallery's wartime operations.



12:00

Early Women Curators: Making the Museum in the 20th Century

Rachel Esner

Associate Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art History, University of Amsterdam

Laia Anguix-Vilches

Postdoctoral Researcher, Utrecht University

Between the 1910s and 1970s, women began assuming decision-making roles in museums worldwide. Despite the distinctiveness of their choices regarding curatorial practices, collection-making and display design, their contributions have been researched mainly at local levels and through isolated case studies, limiting our understanding of their collective, transnational impact on the formation of institutional collections and their role in developing modern-day museums. To address this gap, we have brought together 23 scholars and museum professionals from across the globe to explore the history of curatorial practices through a gendered lens. Together, we aim to unearth transnational patterns in museum-making, collection formation and display design, contributing to the question: what did pioneering women curators achieve, and what can a gender perspective on museum history uncover?

Our reflections have crystallised in *Early Women Curators and the Making of Institutional Collections (1890–1970)*, an edited volume to be published by Routledge in 2026, which examines the global influence of early women curators and their pivotal roles in shaping modern museum practices. Divided into four thematic sections, the volume explores the professionalisation of women curators throughout the 20th century; their contributions to creating accessible and inclusive museum spaces; the intersection of women's curatorial work with 20th-century global history and politics; and their impact on the collection, display and reception of contemporary art. In this paper we share early insights from the project, focusing on 'hidden histories' of women curators, challenges in creating comparative analyses of women's roles in cultural institutions globally, and methodologies to reassess established narratives. By prompting these reflections on the intersections between gender and the curatorial profession, we aim to foster a more inclusive understanding of the institutional histories of museums.

12:20

Loud Shoes: Sixty Years of Art Curation in Regional Collections

Emma Roodhouse

Curator at Colchester & Ipswich Museums and British Art Curator c.1730–1830, Tate Britain (secondment until December 2025)

In 1965, Ipswich Museums appointed its first female curator with responsibility for the art collections. Patricia Margaret Butler would, over the next 13 years, actively acquire, lecture, fundraise and advocate for the Suffolk collection. In 1979 Chloe Bennett took on the role during a restructuring of the Museum service and oversaw documentation projects and the first book on the collection of Suffolk Artists, 1750–1930. The role of curating the art collection in Ipswich has since remained with women for 60 years. Often the names of these museum professionals have been forgotten or are associated with anecdotal stories irrelevant to their careers. For example, when I asked retired staff about Miss Butler, all they remembered was her domineering personality and click-clacking shoes. As the present-day Curator, I have been breaking through these stereotypes and exploring how Butler and her predecessors shaped the collection at a dynamic time through the 1970s and 1980s.

One of the earliest local authority-run museum services, Ipswich was founded in 1846 with the aim of educating people in natural sciences and the arts through its collections at Ipswich Museum and Christchurch Mansion. The art collections now include significant works by Dutch and Netherlandish artists alongside Thomas Gainsborough, John Constable and a range of East Anglians.

This paper highlights the less public profile work that has developed regional collections for communities. It draws on first-hand material of letters and object history files. It is a timely reflection on the legacy of women working with local government collections at a time when many councils face major changes through devolution. What will the next 60 years of regional curation look like?

12:35

'One Woman Show[s]': Lillian Browse's exhibitions in Britain, 1940–1945

Isobel Muir

Assistant Curator of 19th
Century British Art, Tate Britain

The idea of staging loan exhibitions of modern painting and drawing in the National Gallery's recently emptied galleries during the Second World War was the brainchild of a South African émigré art dealer, Lillian Browse (1906–2005). While a few art historians – notably Brian Foss in *War Paint: Art, War, State and Identity in Britain, 1939–1945* (2007) and Suzanne Bosman in *The National Gallery in Wartime* (2008) – have examined the Gallery's wartime Director, Kenneth Clark, and his influence in championing British art during the Second World War as Chairman of the War Artist's Advisory Committee, to date there has been no thorough assessment of the impact of the National Gallery's first temporary exhibitions of modern and contemporary art, or Browse's role as a curator of modern art in Trafalgar Square. Even less is known about her organisation of touring shows across the country, such as the exhibition *Modern Paintings* at the Laing Art Gallery (May 1942). Though Browse published her memoirs in 1999, her legacy as a gallery director and one of the first female art dealers operating under her own name in Britain has yet to be examined. It is clear, however, that she credited her time in the National Gallery's nascent Curatorial department (1940–43) with her later decision to open a gallery on London's Cork Street.

The success of the first of these temporary shows established a tradition that the Gallery maintains to this day, welcoming thousands of visitors to loan exhibitions each year. The Gallery also now employs two permanent (and other temporary) curators of Modern and Contemporary Art, who are responsible for acquiring and displaying work made after 1900, alongside its pre-1900 Permanent Collection of painting made in the Western European tradition.



14:05

The Discovery of Women: Searching and Researching Women in the Modern Museum Collection

Theresa Kutasz Christensen

Instructor of Art History,
The Pennsylvania State University

Museums have more work by women – both as makers and as collectors – than a database search or even a discussion with curatorial staff might initially indicate. Locating those women often means looking beyond the label or the current limitations of databases to find objects that exemplify the myriad ways historical women made their marks on collecting. In many instances, the ability to only partially search data by criteria such as named maker or donor may lead researchers to develop the false impression that women in the historical art market were rare or less influential than male counterparts.

We have all looked at an object provenance and come up against the issue of locating 'Mrs. Husband's Name' as her own historic individual, with a first name and family history often obscured through marriage. Modern provenance research methods provide general tools such as genealogical databases as well as specialised tools such as phonetic search functions to begin addressing these gaps in documentation. The application of these tools, along with increasing institutional support for narrative provenances, has opened the door for more inclusive and representative object histories.

With a lack of work by women – particularly historic women whose work fits traditional standards of art historical importance (painting and sculpture) – many institutions have turned to other ways of addressing gender disparities. In many cases this means digging into institutional histories and object provenances to locate women's contributions. This paper will consider key issues regarding how we track historical women as owners and collectors in both archives and museum databases, and how museums have begun tackling the question of how to locate women in their own object provenances and institutional histories.

14:20

Interwoven Histories: Female Donors and Museum Employees at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen (1918–1956)

Bram Donders

Junior Curator at the Royal Collections of the Netherlands, and Researcher at the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

Eva van Bladel

Junior Registrar at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam

This paper explores the intertwined contributions of female donors and employees at the Rotterdam-based Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen between 1918 and 1956, highlighting the overlooked roles women played in shaping the museum's collection and development. Drawing on Bram Donders' archival research identifying over 500 female donors and Eva van Bladel's study on female employees, it shows how women's networks – through family ties, social circles such as the Rotterdamsche Kunstkring, and shared education – fostered collaboration in building and curating the collection.

Both studies emphasise women's agency in the museum's history: donors provided financial and cultural support, while employees maintained and expanded the collection through curatorial work, education, and administration. Many employees, often from similar socio-economic backgrounds as donors, were confined to applied arts and administrative roles, yet found agency through collecting, donating and curating. The museum's reliance on private donations between the World Wars, especially around the opening of its new building in 1935, underscores the critical role of female benefactors. At the same time, employees such as Jo Zwartendijk (1889–1938) and Bernardine de Neeve (1915–1996) bridged the gap between collection management and cultural patronage.

Merging these findings reveals that women's contributions were not isolated acts but part of a dynamic network of cultural influence that mirrors broader patterns of female philanthropy and labour in museums. This paper argues for a reconsideration of gendered narratives in museum history, positioning women as central to the cultural and intellectual development of art institutions, while acknowledging the socio-economic and cultural context of Rotterdam that made these contributions possible.

14:35

Dismantling Patronage: Exploring the Evolution and Influence of Female Collecting and Philanthropy through National Trust Collections

Gabriella da la Rosa

Assistant National Curator at the National Trust, and Curator at Sulgrave Manor

Alice Strickland

Curator at the National Trust, London and the South East

This paper presents research from a National Trust seed-funded project, and seeks to establish a network of women collectors across National Trust properties and collections. By examining the collections they created and developing their narratives as collectors, the research enables the Trust to tell richer stories from a female perspective, often absent at its properties.

The focus is on the decades between 1880 and 1920, when women took major steps to challenge traditional gender roles and property rights, and philanthropy became closely linked to the rising plutocracy. Within this context, a network of women collectors and philanthropists worked across the UK and US, collaborating with artists, architects, interior designers, dealers and public institutions to develop significant collections now in the care of the National Trust. Key figures include Margaret Greville (Polesden Lacey), Maud Russell (Mottisfont), Alice de Rothschild (Waddesdon), Mary Victoria Leiter, Lady Curzon (Kedleston), Lady Edith, Marchioness of Londonderry (Mount Stewart) and Cara Fairhaven (Anglesey Abbey). In 1929 the American-born Cara Fairhaven donated 188 acres of land at Runnymede to the National Trust in memory of her husband. When she commissioned Edwin Lutyens to design the memorial, he remarked: 'There will never be great architects or great architecture without great patrons'. The research also considers how these women's paths overlapped with prominent US collectors including Isabella Stewart Gardner, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney and Mildred Barnes Bliss.

14:50

Who Have We Here? Women, Imperial Violence and Collecting at the British Museum

Hannah Cusworth

Co-Curator of the Atlantic at Royal Museums Greenwich, and PhD Candidate at UCL

In the British Museum's recent exhibition 'Hew Locke: What have we here?', women's names consistently appeared on object labels. Women collected, donated and sold items from across the world that were intimately linked with British colonial violence. In 1944, Irene Marguerite Beasley donated a brass figure looted from Benin in 1897. Mrs J. Coram Wright sold the Museum a silver gilt dish in 1973, which had an Asante pendant belonging to a soul priest at its centre. In memory of her husband, Nancy Henderson Cole, Dowager Countess of Enniskillen, gave the Museum Tipu Sultan's ring, which was said to have been taken from his finger after the Battle of Seringapatam.

While many women engaged with the Museum after a male relative's death, several were clearly collectors in their own right. Thankfully, decades of scholarship have restored women to their rightful place as art collectors and museum patrons. No longer is women's collecting seen as undiscerning or only associated with the decorative and domestic arts. However, in their 2024 'State of the Field', Bowyer et al highlighted that scholarship which sought to emphasise women's important role in collections history 'usually operated in parallel with investigations of imperial history, rather than combining with it to form [an] across-cutting, intersectional approach'. This paper explores these women's lives and their contributions to the British Museum's collections linked to Empire. It creates tentative typologies of female sellers/givers to analyse their contributions towards shaping the histories, legacies and collections of public museums specialising in pre-1900 art. Ultimately, it asks what it means for women to have been central to the public display of the art and material culture of British imperialism and why their acts have been hidden in plain sight.

15:50

Recognising Women's Contributions to the Parliamentary Art Collection in the 19th and early 20th Century

Caroline Babington
Independent Researcher

Cara Gathern
Researcher and Curatorial Assistant, UK Parliament Heritage Collections

This paper highlights the work of four women associated with the decoration of the British Houses of Parliament after the 1834 fire and rebuilding project. As educators, translators and artists, these women influenced a profoundly masculine scheme. Their contribution has been overlooked, and we readdress their significance.

Mary Philadelphia Merrifield (1804–1889) was at the forefront of technical art history just as Parliament launched its most ambitious artistic commission. Privately sponsored by members of Parliament's Fine Arts Commission, including Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel, she travelled across Europe, translating treatises, visiting studios, investigating restoration techniques and undertaking scientific analysis. Lady Elizabeth Eastlake (Rigby) (1809–1893) was connected to the project from the 1840s. When Parliament's fresco paintings began failing in the late 1850s, a more workable method was needed. Artist Daniel Maclise was sent to Germany to study an innovative technique known as waterglass, with Lady Eastlake translating. This rigorous research enabled the successful completion of the remaining commissions.

Feodora Gleichen (1861–1922) was Parliament's first commissioned female artist. Her bust of W.H. Smith (1892–4) was prominently placed on the Members' Stairs. Like Merrifield and Eastlake, she also worked externally – notable when many works were made in situ. Gertrude Martin (1881–1952) was more visible. The first female master mosaicist in Britain, she laid four mosaics at Parliament between 1922 and 1926. Working in situ to Robert Anning-Bell's designs, she sourced and managed materials and labour. Parliament's 'lady mosaicist' was acknowledged, just as women became more visible in politics.

16:10

Sarah Purser and the Development of Ireland's Public Art Museums

Logan Sisley
Head of Collections,
Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin

The portrait painter Sarah Purser played an important role in the development of two of Dublin's art museums, Hugh Lane Gallery (HLG) and the National Gallery of Ireland (NGI). Purser was an indomitable figure in Dublin's cultural sphere in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Alongside her own artistic career, she founded and managed the stained-glass studio An Túr Gloine, organised exhibitions, and established the Friends of the National Collections of Ireland. A significant collector in her own right, she recognised that public institutions lacked resources to acquire works, so encouraged the Friends to support galleries and museums across Ireland. The HLG and the NGI were among the first beneficiaries of the Friends' philanthropy. Under her leadership the Friends campaigned for the return to Dublin of the paintings in the Sir Hugh Lane Bequest 1917 (now shared in partnership between the National Gallery and HLG).

A close friend of Hugh Lane, she was one of a significant group of women (such as Sarah Cecilia Harrison, who compiled the gallery's first catalogue, and Ellen Duncan, its first paid curator) who were critical to the founding of HLG. Purser sat on the gallery's Arts Advisory Committee and identified Charlemont House as a suitable permanent home, successfully lobbying the Irish government to secure the site. She also served on the Board of Governors and Guardians of the NGI from 1909 until her death in 1943, providing continuity during turbulent times. As a Board member she was actively involved in matters related to NGI staffing and acquisitions. Due to her intellect, fortitude, knowledge of art and her social connections, she was a valued supporter of both the NGI and HLG across several decades.

16:25

Behind the Artist's Eye: Bridget Riley at the National Gallery

Richard Johns

Senior Lecturer in History of Art,
University of York

The unveiling of Bridget Riley's wall painting *Messengers* in 2019 marked the latest chapter in a long and productive relationship between the artist and the National Gallery in London. This paper explores the flourishing of that relationship in the 1980s, a decade that saw a significant change in Riley's practice – characterised by an extended series of richly chromatic 'zig' paintings – and which culminated in 1989 with her participation in the fourth Artist's Eye exhibition. In sharp contrast to the contemporaneity of Riley's black-and-white paintings of the 1960s, her work since the 1980s has consistently been identified as an art 'out of time': more at home alongside, and in dialogue with, a prescribed canon of European old masters than with the shifting fashions of the contemporary art world. Underpinning Riley's public relationship with the National Gallery was her presence behind the scenes, as an artist trustee from 1981 to 1988, a period in which the Gallery became a lodestone for the market-led cultural policy of Margaret Thatcher's government (most prominently through the development of what we know today as the Sainsbury Wing).

The battle of ideas that defined the design and financing of the Sainsbury Wing is well documented. Less well known is the formative role that Riley played in that process in her capacity as a trustee. Drawing on unpublished material from the Gallery's archive, as well as a close reading of the artist's own work and writing from the time, this paper explores how these different threads of Riley's engagement with the National Gallery – as artist, curator and trustee – came together in ways that remain powerfully visible today.

Speaker Biographies

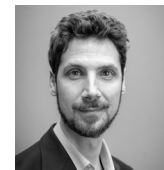
Keynote



Kate Hill

Kate Hill is Professor of History at the University of Lincoln. She is a historian of 19th- and 20th-century museums, collecting and curating; her books include *Culture and Class in English Public Museums 1850–1914* (2005), *Museums and Biographies* (2012), and *Women and Museums 1850–1914: Modernity and the Gendering of Knowledge* (2016). She has also written about masculinity and museums, children and museums, and approaches to studying museum history, and is Co-Editor of the *Museum History Journal*. She is currently working on projects on the history of professionalisation in museum work, and the development of folk and social history in British museums.

Panel 1



From top:
Meaghan Clarke
Erika Lederman
Carlo Corsato

Meaghan Clarke is Professor of Art History at the University of Sussex. Her most recent book is entitled *Fashionability, Exhibition Culture and Gender Politics: Fair Women* (2020; 2022). She is the author of *Critical Voices: Women and Art Criticism in Britain 1880–1905* (2005; 2017) and she has published in collections and journals including *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, *Tate*, *Art History*, *RACAR*, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, *Henry James Review* and *Visual Culture in Britain*.

Erika Lederman is a cataloguer of photographs at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (V&A). She recently completed a PhD through the Arts and Humanities Research Council's collaborative doctoral partnership scheme. Her thesis, 'Armour and Lace: Women Photographers in Nineteenth-Century Institutions', was co-supervised by the Photographic History Research Centre at De Montfort University and the Photography Collection staff of the V&A.

Carlo Corsato is a professional art historian, educator and project curator for the Digital Dossier Programme at the National Gallery, and he specialises in Western art and archival research. His work combines rigorous scholarly investigation with innovative approaches to public engagement. Carlo has published extensively on early modern art, including co-editing *Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari: Devotional Space, Images of Piety* and contributing to major exhibition catalogues. His current research focuses on uncovering hidden institutional histories and untold stories of women in the arts. Carlo brings particular expertise in working with personal correspondence and institutional archives, having developed several digital projects that make historical collections accessible to diverse audiences.

Panel 2



From top:
Rachel Esner
Laia Anguix-Vilches

Rachel Esner is Associate Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art History at the University of Amsterdam and Academic Director of the National Research School for Art History (OSK). Her current research centres on the history of museums and exhibitions, with a particular focus on questions of display and, more recently, on the role of female workers in the museum field. She is one of the founders of the research network *The Other Half – Women in the Dutch Art World 1890–1970*, which aims to trace the contributions of women – as collectors, curators and critics – to the making of art institutions in the Netherlands.

Laia Anguix-Vilches is an art and museum historian with specific interests in curatorial practices, institutional collecting and gender in museums. Besides multiple conference presentations, book chapters and exhibition catalogues on these topics, she has published in the *Journal of Design History* and the *Journal of the History of Collections*. She has convened two panels on curatorial practices for the Association for Art History Conference and has co-edited a special guest issue on British curation for the *Museum History Journal*. She has received grants from the Paul Mellon Centre, ICOM and the Slovak Ministry of Culture. She currently works as a postdoctoral researcher at Utrecht University, where she investigates global exhibitions of Netherlandish art from a postcolonial perspective. She is also a board member of the Museums and Galleries History Group, and the book reviews editor for the *Museum History Journal*.

Panel 2



From top:
Emma Roodhouse
Isobel Muir

Emma Roodhouse is an art curator and researcher, with a special interest in Suffolk artists. Emma has curated many exhibitions for Colchester and Ipswich Museums, including *Landscape Rebels: Turner, Constable and Monet* (2022); *Creating Constable* (2021); *Made in Suffolk: Ed Sheeran* (2019); *Kiss and Tell: Rodin and Suffolk Sculpture* (2018); *Women 100* (2018); *Twists and Turns, Hairstyles in Art* (2017) and *A Year of Constable* (2015). She is the recipient of awards for research into Constable's paintings at the Yale Centre for British Art and Constable's early career through a research grant from the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art. Her publications include the first publication on the Colchester and Ipswich Museums Constable collection, *Creating Constable* (2021), as well as *The Art of Doris and Anna Zinkeisen* (2021) and *Discover Constable & The Hay Wain* (2024).

Isobel Muir has completed an AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Partnership project (2020–2024) on Jewish collectors and cultural philanthropists at the National Gallery between 1824 and 1945. She is now developing further research focused on Jewish women art dealers in Britain, including Lillian Browse. Prior to her PhD, she has held curatorial roles in the Paintings and Prints and Drawings departments of the Royal Collection Trust, and most recently, was Project Curator of *Van Gogh: Poets and Lovers* (2024) at the National Gallery. Isobel is currently Assistant Curator of 19th Century British Art at Tate Britain and is working on an upcoming *Whistler* exhibition.

Panel 3



From top:
Theresa Kutasz Christensen
Bram Donders

Theresa Kutasz Christensen is an art historian specialising in women's roles in the historical art market and provenance research. She has held numerous collection and provenance research positions at institutions including the Smithsonian American Art Museum, National Museum of Asian Art, Archives of American Art, the Detroit Institute of Arts, and the Baltimore Museum of Art. She served on the curatorial team for the award-winning catalogue and exhibition, *Making Her Mark: A History of Women Artists in Europe 1400–1800* (2023) produced for the BMA and the Art Gallery of Ontario. Her work has been recognised with awards and fellowships including support from the Swedish American Fulbright Foundation, Winterthur Museum, Garden, and Library, the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, and Oxford University. She recently developed a flagship education programme in provenance research methods and practices for the International Foundation for Art Research (IFAR) and is an instructor of Art History at the Pennsylvania State University.

Bram Donders is an art historian specialising in 19th-century visual arts. He is junior curator at the Royal Collections of the Netherlands and researcher at the Van Gogh Museum, where he is contributing to a major retrospective on Eva Gonzalès (1847–1883). Previously, he worked as a researcher at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam, focusing on projects about female artists and donors. He was nominated as Museum Talent by the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands and received an NWO Museum Grant (from the Dutch Research Council) for his research on female donors and bequeathers.

Panel 3



From top:
Eva van Bladel
Gabriella de la Rosa
Alice Strickland
Hannah Cusworth

Eva van Bladel holds a Master's degree in Museum Studies from Leiden University and currently works at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen as a junior registrar. Her research focuses on the contributions of women to art history as artists and benefactors during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In 2024, she contributed to research on female donors and bequeathers at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen as a research intern, collaborating with Bram Donders. Eva aims to highlight overlooked female narratives in museum collections and the broader cultural landscape.

Gabriella de la Rosa is National Curator at the National Trust and Curator at Sulgrave Manor, ancestral home of George Washington. This year Gabriella has published on Sulgrave Manor's 17th-century textiles, which were collected and donated by Ruth Lee, Viscountess Lee of Fareham (d. 1966) in the 1920s.

Alice Strickland is a National Trust regional curator in London and the South East, and is currently on secondment to the Royal Collection Trust as Senior Curator of Paintings. This year her publications, as a contributing author, include *Standen: Philip Webb, Morris & Co. and the Creation of an Arts and Crafts Home* (YUP and NT) and *British Women Artists* (Clark Institute of Art and YUP).

Hannah Cusworth is the Co-Curator of the Atlantic at Royal Museums Greenwich and PhD student at UCL. She began her career as a secondary school teacher, before creating a freelance business that seeks to support organisations looking to tell histories of Black Britain and the British Empire. Her doctoral work looks at the mahogany in three English Heritage houses and brings it into conversation with Black Studies. She has published on the recent 'girlbossification' of women in public history and Black approaches to archival work.

Panel 4



From top:
Caroline Babington
Cara Gathern

Caroline Babington studied Art History at the University of East Anglia, then a Postgraduate Diploma in Wall Painting Conservation at the Courtauld Institute of Art. From 1988–1999 she worked as wall paintings conservator for English Heritage. Caroline was employed at Parliament for 18 years, and in 2011 she was appointed Collections Conservation Manager for the Parliamentary Art Collection. In 2024 she was elected Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London and is currently pursuing independent research on Parliamentary wall paintings.

Cara Gathern is a heritage professional with a PhD from the University of Brighton. She works as a Researcher and Curatorial Assistant for UK Parliament Heritage Collections and previously interned with the curatorial team at Historic Royal Palaces. At Parliament, Cara specialises in the 19th-century art scheme overseen by the Commission of Fine Arts for the New Palace of Westminster, and the 20th-century mosaics on the principal floor.

Panel 4



From top:
Logan Sisley
Richard Johns

Logan Sisley was born in Aotearoa, New Zealand where he studied art history at the University of Otago and the University of Auckland. From 2000, he lived in Scotland where he worked at the National Galleries of Scotland and Edinburgh College of Art. From 2007 to 2018 he was Exhibitions Curator at Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin, where he is now Head of Collections. He curated *More Power to You: Sarah Purser – A Force for Irish Art* (2024) and collaborated with the National Museum of Ireland on *Studio and State: The Laverys and the Anglo-Irish Treaty* (2021) and with the National Gallery, London, on *Discover Manet and Eva Gonzalès* (2022). He has written articles and catalogue essays on Walter Osborne, Sarah Purser, John Lavery, Eithne Jordan, Sean Lynch and Francis Bacon, as well as on family photography, artist's books, the George Bennie Railplane and the Glass House of Antoine de Paris.

Richard Johns is Senior Lecturer in History of Art, and a member of the Centre for Eighteenth Century Studies, at the University of York. He has written on various aspects of British art from the 17th century to the present, including Bridget Riley's stripe paintings in 'Riley in Cairo: British Art and Egypt in the 1980s' for *Art History* (2022). More recently, he was a member of the curatorial team responsible for the exhibition *Austen and Turner: A Country House Encounter* (Harewood House, 2 May–19 October 2025).



Acknowledgements

Acknowledgments

The Women and the Arts Forum is convened by Susanna Avery-Quash and Jon King.

The conference forms part of the Forum's annual programme, aiming to address the various and integral roles that women, past or present, have had in the arts, particularly in relation to the National Gallery's history and collection.

This conference and the wider programme are generously supported by **The Diane Apostolos-Cappadona Trust** in honour of her mother, Stacia Apostolos.

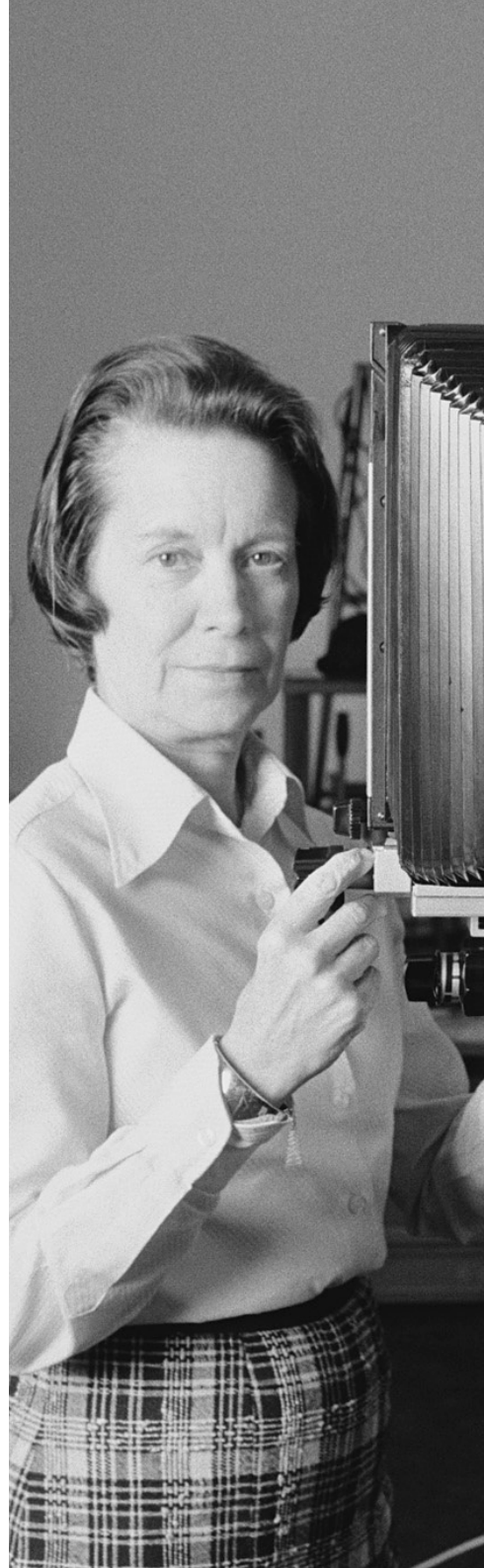
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Pigott Theatre

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