

# THE NATIONAL GALLERY

## STORIES OF ART: 1500–1600

Wednesdays 10, 17, 24, 31 January and 7, 14 February 2024

5.30–7.30pm GMT

Course Tutor: Siân Walters

Join us as we explore image-making and artistic patronage in early modern Europe and the role of key artists of the Renaissance such as Leonardo, Raphael, Holbein and Dürer. Gain a deeper understanding of a wide range of works whether public or private, religious, or secular, and how they were created to serve different purposes - to instruct or commemorate, intrigue the mind, or delight the eye.

It was during the period covered by this course that the artist, architect and author Giorgio Vasari effectively invented the History of Art, when he published *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* in 1550. A second edition of Vasari's *Lives* (as the work is more generally known) followed in 1568. In both editions, the focus is on the artists themselves, their biographies, the influences on them and their influence upon others. However, this is just one of the stories we can tell. Over the next six weeks we will take a more thematic approach, looking at the artists themselves but also the political, theological and cultural environments in which they lived and worked, alongside topics such as artistic rivalry and the role of women.

Each two-hour session includes an hour-long talk delivered by course tutor **Siân Walters**, followed by a short break and further discussion. Several of the sessions feature an in-depth contribution from guest speakers as well as Gallery specialists who will focus on aspects of the Gallery's work. Time will be allowed for questions and discussion. This series should result in a greater understanding of not only the art itself, but also of the work the National Gallery does to care for it, present it and interpret it.

### **Week 1: Power and patronage**

#### **10 January**

The 16<sup>th</sup> century was a period of dynamic transformation and development: a time which witnessed dramatic religious reform, the advent of printing, the rise of humanism, and an extraordinary wave of artistic activity. Rulers and leading families sought to rival one another with increasingly elaborate programmes of patronage, pursuing the best artists of their day, from Dürer and Holbein to Michelangelo and Titian.

In this introductory session, we will examine the political structure of Europe and the rulers who governed the societies in which art was produced. We will look at competition and rivalry between King Henry VIII in England, King Francis I in France and Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor, and focus in particular on the patronage of Popes Julius II and Leo X in Rome. We also evaluate the impact of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation on the visual arts, following Martin Luther's infamous *Ninety-Five Theses* of 1517, outlining his criticisms of Catholic church practice, often considered a major catalyst for the ensuing schism within the church.

In Part II we are joined by **Patrick O'Sullivan**, Head of Art Handling at the National Gallery, who will discuss the recent moving and rehanging of Sebastiano del Piombo's *Raising of Lazarus*, one of the largest paintings in the collection. We will learn about the work of the Art Handling Department, including current projects as the Gallery prepares to reopen the Sainsbury Wing for its Bicentenary celebrations.

## **Week 2: Renaissance faces**

**17 January**

The Renaissance engendered a reawakening of interest in both the human form and character, and the portrait became the most effective visual means of recording this rising awareness of the individual. This was a period in which some of the most imaginative ways of having one's likeness recorded appeared – a time when patrons could literally reinvent themselves through the visual image, and in which artists were given the possibility of transforming the genre and creating ingenious variations on a theme.

In this session, we explore examples by some of the most influential artists of the period such as Giovanni Bellini, El Greco, Titian and Dürer, with a special focus on Holbein's masterpiece, *The Ambassadors*.

## **Week 3: Artist in focus: Hieronymus Bosch**

**24 January**

This week we focus on the National Gallery's *Christ Mocked (or The Crowning with Thorns)*, one of the rare works by Bosch in a British collection. Many of the most powerful and emotive works of Northern European art describe the suffering and Passion of Christ, from private devotional images or woodcut prints, to more public works such as large-scale altarpieces and sculptural groups.

In this dramatic painting Christ is represented as a passive victim tormented by four brutish and grotesque figures who press closely around him, creating a claustrophobic atmosphere. Yet the work requires placement in the religious context of the turn of the century to be fully understood. Why are the figures dressed in contemporary costume? What is the significance of non-scriptural elements and objects, such as the dog collar or the oak leaves? How would the painting have been viewed and interpreted during the period? We will examine the work within the context of some of Bosch's paintings in other collections.

After the break we will go beyond what can be seen with the naked eye, thinking about the ways in which the technology available to the Gallery's conservators and scientists can enhance our understanding of the collection. Guest lecturer **Rachel Billinge**, Research Associate in the National Gallery's Conservation Department, will discuss the technical investigation of Bosch's *Christ Mocked (or The Crowning with Thorns)* and will demonstrate, with the aid of photomicrographs, X-ray images and infrared reflectograms, how analysis of the panel has revealed surprising information beneath the painted surface.

## **Week 4: Mythology**

**31 January**

This week we will look at the relevance of literature to the art of the period and how painting during the Renaissance reflects clear changes in literary taste. Depictions of Greek and Roman mythologies became frequent and popular, as both patrons and artists became more familiar with classical sources and stories. Mythological paintings could reflect a patron's erudition and awareness of the antique, or relate heroic stories of the past to glorious events of the present. They therefore often become important tools for the display of power and wealth.

We will examine mythological imagery in the 16<sup>th</sup> century collection of the National Gallery, with a particular focus on Titian's paintings created for one of the most important and prestigious collections in Europe, that of King Philip II of Spain. These ambitious 'poesie', as Titian named

them, were intended to be the visual equivalents of poetry, drawing upon classical subjects which underlined Philip's sophistication, yet also appealing to his predilection for sensual subject matter.

After the break we will be joined by guest lecturer **Dr Antonio Mazzotta**, a distinguished scholar of Venetian and Lombard painting. His lecture, entitled 'Giorgione and early Titian at the National Gallery' will focus in particular on works that are attributed to Giorgione, some not unanimously, and on two portraits by Titian, one of a man, the other of a woman, which are considered among the most important and influential works in the history of art.

## **Week 5. Rivalry and collaboration**

### **7 February**

A notable result of the increased status of the arts during the Renaissance was the sense of competition between the artists themselves. Nowhere was this more pronounced than in Italy, where the rivalry between Michelangelo and Leonardo – and between Michelangelo and Raphael and Sebastiano del Piombo – not only drove the production of great works of art, but also led to important areas of collaboration.

There will also be discussion of the literary contribution of Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*. Dedicated to Grand Duke Cosimo I de' Medici, its expanded second edition included more than 200 artists' biographies, spanning a period of 300 years. Vasari's ground-breaking book combines fascinating descriptions of artworks with delightful anecdotes about their creators, but to what extent have our views of Renaissance art been influenced by his opinions and criteria?

## **Week 6. Women as artists and patrons**

### **14 February**

In 2020, the National Gallery hosted the first major exhibition in the UK dedicated to the work of Artemisia Gentileschi, following the acquisition of her *Self Portrait as Saint Catherine of Alexandria*. This is one of a number of promising and inspiring steps towards the revival and recovery of the reputations of many great female artists who achieved fame and renown amongst their contemporaries, but whose lives became obscured over time. In this session, we will explore the work of artists such as Sofonisba Anguissola, Lavinia Fontana, Catharina van Hemessen, and Levina Teerlinc as well as women who were active as patrons and collectors of art during the 16th century.

After the break we are joined by the award-winning author **Sarah Dunant** who will discuss the life and patronage of Isabella d'Este, Marchioness of Mantua. The first and greatest female art patron and collector of the Italian Renaissance, she was born into the Este court of Ferrara and married at 15 into the Gonzaga family in Mantua. Over the next fifty years she would go on to create a dazzling Renaissance court, running the state while her husband was away fighting or in prison, and amassing a collection of contemporary and antique art to rival the greatest collectors of her time. When she died, she left behind her a treasure trove of letters, unique in the history of the Renaissance women. An hour in her company is not enough. But it is a good way to start.

## **Course tutor and guest lecturers**

**Siân Walters** is an art historian and the director of *Art History in Focus*. She studied at Selwyn College, Cambridge University and has been a lecturer at the National Gallery for over 20 years. Her specialist areas of research are Italian painting, Spanish art and architecture, Flemish and Dutch painting and the relationship between dance and art. Siân also lectures for The Wallace Collection and The Arts Society and leads specialist art tours abroad. She was a lecturer at Surrey University for many years and has lived and worked in France and Venice.

**Rachel Billinge** is one of the world's leading conservation scientists and has played a key part in many ground-breaking investigations and discoveries at the National Gallery as part of its teams of conservators and scientists. Graduating from Oxford University, she then obtained an MA in the conservation of easel-paintings and joined the Conservation Department of the National Gallery in 1991. Rachel studies European paintings from the 13th to late 19th centuries, specialising in non-destructive technical analysis, particularly infrared reflectography but also macro-XRF scanning, X-radiography, stereomicroscopy, and surface-textural mapping.

**Sarah Dunant** is an award-winning writer, historian, critic and broadcaster, and a regular contributor to BBC Radio 4's "A Point of View". She has published thirteen novels and lectures regularly around the world at literary festivals and conferences. Her most recent books, set within the Italian Renaissance, weave cutting edge historical scholarship into fast moving popular fiction. These have been best sellers in Britain and America and have been translated into thirty languages. They include *Blood and Beauty*, *The Birth of Venus* and *In the Name of the Family*. Sarah is currently writing a book about Isabella d'Este, Marchioness of Mantua.

**Dr Antonio Mazzotta** is a lecturer in the History of Art at the University of Milan and a curator and scholar specialising in Venetian and Lombard art of the Renaissance. He worked as Curatorial Assistant at the National Gallery in 2008-2010, where he curated the exhibition 'Titian's First Masterpiece: The Flight Into Egypt' and in 2023 he co-curated 'Titian 1508: At the Beginning of a Luminous Career' at the Gallerie dell' Accademia in Venice.

**Patrick O'Sullivan** joined the National Gallery in 1995 and became Head of Art Handling in 2006. Aside from supervising the movement and installation of pictures throughout the Gallery and during temporary exhibitions, as well as preparing works for loan, he also designs and develops bespoke equipment which can be used to move the collection. Patrick is also a practicing artist.

## Suggested reading

**Further book recommendations as well as online resources, articles, suggested gallery visits and source studies will be provided each week.**

Lorne Campbell, et al, *Renaissance Faces: Van Eyck to Titian*, National Gallery Company, 2011. This catalogue accompanied an eponymous exhibition held at the National Gallery and provides excellent catalogue entries on many seminal portraits of the period, both painted and sculpted.

Stephen J. Campbell, Michael W. Cole, *A New History of Italian Renaissance Art* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed), Thames and Hudson, 2017

This acclaimed chronological survey covers the period 1300-1600 so is also a good suggestion for those students who also attended Modules 1 and 2.

Jeffrey Chipps Smith, *The Northern Renaissance*, Phaidon, 2004.

An excellent introduction to the work of many of the artists whom we will look at during the course including Dürer and Holbein, discussed within their political and socio-historical context. It covers the period from 1380 to 1580 so again is useful for other modules.

Jill Dunkerton et al, *Dürer to Veronese: Sixteenth Century Painting in the National Gallery*, National Gallery Company, 2002.

A thematic description of the gallery's 16th century collection, concentrating in particular on questions of patronage, genre and technique. Informative, accessible and beautifully illustrated - highly recommended although sadly out of print. Copies however can be found online.

Catalogues dedicated to particular schools are however still in print and provide the most comprehensive and detailed coverage of the gallery's 16<sup>th</sup> century collection. *The Sixteenth-Century Italian Paintings* is by former director Nicholas Penny and appears in 3 volumes. *The Sixteenth Century Netherlandish Paintings, With French Paintings Before 1600* is written by former

curator Lorne Campbell. All are National Gallery Company publications (distributed by Yale University Press).

Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* (1st ed. 1550) is an invaluable source study for art historians and students. Oxford University Press has a one volume edition, translated by Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella (2008) while the Penguin Classics edition, translated by George Bull (1987) has two volumes.

The *National Gallery Technical Bulletin*, first published in 1977, draws from the combined expertise of curators, scientists and conservators, bringing together a wealth of information about artists' materials, practices and techniques. For example, Volume 32 is a special issue devoted to the work of Leonardo da Vinci and Volumes 34 and 36 are dedicated to Titian's painting technique. The Bulletin is available to download free from the Gallery's website.

<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/technical-bulletin>

For lighter reading, I highly recommend the novels of Sarah Dunant whose work combines solid historical scholarship with popular fiction. Many of her novels are set in the Italian Renaissance, including *The Birth of Venus*, *Blood and Beauty* and *Sacred Hearts*. Sarah is one of our guest speakers.

### **Independent visits**

Here are some suggestions for independent visits.

See also the Museum Explorer feature of the Google Arts and Culture website:

<https://artsandculture.google.com/partner>

## **London**

### **Victoria and Albert Museum**

I would highly recommend visiting the Renaissance Galleries at the V&A. Head first of all for Room 48 where you will find the Raphael's Cartoons (the word comes the Italian *cartone* meaning a large sheet of paper). These were full-scale designs for tapestries commissioned by Pope Leo X for the Sistine Chapel in Rome. Rooms 50A-D include two giant spaces which lend themselves well to large-scale works from the Renaissance - one is arranged as a Renaissance courtyard and the other as the nave of a church. Finally, Rooms 62-64B explore smaller objects relating to Renaissance trade and society with a myriad of art works, everyday objects and luxury goods. Look out in particular for the *Burghley Nef* (an exquisite French silver-gilt salt cellar) and Michelangelo's small wax model of a slave.

**The Wallace Collection** is home to Titian's *Perseus and Andromeda*, one of the famous *poesie* painted for Philip II which we will discuss, as well as masterpieces by Andrea del Sarto, Pieter Pourbus and Isaac Oliver. There are also lots of examples of 16th century coins, medals, armour and *objets d'art* – you'll find these in the 16th Century Gallery and Smoking Room.

You might also like to visit **The British Museum**, in particular Rooms 46 and also Renaissance works in the Waddesdon Bequest which can be found in Room 2a. Look out for the exquisite *Phoenix Jewel* containing a portrait of Queen Elizabeth I of England with a phoenix in flames on the reverse, symbolising endurance, chastity and eternal life.

### **Outside London - UK**

There are very many suggestions so please do forgive me if I don't mention your local/favourite gallery or stately home! Here are a few ideas though:

**The Fitzwilliam Museum** in Cambridge boasts masterpieces such as Titian's *Tarquin and Lucretia* and his *Venus and Cupid with a Lute Player* and **The Ashmolean Museum** in Oxford has a fine collection of Renaissance paintings, drawings, sculptures and prints. It has a world-famous

collection of Raphael drawings although these are fragile, so you would need to book a visit to the Western Art Print Room in order to see them. Visits can be pre-booked.

The **Walker Art Gallery** in Liverpool has a good collection of Renaissance art and these galleries are due to reopen soon (January 2024) after a period of refurbishment.

A number of Renaissance masterpieces from the Royal Collection can be seen at **Hampton Court Palace**, including Anthonis Mor's *Christina of Denmark* (the same sitter portrayed by Hans Holbein, now in the National Gallery's collection) and *The Family of Henry VIII* (both can be found in the Haunted Gallery). *The Triumphs of Caesar* by Andrea Mantegna are usually in the orangery, but currently on loan to the National Gallery. You can find them in Room 14.

There are many wonderful collections in National Trust properties of course, including **Upton House** in Warwickshire (with works by Bosch, El Greco and Holbein among others), **Kingston Lacy** in Dorset, Hardwick Hall in Derbyshire, **Petworth House** in Sussex and **Penrhyn Castle** in Gwynedd.

The **Scottish National Gallery** is a must if you are in Edinburgh. It has masterpieces by Raphael, El Greco, Quentin Massys and Titian. Titian's *Diana and Callisto* and *Diana and Actaeon* were purchased jointly a few years ago by the National Galleries Scotland and the National Gallery in London and they move between the two collections every few years (they are currently in London).

## Europe

Many museums across Europe are rich in 16th century art – the Museo del Prado in **Madrid**, the Alte Pinakothek in **Munich**, the Gallerie degli Uffizi in **Florence**, the Gallerie dell'Accademia in **Venice** and the Musée du Louvre in **Paris**.

Fine collections of works by the Flemish master Pieter Bruegel the Elder can be found in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in **Vienna** and the Royal Museums of Fine Arts in **Brussels**. Flemish 16th century art is sometimes overlooked by that of the previous century but there were many great masters. Less well-known is Pieter Pourbus who was from Gouda but settled in **Bruges** where many of his paintings can still be found in situ, including in St Gilliskerk and Sint-Jacobskerk.

However, it is always good to be able to see works in the locations for which they were originally created - seeing them in context helps our understanding of their meaning and purpose. For example, if you go to **Toledo**, you can still admire a number of works by El Greco in their original locations, for example in the Sacristy of the Cathedral and the churches of Santo Tomé and Santo Domingo el Antiguo. Spain has a long history of sculpture and notable figures from the 16th century including Alonso Berruguete who carved some of the beautiful choir stalls in Toledo Cathedral. You could take a day trip to the Monastery of **El Escorial** to see its fine collection of 16<sup>th</sup> century paintings and its magnificent library frescoed by Pellegrino Tibaldi.

In **Venice** there are many works still in situ, including Veronese's frescoes and canvases in the church of San Sebastiano and Titian's famous altarpieces in Santa Maria dei Frari (*The Assumption of the Virgin* and *The Pesaro Altarpiece*). Visit the *Scuola of San Giorgione degli Schiavoni* for works by Carpaccio and the *Scuola of San Rocco* to see Tintoretto's great series of canvases including *The Crucifixion*. This painting is currently undergoing conservation treatment, but I will be running an online livestream broadcast from the conservators' platform this month (January). If this is of interest, do get in touch.

The Doge's Palace has many important canvases by artists such as Tintoretto and Veronese in their original locations, commissioned by the Venetian government in the 16th century. In **Rome** visit St Peter's to see Michelangelo's *Pietà* and his frescoes in the Sistine Chapel, as well as Raphael's decorations of the *Stanze*. In **Florence** you should see the *Laurentian Library* by Michelangelo as well as his powerful tomb sculptures in the *New Sacristy*. A "secret" room under the sacristy which contains some fascinating sketches by the artist, made whilst in hiding, has just

opened to the public for the first time (until March 2024 only). It's fun to do a Bronzino trail in Florence and hunt down many of his works still in situ, such as those in the church of *San Lorenzo* and the Cappella di Eleonora in the *Palazzo Vecchio*. Don't miss the haunting deposition by his pupil Pontormo, in the church of *Santa Felicità*.

### Exhibitions – worldwide

A stunning exhibition of Holbein's portraits is currently on show at The Queen's Gallery in London, bringing together over 100 drawings, paintings, miniatures and book illustrations and representing the largest group of Holbein's works from the Royal Collection Trust to be exhibited in over 30 years. "Holbein at the Tudor Court" runs until 14th April 2024.

I'd also recommend a major exhibition dedicated to El Greco currently on view at the Palazzo Reale in Milan. It traces the artist's entire career, from early works made soon after his departure from Crete to masterpieces created in Toledo, where the artist settled in 1577. "El Greco" runs until 11th February 2024.

I'm particularly looking forward to "Bruegel to Rubens: Great Flemish Drawings" which will open this March at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. The museum will showcase over 100 exceptional drawings from 16th and 17th-century Flanders. "Bruegel to Rubens: Great Flemish Drawings": 22nd March – 23rd June 2024.

Moving to Vienna, one of the Kunsthistorisches Museum's key exhibitions this year is dedicated to 16<sup>th</sup> century German painting. "Holbein. Burgkmair. Dürer: Renaissance in the North": 19th March – 30th June 2024.

If you love Italian Renaissance painting, don't miss The Royal Academy's blockbuster in London at the end of 2024, exploring the rivalry between Michelangelo and Leonardo and their influence on the young Raphael. Highlights will include studies by Leonardo and Michelangelo for their unfinished murals in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, which will be reunited in the exhibition for the first time. "Michelangelo, Leonardo, Raphael: Florence, c. 1504": 9th November 2024 – 16th February 2025.