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Review

## The Great Room of Art

By [Richard Dorment](#)

*Art on the Line: The Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House, 1780–1836*

edited by David H. Solkin

Yale University Press, 278 pp., \$65.00

### 1.

In a famous letter to the committee of artists responsible for hanging the Royal Academy's annual summer exhibition in 1784, Thomas Gainsborough announced that he could not possibly allow his full-length group portrait of the three eldest daughters of George III to be hung at a height "higher than five feet & a half." By attempting to dictate to the Royal Academy in this way, Gainsborough was asking for a radical dispensation from the rule that full-length or three-quarter-length portraits were hung above the "line," a projecting wooden molding running around the walls of the main exhibition space at a level of eight feet from the floor. Gainsborough, who was one of the founding members of the Royal Academy in 1768, was well aware of this regulation.

But, he explained, his was a special case. He had painted the picture of the three princesses "in so tender a light, that notwithstanding *he approves very much of the established Line for Strong Effects*,...the likenesses & Work of the Picture will not be seen any higher." In other words, he considered the rule about the line to be fair—for showing big, bold pictures that would register from a distance. But Gainsborough created the brilliant visual effects for which he was so celebrated in a darkened studio, often by candlelight, using the techniques of scumbling (the rubbing of a light and opaque color over a darker one) and glazing (laying a darker color over a lighter one). All the delicacy of color, subtlety of touch, and nuance of his paint surface would be lost to the public, he said, unless the academicians hung his picture at eye level. His demand for special treatment was, therefore, nonnegotiable. When the hanging committee refused to comply, he removed all eighteen of the pictures he had submitted to that year's show, resigned from the Royal Academy, and never again exhibited at Somerset House.

*Art on the Line*, subtitled *The Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House, 1780–1836*, a book of essays published to coincide with a recent exhibition of the

same title at the Courtauld Institute Gallery in London, helps us to understand the context and wider implications of this quarrel. The subjects covered in the book, edited by David Solkin, include Mark Hallett's study of eighteenth-century art journalism, Michael Rosenthal's look at professional rivalry among the academicians, Martin Myrone's masterly discussion of sensational imagery in the RA exhibitions, and Ann Bermingham's account of the relationship between high art and popular entertainments such as dioramas and panoramas in London during the later Georgian and Regency periods.

Though the exhibition closed in January, it will, I predict, come to be considered one of the most influential in recent years. What Solkin and his colleagues did was to reconstruct a Royal Academy Summer Exhibition as it might have looked in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the actual spaces in which the exhibitions took place. This was much more than simply an academic exercise. Never again will we be able to show paintings of the British school without taking into consideration the lessons we learned from this show. What is more, it came at the very moment when Tate Britain opened a new extension for the exhibition of its historic British collection, and coincided with the unveiling of the Victoria and Albert Museum's long-awaited renovation of its primary British Galleries, which tell the story of British art and design from the Tudors to 1900. Had Solkin's exhibition and publication been available five years ago, curators, architects, and designers at Tate Britain, at least, may well have made different choices about the way paintings were displayed.

## 2.

Although no longer in regular use as an exhibition space, the main room in which the Summer Exhibition was held still exists at Somerset House, the former government building that today houses both the Courtauld Institute and the Courtauld Gallery. Known as the Great Room, it was designed by Sir William Chambers specifically for the annual display of pictures by members of the Royal Academy. High, square, and oddly proportioned, it is this space —and how painters responded to it— that provides the key to understanding why British pictures look the way they do. For ambitious British artists worked in the knowledge that their pictures would be seen under the specific physical conditions that prevailed at Somerset House—and adjusted their painting styles, their compositions, their use of color, and even their choice of subject matter to ensure that their work would be seen to advantage there. Unless you understand the hanging system at the Royal Academy, you simply don't appreciate how desperate artists were to grab visitors by the lapels with dramatic or topical subjects, strong colors, inventive compositions, or—in the case of portraits—famous, glamorous, or notorious sitters.

In 1768, a number of artists and architects, including the architect William Chambers, the pastellist Francis Cotes, and the American history painter Benjamin West founded the Royal Academy, under the patronage of King George III. Joshua Reynolds was elected the first president. The original premises were those of an auctioneer in Pall Mall, but in 1780 the Royal Academy's exhibition rooms and schools moved to the newly built Somerset House, a palatial building on the Thames, five minutes' walk from Covent Garden and Drury Lane, otherwise occupied by government offices, including the Excise and the administration of the navy.

Here, every year between 1780 and 1836, the annual exhibition took place.<sup>[\*]</sup> The summer show opened on the last Monday in April or the first in May and ran for about six weeks. To see the show—one of the great spectacles Georgian and Regency London had to offer—visitors toiled up the narrow, vertiginous, winding staircase from the dark entrance level to the top-lit galleries under the roof. Nowadays most people take the elevator, but were we to follow in the footsteps of our ancestors we would arrive, panting and with a whoosh of exhilaration, into the noise and light of the Great Room, the dramatic heart of the annual exhibition. Here, the walls were hung from floor to ceiling and frame to frame with over two hundred paintings that, Solkin and his colleagues argue, were a mirror of the British establishment, and entirely in tune with the intensely competitive spirit of entrepreneurial capitalism of the period.

The places of honor in the center of each wall were reserved for full-length portraits, often of members of the royal family. Otherwise, there were no rules about who could or could not have their portrait shown at the summer exhibition. This was the place to see what people in the news looked like—society beauties like Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, or Lady Elizabeth Foster, actors like John Philip Kemble and Mrs. Siddons, and writers like Dr. Johnson, Lord Byron, and Sir Walter Scott. Then there were the adventuresses and courtesans who sometimes owed their livelihoods to the notoriety the appearance of their portraits at the RA bestowed upon them. According to the *Daily Universal Register* of May 1786,

The French who visit our exhibitions are shocked at the indelicacy of placing the portraits of notorious prostitutes...close to the pictures of women of rank and virtue. In Paris, such portraits would on no account be admitted.

In a separate category were paintings of military heroes and their exploits, as well as depictions of topical events such as James Northcote's *Portraits Painted from Life, Representing Capt. Englefield with Eleven of his Crew Saving Themselves in the Pinnace, from the Wreck of the Centaur, of 74 Guns, Lost Sept. 1782*, exhibited in 1784.

In a world without photography or even cheap reproductive engraving, how interesting it must have been to see what the celebrities you had only read about in the newspapers or gossiped about in the coffeehouses actually looked like. Guessing who was who was part of the fun. The paintings didn't have labels, and by convention the identity of the sitters was concealed in the catalog under the title "Portrait of a Lady" or "Gentleman." The satirist Anthony Pasquin described the crowds at one summer show as "buzzing and fidgeting about the room...in the ardent wish to know who or what such a lady or gentleman is...." Clearly the RA summer show functioned as an early version of *Hello* or *People* magazine.

**R**ight from the beginning of its existence, and long before the move to

Somerset House, the Academy had introduced an admission charge of one shilling in order to keep out poor and uneducated members of society. In a controversy recently echoed in the successful struggle to achieve free entrance to all national museums in Britain, the academicians felt guilty about the imposition of this admission charge, well aware that, since the exhibition was under the patronage of the King, the RA could be criticized for not opening its doors free of charge to all

British people. But the RAs felt that

they have not been able to suggest any other Means, than of receiving Money for Admittance, to prevent the Room from being filled by improper Persons, to the entire Exclusion of those for whom the Exhibition is...intended.

In fact the academicians' pious disclaimer told only part of the story. A pastel by John Russell, which serves as the frontispiece to this volume, reveals something else about the tensions that existed between the academicians and their public. At first glance, it simply shows an elderly porter taking admission tickets to the Royal Academy exhibition of 1792. But in the background behind this mild-mannered fellow, Russell sketches in what could be mistaken for a revolutionary mob surging through the entrance foyer and up the staircase at Somerset House. Despite the admission charge, these are not polite, well-mannered people. The men have not removed their wide-brimmed hats, and some of the women look as if they might be crushed in the movement forward. With the revolution raging across the Channel, the King and his Royal Academicians had good reason to feel nervous about encouraging large gatherings of "improper persons" in a government building with strong royal associations in central London. Russell subtly suggests these fears by the way in which he juxtaposes the headless torso of a classical fragment in the middle distance with a form that looks exactly like a pitchfork—until you look twice and realize that it is in fact the metal rod of a standing lantern.

Like modern blockbusters, the summer exhibition was a highly lucrative business. The entrance fee made for the Academy a fat profit, which the academicians used to meet expenses for the rest of the year. In 1780, for example, the show attracted 61,000 people—about 2,000 per day in the six weeks it was open. Thereafter it averaged about 50,000 per season, reaching a peak of 91,827 in 1822. An amazed Samuel Johnson wrote Mrs. Thrale in May 1783:

On Monday, if I am told truth, were received at the door, one hundred and ninety pounds, for the admission of three thousand eight hundred Spectators. Supposing the show opened ten hours, and the Spectators staying one with another, each an hour, the rooms never had fewer than three hundred and eighty justling [*sic*] each other.

**T**he Great Room measured only 53 × 43 feet, so visitors must have been packed in shoulder to shoulder. May and June can be very hot in London; the exhibition rooms were directly under the roof; people did not bathe frequently. No wonder that some ladies were "ready to faint, on account of the heat of the rooms, and the powerful perfumes of the odiferous company [with] which they are filled." Under such viewing conditions the Royal Academicians were forced to hang the pictures in such a way that they could be seen. Chambers's solution was a radical innovation in the history of displaying art, namely to establish the "line" of molding above which large and easily visible pictures could be hung, and which, in addition, served to bear some of their weight. The line established a common height for the largest canvases, and created a sense of symmetry that so higgledy-pigglety a collection of pictures badly needed. One of the strangest features of an RA hang is that pictures hanging above the line (and some below it) were canted outward from the wall at an angle of seventeen degrees from the perpendicular. This was simply a

practical solution to an annoying problem. In what must be seen as a fault in Chambers's design, the light that flooded into the Great Room from the four semicircular windows in the lantern created glare on the reflective varnish of the pictures, which made them difficult to see unless they were tilted forward. This was relatively easy to do because the pictures were not nailed to the walls or hung from chains, but lashed by ropes to a wooden armature or scaffold erected every year specifically for the summer exhibition and concealed by a covering of green baize.

Smaller paintings, head-and-shoulder- sized portraits, landscapes, and genre subjects were all hung below the line, so that you could step up and see them close too. At the exhibition "Art on the Line" visitors found themselves in constant movement, looking at the pictures from two entirely different perspectives. When they wished to see the art below the line they moved close to the walls, but to see the pictures above the line they had to step back into the center of the room. Eighteenth-century visitors brought spyglasses and telescopes to inspect the pictures near the ceiling, and for the recent show the organizers provided binoculars, which, I must add, were not really necessary. But as you moved about the Great Room, you realized something else about the RA exhibitions: the way the pictures were hung encouraged visitors not only to look at what was on the walls, but also to look at each other. The theatrical space created by Chambers ensured that the people who came to the exhibitions were as important in creating a sense of excitement as the pictures on the walls. Surrounded by other visitors, you felt you were on a stage, looked down upon by the full-length portraits above you. It was a place to see and be seen.

**A**fter *Art on the Line*, museum curators must now take note of a few basic facts about British paintings. The larger ones—mainly history paintings and full-length portraits—work best when seen from below, and arguably best of all when tilted slightly forward. Take for example Thomas Lawrence's portrait *John Philip Kemble as Coriolanus*, which is usually shown at eye level. Seeing it for the first time from below, as we did last autumn, the actor's pose seems convincing for the first time. Suddenly we realize that we are meant to be looking up at him as though from the pit in the theater, as he steps forward to the footlights, just above our heads. The implications for the exhibition of all historic British paintings seem to me enormous.

The bizarre conditions under which art was seen in eighteenth-century Britain can be said to have changed the way British artists painted. This was the era before the rise of dealers in modern art, so another function of the summer show was as a shop window. To make his name at the Royal Academy summer show, an artist first had to be noticed. Larger pictures had to register their effect from quite a distance while hung frame to frame and against the ubiquitous green baize. This meant artists tended to favor broad, easy-to-read compositions and colors that would blend easily with the old masters their pictures were likely to hang next to, since only owners of great houses were generally able to commission or purchase art on this scale. Those who specialized in smaller genre pictures and landscapes faced slightly different problems. Since their pictures were more moderately priced, they sold more readily than large history pictures and full-scale portraits, but only if the landscapes showed familiar sites with pleasant associations, or, in the case of genre, if the subject were sentimental, charming, or edifying. It is hard to think of a

significant still-life painter who exhibited successfully at the Royal Academy summer show during this period. Certainly there is no British equivalent to Chardin.

In the intensely competitive space of the Great Room, all artists—whether portrait, landscape, history, or genre painters—chose subjects that would either attract attention or readily sell. Joshua Reynolds, the academy's founding president, had hoped that by giving the British public access to the best works of contemporary art, his institution would instruct and elevate the nation's taste. Instead, the exact opposite happened. Desperate for attention and sales, artists became obsessed with novel subject matter or striking visual effects. As early as 1807 a monthly art periodical noted that "all pictures...must be coloured above nature, to prevent their being either overborne by the works of others, or overlooked by visitors in so large a room." Year by year colors became stronger, so that the soft palette of the eighteenth century was gradually transformed into the harsh, bright one we associate with the Victorian Era.

Not only were the landscape painters competing against one another, but they were well aware of the spectacular *son et lumière* panoramas and dioramas that were so popular during this period, and chose for their motifs subjects that would enable them to show off their virtuosity in reproducing ever more violent effects of light. This in part explains the attraction to subjects such as coal furnaces at night, volcanic explosions, or, in the realm of fantasy, theatrical extravaganzas such as John Martin's visions of heaven and hell or Francis Danby's *Opening of the Sixth Seal*. Another tactic was to attempt to overshadow the competition by the sheer size of your picture, as Benjamin West, Thomas Lawrence, and the landscape painter James Ward were apt to do. The point is that either an artist chose to compete in the marketplace by becoming a commercial entertainer or he faced obscurity.

**T**hen too, the Academy became something of a snake pit, as painters competed against each other for critical notice and sales. In 1806 the Scottish painter Sir David Wilkie showed *The Village Politicians* to great acclaim. This spurred Turner to paint his "challenge," *A Country Blacksmith*, which was exhibited, as was Wilkie's *The Blind Fiddler*, the following year. In "Art on the Line" the last two pictures were hung together to demonstrate the development of an "anything you can do I can do better" mentality. More aggressive is the story of how Turner at the 1832 exhibition, seeing that his pale green seascape had been placed next to Constable's strongly colored *The Opening of Waterloo Bridge*, added a luscious crimson disc of pigment to the foreground of his picture, which later he shaped into a buoy. Constable, seeing how effectively Turner had diminished the impact of his picture, could only say after his rival's departure, "He has been here, and fired a gun."

But at the Royal Academy, any tactic was fair. The Swiss-born painter Henry Fuseli, seeing the great Sir Joshua Reynolds at work on the subject of the "Death of Dido" for the Royal Academy exhibition of 1781, made his reputation by showing his own version of the subject at the same exhibition. When the two pictures were exhibited that spring, visitors saw that one composition was horizontal, the other vertical; one showed the strong emotions on the faces of the protagonists, in the other the faces were hidden or half-hidden. Whatever Reynolds had done, Fuseli did the opposite. Through such stunts, unknowns and foreigners made their name in the bullring that was the London art world. Fuseli went on to a long career startling

the gallery-going public with obscure, erotic, and violent subjects. Such pictures were broadly painted, with strong contrasts of light and shade, and little detail. Since their purpose was to create a sensation from a distance, there was little point in fussing over fine passages of painting. In July 1832 a critic writing in *Fraser's Magazine* complained that the "annual exhibitions are quite as much calculated to create a hankering after mere novelty...as to induce attentive study of what is most deserving."

For those of us who enjoy making parallels between the past and the present, you can see in these early tactics the origins of shows like "Sensation" (which attracted more than 200,000 visitors at the Royal Academy in 1999, before it traveled to Brooklyn to outrage Mayor Rudolph Giuliani in 2000). British artists know now what they knew then: that the way to bring the public in is to make art that is novel, attention-grabbing, and easy to understand. Poor Reynolds had to watch this happening:

Our Exhibitions while they produce such admirable effects, have also a mischievous tendency, by seducing the Painter to an ambition of pleasing indiscriminately the mixed multitude of people who resort to them.

*Fraser's Magazine* complained that

instead of educating themselves up to the level of literature and art, the people demand that both sink down to the level of their taste and comprehension.... Unless something occur to interpose a timely check to our present unnatural position, the million will, ere long, be the principle if not the sole arbiters in all matters of taste.

Then, as now, the British press fanned the flames of controversy, built up its favorites, and cruelly ridiculed the artists it didn't like.

### 3.

Paradoxically, Gainsborough fully accepted the reality of what the British public liked to look at and was willing to hang on its walls. Unlike his rival Joshua Reynolds, who stubbornly believed that that public could be educated to like subjects from classical history and Shakespeare, Gainsborough believed that an artist

may do great things, and starve in a Garret, if he does not conquer his Passions and conform to the *common Eye* in chusing that branch [i.e. portraits] which *they* will encourage, & pay for.

After reading Sir Joshua's fifth discourse, calling for a national school of history painting, he wrote to William Hoare in 1773,

But betwixt Friends Sir Joshua either forgets, or does not chuse [to] see that his Instruction is all adapted to form the History Painter, which he must know there is no call for in this country.... Therefore he had better come *down* to *Watteau* at once (who was a very fine Painter taking away the french conceit) and let us have a few Tints. Every one knows that the grand Style must consist in plainness & simplicity, and

that silks & Sattins Pearls & triffling ornaments would be as hurtfull to simplicity, as flourishes in a Psalm Tune.

Gainsborough was not the only artist of his time unwilling to play by the RA's rules: George Stubbs, Joseph Wright of Derby, and John Singleton Copley all came into conflict with the Academy over these issues. Gainsborough made more of a fuss than any other academician because his pictures suffered more than most from the hanging system. Sir Francis Bourgeois remembered him saying that "chaste colouring was as necessary to a picture as modesty to an artist." As early as 1772 Gainsborough offered this advice to David Garrick, about the placement of the artist's recently completed portrait of the actor:

If you let your Portrait hang up so high, only to consult your Room ...it never can look without a hardness of Countenance and the Painting flat: it was calculated for breast high, & will never have its Effect or likeness otherwise.

The following year Gainsborough reported, "I don't send to the Exhibition this year; they hang my likenesses too high to be seen, & have refused to lower one sail to oblige me." He did not exhibit again until 1777.

**T**he subject blew up again in 1783 when Gainsborough sent to Somerset House his small oval portraits of the King, the Queen, and their thirteen children, along with a sketch showing how he wished the works to be hung—in rows of five as a single block, with their frames touching. Fearing that these exquisitely painted ovals might be hung above the line, he wrote to the Academy's secretary with the energy and wit that characterize all his letters:

Mr Gainsborough presents his Compliments to The Gentlemen appointed to hang the Pictures at the Royal Academy; and begs leave to *hint* to Them, that if The Royal Family, which has been sent for this Exhibition (*being smaller than three quarters* [i.e., smaller than a standard 30 ¥ 25-inch portrait]) are hung above the line along with full lengths, he never more, whilst he breaths, will send another Picture to the Exhibition—This he swears by God.

Bearing in mind that each individual portrait was so small that it would normally have hung below the line anyway (it was only the block of portraits that presented the difficulty) and that the King was the patron of the Academy, the committee gave way.

The following year they put their collective foot down. The full-length portraits of the three eldest princesses had been commissioned not by the King but by his son the Prince of Wales for his palace, Carlton House. Now Gainsborough didn't have a leg to stand on. His picture measured 100 ¥ 70 inches—even larger than the standard full-length size of 90 ¥ 55 inches. To hang it at eye level would ruin the symmetry on which the integrity of the academy's hang depended. His argument that the line was established for broad effects but not for pictures conceived in a different spirit didn't really hold water.

So who was right? Until recently, all our sympathies were with Gainsborough. In

designing four new galleries as part of the handsome new extension to Tate Britain, the architects John Miller and partners reproduced the proportions of the old top-lit, barrel-vaulted galleries designed by John Russell Pope in the 1930s. These gracious galleries reflect the aesthetic of their period, by allowing the eighteenth-century pictures to be shown only in single rows, hung at eye level and with plenty of space between them.

That never bothered me before, but tastes in hanging pictures, like tastes in art, change. After seeing "Art on the Line" I felt that pictures like Reynolds's *Three Ladies Adorning a Term of Hymen* and Gainsborough's *Giovanna Baccelli* really needed to be hung high enough on the wall to be seen from below, as the artists must originally have intended. It is only when we come to the long gallery in which eighteenth- and nineteenth-century history paintings are hung at Tate Britain that the paintings are double- and even triple-hung. Here, the height feels appropriate—but unfortunately very few pictures in this particular gallery are of the right scale to be seen from such a distance.

**T**he new British Galleries at the Victoria and Albert Museum amount to a whole new museum-within-a-museum for London. Laid out in fifteen galleries on two floors with three thousand objects (two thirds of which have either not been seen before or were shown elsewhere in the museum), the £31 million project tells the story of British culture, style, and taste through displays of historic furniture, textiles, dress, ceramics, jewelry, silver, prints, paintings, and sculptures over a period of centuries. On the face of it, the installation would seem to have very little to do with the question of how British paintings are exhibited, because pictures are only one element in the display.

In fact, the approach of the curators Christopher Wilk and Sarah Medlam and the designer Dinah Casson harks back to the way pictures were shown at the Royal Academy in the eighteenth century. Instead of a spare, spot-lit installation which leads the visitor from one masterpiece to another, major art works are juxtaposed with lesser works, relatively minor pieces sit side by side with those of the utmost rarity, and every section is so crowded with objects that at times the visitor hardly knows where to look. And so, Bernini's bust of the dandy cavalier Thomas Baker (in my view, among the ten most important works of art in England) is shown next to a not particularly important copy of Van Dyck's triple portrait of Charles I.

The historical point this juxtaposition makes is of great interest (the original Van Dyck, now lost, was sent to Bernini as a guide to carving a marble bust of the King), but we have to read the label carefully to find this out. Of course, superb lighting and clear labeling help to bring outstanding works to the fore, but the overall effect, I think, is closer to what Somerset House was like in the eighteenth century than the new galleries at Tate Britain. As then, visitors find themselves working hard to focus on individual works of art. The wheel has come full circle. The job of separating the great from the good, and the good from the bad, is ours, not the gallery's.

## Notes

<sup>[\*]</sup>After 1836 the Royal Academy moved to the National Gallery in Trafalgar

Square before transferring to its present location, Burlington House, in 1856.

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