

Reviews Christen Kobke at the National Gallery telegraph.co.uk/art

Victoria and Albert's art from the heart

A new exhibition reveals the couple's passion for collecting matched their love for each other, says Richard Dormant

EXHIBITION
VICTORIA AND ALBERT: ART AND LOVE
QUEEN'S GALLERY

The title of the hugely enjoyable new exhibition at the Queen's Gallery Buckingham Palace – "Victoria and Albert: Art and Love" – sounds as though the curator was Barbara Cartland. In fact, it is merely descriptive: there had been happy royal marriages before, from Charles I and Queen Henrietta to George III and Queen Charlotte, but none in which the mutual devotion was so all-consuming as that of Victoria and Albert.

One of the ways in which these two remarkable people expressed their love for each other was by buying and commissioning works of art. Their acquisitions ranged from paintings, works on paper, books and book bindings, photographs, sculpture, furniture, jewels and memorabilia. When they weren't showering each other with presents, they were buying gifts for their children or receiving them from foreign heads of state.

They also acquired, enlarged and furnished three extremely large royal residences – Buckingham Palace, Osborne and Balmoral. Four hundred individual works in this show demonstrate that, for Victoria and Albert, collecting must have been a non-stop activity.

The dramatically crowded installation therefore serves to emphasise the sheer scale of accumulation that went on during the 20 or so years covered by the show: painted and gilded Minton bonbon dishes, gigantic porcelain vases painted in enamel and mounted on bronze, a silver table fountain in the form of a Moorish palace, a jewel embedded in the milk tooth of the Princess Royal shown side by side with the Koh-i-nûr diamond.

Almost everything that could be gilded was gilded – even a pair of simple water jugs made of frosted glass. Much of this is wonderful, especially as we can see the opulence and glamour of court life, with its costume balls, theatrical performances, and state dinners in the lively watercolours of the French artist Eugène Lami. But given the dizzy heights of decorative excess the royal couple went in for, it can sometimes be difficult to find works of real artistic merit amid the thickets of high camp.

Hanging side by side in the first gallery, two portraits by Franz Xaver Winterhalter of the young Queen Victoria perfectly illustrate the distinction that must exist between the public and private aspects of any royal collection. During Albert's

lifetime, the German-born Winterhalter played a role at the English court comparable to that of Thomas Lawrence during the reign of George IV and of Van Dyck during that of Charles I.

Like his predecessors, Winterhalter wielded his brush like a trowel. Shamelessly flattering his sitters, he also possessed a diplomat's ability to show them as they wished to be seen by the world. Fortunately, the Queen made his job easy because the image she wanted to project to her people – of a stable and happy family united by love and duty – was no more than the truth.

It was the nuances that were tricky. Artists had no recent precedent for the representation of a female monarch and her consort. As head of state, Victoria is shown wearing the crown, but as head of the family Albert not only remains seated in her presence, but within the pictorial space is placed in front of her. Alone of her children, the Queen draws her only son close to her body, as though to signal that biologically no member of the family, including Albert, has more importance for the stability of the monarchy.

If this group portrait could be described as a dynastic public broadcast, next to this hangs a love letter. In 1843, Victoria commissioned Winterhalter to paint her portrait in an oval format as a birthday present for Albert. In it the 24-year-old Queen is shown in what looks like her nightdress, with her loosened hair falling over one bare shoulder. In case the recipient missed the point, her eyes are raised in adoration, and are her lips slightly parted. We recognise at once the private signals a wife gives to a husband. This is how only Albert will see her.

When it came to contemporary painting, Victoria's eye was arguably better than Albert's. It was she who bought William Powell Frith's enchanting *Ramsgate Sands – Life at the Seaside* and Edwin Landseer's wonderfully surreal portrait of the animal tamer Isaac van Amburgh reclining in a cage with two lions, two leopards, a tiger and a lamb. In Landseer's portrait of Albert's beloved greyhound, *Eos*, and the same



Tokens of love: top, Winterhalter's portrait of Victoria was a birthday present for Albert; above, the Queen's wedding brooch (1840); below, her costume for the Stuart Ball (1851), by Eugène Lami



artist's study of an exhausted stag, *The Sanctuary*, she acquired two of the most significant animal paintings in the whole of British art.

Albert tended to admire German genre painting and religious artists such as Ferdinand Waldmüller, Johann Michael Wittmer and Eduard Von Steinle. He also had a thing for insipid British painters like Edward Corbould.

To be fair, the Queen was also a fan of the ghastly William Edward Frost, and when she bought the then-unknown Frederic Leighton's first exhibited picture, *Cimabue's Madonna Carried in Procession* at the Royal Academy exhibition of 1855, it was on Albert's advice.

On the other hand, the Prince was one of the first people in this country to appreciate and collect gold-ground Italian paintings of the 14th century, including a triptych by Duccio and his studio that was the first work by the Siennese master to enter this country.

Indeed, a whole exhibition could easily be devoted to Albert, an amazing figure who, among his many other accomplishments, was a pioneering collector of photographs and the genius behind the Great Exhibition of 1851. Among the most personal objects in the show are jewels designed by the Prince as gifts for his wife.

In his excellent catalogue essay, Jonathan Marsden points out that the Queen's annual budget for the

purchase of pictures was £2,000. On her yearly visit to the Royal Academy, she wasn't always able to afford the pictures she wanted and wasn't in the same league as a collector like the fourth Marquess of Hertford, whose income was £250,000 per year. Even with limited resources, the royal couple made a point of acquiring works from international exhibitions and trade fairs in part as a means to encourage manufacturing and craft.

Such pieces form a subsection of the exhibition, for in them manufacturers tended to show off by pursuing technical virtuosity for its own sake. Sometimes these mind-bogglingly elaborate pieces of furniture have a certain charm – a writing table carved with little figures of herdsman, hunters, milkmaids, birds' nests and animals by the Swiss craftsman Michael Leonz Wetli must have looked charming in the miniature chalet that served as the children's playhouse at Osborne.

The Queen's Gallery at Buckingham Palace is by far the most successful purpose-built exhibition space to have opened in London in my lifetime. The variety and scale of the galleries, the attention to architectural detail and the superb lighting make anything that is shown in those spaces look sensational. With so much on show in so many different mediums, and with so many strands to the story it has to tell, this can't have been an easy show to select and install.

It is a tribute to the curator that not only does the exhibition brilliantly convey the glamour of the English court but that we leave it with a sense of the Queen and the Prince both as separate individuals and as a couple who shared a love of life and a passionate interest in the arts.

Until October 31

Ⓙ RATING ★★★★★

“ We recognise at once the private signals a wife gives to a husband ”

THE ROYAL COLLECTION