

When the Queen opened her new gallery at Buckingham Palace yesterday, she revealed the sensational quality an Collection, says Richard Dormant, and Giles Worsley is impressed by the ambitious and surprising grandeur of

Jewels in the crown

Most of us don't have the slightest idea of what is in the Royal Collection – we only think we do. Johannes Vermeer's *A Lady at the Virginal with a Gentleman*; Lorenzo Lotto's psychologically compelling portrait of the collector Andrea Odoni; Thomas Gainsborough's swagger portrait of the musician Johann Christian Fischer; Johan Zoffany's glorious *Tribuna of the Uffizi*; William Powell Frith's delightful *Ramsgate Sands: Life at the Seaside* – all these paintings feel so familiar that we tend to forget they are not on public view. Because they have been reproduced so often and because the Queen rarely refuses requests to lend them to exhibitions, they have entered our collective memory bank.

Then, too, some of the most important paintings in the Royal Collection are almost always on public view – Thomas Lawrence's full-length portrait of Pope Pius VII in the Waterloo Chamber at Windsor, for example, or Franz Xavier Winterhalter's *The Maharaja Dalip Singh at Osborne House*. Recent exhibitions at the Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace (paintings by Canaletto, drawings by Raphael and Leonardo, the art of Reynolds and Gainsborough, illustrations from the *Padshahnama*, to name a few) have given the public a glimpse of the range and depth of the world's greatest private collection.

At this very moment, some of the Queen's most beautiful English pictures are hanging at Tate Britain, and the magnificent silver gilt, bronze, ivory and crystal epergne (an ornamental centrepiece for a table) created for Queen Victoria in 1890 by Alfred Gilbert, one of the greatest of all British sculptors, has been on loan to the V&A Museum for decades.

While it is true that the Royal Collection is for the most part inaccessible to the public, far from being a secret hoard, almost everything in it has been illustrated and described in a series of catalogues published over the past 40 years or so. Even so, the exhibition *Royal Treasures: A Golden Jubilee Celebration* at the glitzy new Queen's Gallery reveals that

what we have seen so far is just the tip of a very big iceberg.

I had absolutely no idea that the Queen owned Claude's ultra-romantic *View of the Roman Campagna from Tivoli, evening* – one of his rare depictions of a real place, and a picture so suffused with a feeling for the transience of light and of life that, from a few feet away, I wondered whether it might be by Samuel Palmer.

Art historians always bang on about how the 17th-century French painter George de la Tour's candlelit scenes were a discovery of the 20th century, but the Queen's achingly sensitive *de la Tour, showing St Jerome in a garment of the purest scarlet* – the colour irradiated and intensified by the light of an unseen candle – was bought by Charles II in 1662. I had never seen the canvas called *The Musicians* attributed to Giorgione, a picture of such sweet innocence that it could have been painted only by an artist in the first flush of youth and a textbook example of how a Venetian artist uses colour to kindle a slow, subtle composition into life. But where do I stop? Duccio, Vermeer, Hals – all the greatest names are here, and in every case the Queen owns one of their defining works.

The impact of seeing so many masterpieces concentrated in so few galleries is almost uncomfortable. It is hard to change aesthetic gears when you move from a case filled with most refined Sèvres porcelain to Landseer's portrait of Prince Albert's favourite greyhound, *Eos*, or from the magnificent diamonds in the Cullinan Brooch to Samuel Cooper's miniature of Catherine of Braganza. Clearly the curators of the Royal Collection were given very clear and simple instructions: to choose the best works of art under their care, whatever the medium – and wherever they were located in the royal palaces. The effect is overwhelming.

Choosing 50 or so works from the drawing collection must have presented a particularly daunting task. But the curator solved the problem by intelligently juxtaposing drawings by some of the most cele-



Picture: JEFF GILBERT

The Nash Gallery is crammed with works in various mediums, chosen because they are the best in the collection

brated names in the history of art with those by artists of lesser repute. It was no surprise to find vigorous nudes by Rubens and Annibale Carracci, but unexpected to come across one by the Roman baroque artist Benedetto Luti. A ravishing figure study by Leonardo is shown next to a figure in fancy dress by Stefano Della Bella. A show-within-a show of watercolours depicting the interiors of royal residences from Charles Wild in 1817 to the present day was particularly enjoyable since, in adjacent galleries, you could see some of the objects shown in them. The royal provenance gives

virtually everything an added lustre. When George IV bought the Jean-Henri Riesener marquetry chest of drawers made for the bedroom of Louis XVI at Versailles in 1774, did the fate of the original owner ever cross the mind of the extravagant king? And, looking at the bejewelled *necessaire* and watch by the 18th-century English goldsmith James Cox, I could just imagine the scene on that Christmas morning in 1925 when George V gave it to Queen Mary. I am not a great admirer of Fabergé, but the pieces collected by Edward VII and Queen Alexandra are full of wit

and high spirits. And, though I dislike the whopping great jewels given to various monarchs by Indian princes, they do make a spectacular display. Lucian Freud's tiny portrait of the Queen is like a bit of grit in the oyster: at once touching and tough, it packs a wallop out of all proportion to its size. But the paintings here by Paul Nash and Graham Sutherland show why most art made in Britain over the past century doesn't belong in the Royal Collection. This is not to knock either artist. Even the best 20th-century artists simply don't measure up to the old masters, so why add pleasant,

but slightly inferior works to a collection that needs no enhancement? Though I admire a lot of contemporary art, in terms of the integrity of the Royal Collection, the Queen has been right to ignore most of the art produced in this country during her reign. The show really is sensational. It is on for six months, but don't put off your visit. **RD**

Treasures from the Royal Collection are on display in the new Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace, until Jan 12. Tickets: 020 7321 2233 or www.the-royal-collection.org.uk. For more reviews by Richard Dormant, visit his website at www.artcriticlondon.com.