

An aardvark at Buckingham Palace

Both the great and the ghastly are at their best in the revamped Queen's Gallery, says **Jonathan Glancey**

The stately and rather sombre Portland stone facade of Buckingham Palace, designed by Aston Webb and as much a symbol of Britain as, say, the dome of St Paul's or the clocktower of the Palace of Westminster, was barely a year old when the first world war broke out. This was rather awkward for the royal family given their many German relations, but it was three years before George V decided it would be wise to change its name from Saxe-Coburg to Windsor. He had other, more pressing matters to hand. On November 25 1914, three days after the close of the first battle of Ypres, which had claimed the lives of 50,000 British soldiers, the king bought an agate and diamond Faberge aardvark for £18 from the London branch of the famous Russian fancy-goods maker. Not a lot of people know that, but perhaps now they will.

On Wednesday, the greatly enlarged Queen's Gallery at Buckingham Palace opens to the public. It is an extraordinary place, a gathering of, more or less, 600 years' worth of great art and glistening kitsch reflecting the tastes of monarchs from Henry VIII to our own dear queen. These are housed in a rich range of galleries designed in the styles of John Nash and John Soane, as reinvented by John Simpson, architect of the market building at Poundbury, the Prince of Wales's model village in Dorset and the new West Range at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge. A dash of Alexander "Greek" Thomson, the imaginative Scottish classicist, has been added to the mix.

Displayed in an appropriately palatial fashion behind Simpson's eye-catching new doric entrance portico are majestic paintings by Van Dyck, Vermeer, Reynolds, Stubbs, Gainsborough and Zoffany. Here is Lucian Freud's powerful portrait of the Queen painted last year. Over there, too, neoclassical sculpture by Canova. There are wonderful drawings by Michelangelo, Da Vinci and Holbein, books that you wish were on your own shelves (not least Eric Gill's illustrated Four Gospels for the Golden Cockerel Press), and more jewels, swords, snuffboxes and show-off pieces of furniture than the most absurd TV makeover programme would know what to do with. Maybe.

And then there is that Faberge aardvark in company with a turkey obsidian, lapis lazuli, purpurine, gold, diamonds) displaying its tail, a pug (agate, diamonds) scratching its ear, a dormouse (chalcedony, platinum, gold, sapphires) tugging its whiskers, and a hornbill (more of the same) in a cage.

This Tube-platform gap between good and ghastly taste page 14



More show-off furniture than Changing Rooms... the interior of the Queen's Gallery

14 | Architecture

page 12 is not perhaps surprising. Just think of the royal taste in architecture, which over the years has descended from Parnassus (Wren's Fountain Court at Hampton Court for William and Mary) to the marketplace (the Duke and Duchess of York's Kentucky Fried Georgian mansion in Windsor Great Park). In a national museum or major gallery, the aardvark and turkey might well have been culled, yet here they help to tell the story of the ups and downs of royal taste over several centuries.

How to house this gloriously odd-ball collection was the problem set to a small number of architects invited to compete for the £20m redesign of the Queen's Gallery five years ago. John Simpson was the winner. He might stand accused of trying to cram too many pet ideas into one project, yet his rich, playful, clever neoclassical building is probably exactly the right frame for this cabinet of royal curiosities.

Simpson is a classicist through and through, but not a stick-in-the-stucco history man. The Queen's Gallery is a nimble blend of Portland stone and air-conditioning, of Bath oak, marble, alabaster and hi-tech gadgetry. The building is eminently practical and suited to its royal purpose; it will age well; and it is a box of architectural tricks that will delight those who wish architectural development had stopped with the deaths of Nash (1835), Soane (1837) and, perhaps, "Greek" Thomson

This is a realm of oak floors and Delft tulip vases. You half expect the Queen to walk in at any moment

(1875; classicism held on longer north of the border).

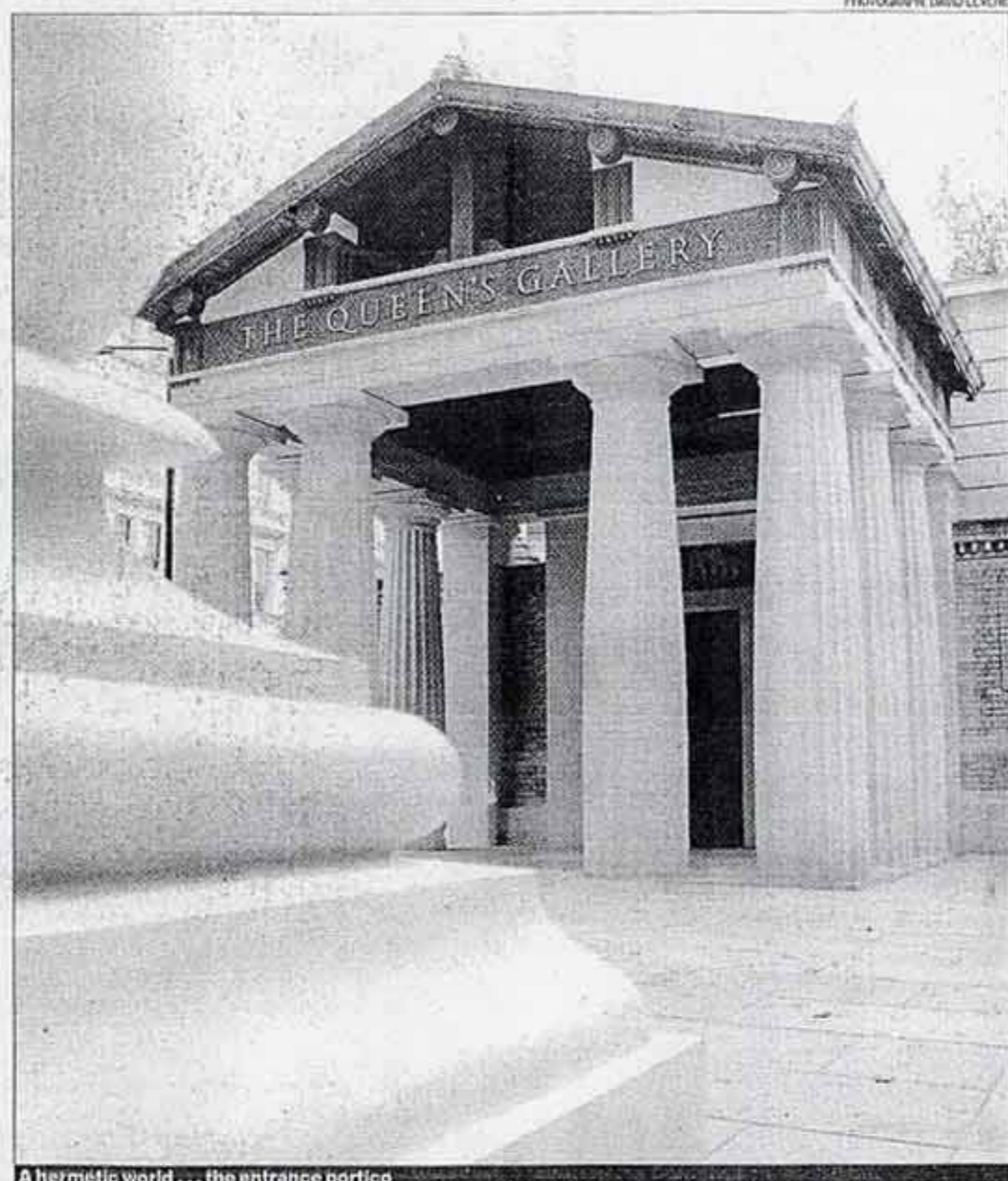
It is also a deft piece of planning. It has been a tricky job to weave the new buildings above, below and beside the existing structure of Buckingham Palace. The palace itself is a bit of a hound's banquet. Behind that Webb facade are the remnants of Buckingham House (1702-6). This was bought by George III in 1761 and altered by William Chambers, architect of Somerset House. It was transformed by Nash into a palace for George IV, although the first

monarch to take up residency was Victoria shortly after she was crowned in 1837. New works followed: by Edward Blore in the 1840s, James Pennethorne in the 1850s, Webb in the 1910s and the Office of Works in the 1960s, which was when the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh first revitalised the palace's picture gallery. The original, designed by Nash, had been converted into a chapel in 1843 and destroyed, partly by the Queen Mother's relief, by the Luftwaffe in 1940; she was then able, she said, to look the East End in the face.

The art gallery, until it closed for Simpson and his team to get to work, was gained through a cat's flap of an entrance. Although popular, the gallery was almost absurdly discreet. Now, from the moment visitors pass through the new entrance portico, with the decorative copper acroter adorning the peak of its pediment like a feather in a hat the Queen might wear at Ascot, they are immersed in a hermetic world. Nearby Victoria station, its hordes of commuters, its gurgling taxis, hissing buses and rank fast-food stalls might never exist.

The double-height lobby that orients visitors to the grand Grecian entrance of the galleries proper is like some neoclassical conservatory. Light filtering through a glazed timber lattice ceiling dapples down across reliefs depicting Britain's patron saints carved by Alexander Stoddart, the Glaswegian sculptor, giant vases and the entrance to the shop. Tucked under twin rows of Soanian domes, the shop will partly pay for the upkeep of the gallery. The Queen's Gallery is wholly self-funding; neither public nor corporate funds have been involved in its construction.

The summer-bright lobby leads through to a grand stair hall lined with green pilasters where the light is deliberately dimmed to accustom visitors' eyes as they move from the street to the realm of Rubens, Michelangelo and Faberge's aardvark. Twisted gold-iron ropes wind up the bronze balustrades. Alabaster lamps shine in a Grecian gloaming. Up the stairs are the seven richly coloured galleries offering three and a half times more exhibition space than before, some top lit, others artificially lit for delicate books and drawings. This is a realm of oak floors and mahogany doors, of Delft tulip vases, porcelain pagodas,



A hermetic world... the entrance portico

of deep reds, blues and greens. You half expect the Queen to walk through at any moment. It is very much her world.

This upper floor also houses a teaching room and a lecture room. The former is concealed behind mirrored walls and doors; the latter sits attentively under a glazed dome. Zephyrs of fresh air from the air-conditioning plant (water cooled from a borehole sunk 250m below the palace gardens) puff through decorative rosettes in the ceiling. Elsewhere in the building, modern

functions are dressed in or concealed by antique garb. The gents' lavatory features a classical urinal; the lift could have been designed by Soane; the mahogany door to the lecture room is wide enough for Henry VIII to huff through; another glazed door offers enticing views of the tea-and-cucumber-sandwiches garden beyond. The e-gallery, where you can search the virtual collections, boasts computer screens framed in solid oak frames. It really is another world, and Simpson has captured it just as it ought to be caught.

The problem with all too many classical revival buildings of the past 20 years is that they have seemed not just fey and fussy, but out of context and without a real purpose. While it seems daft to dress up modern offices and shopping centres in classical fancy dress, Simpson has done well to represent the values of the British monarchy while providing an appropriate home for Charles I's impeccable canvases and George V's pig, aardvark and turkey.

The Queen's Gallery at Buckingham Palace opens on Wednesday. Details: 020-7321 2233.

PHOTOGRAPH: DAVID LEVINE

PHOTOGRAPH: JEFF BOOREN/REX PICTURES