

A very grand re-entrance

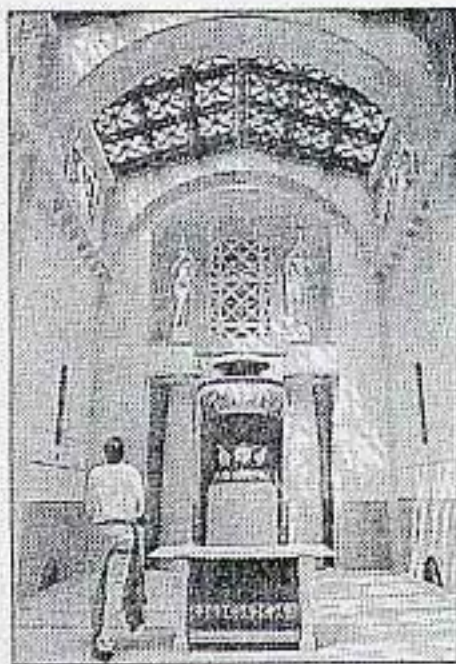
Those who remember the old Queen's Gallery are in for a bit of a shock. In place of an undistinguished door in a wall on Buckingham Palace Road, an imposing Greek portico with bulging Portland stone columns, dark red granite frieze and coloured ceiling now stands beside the palace. The long corridor that led visitors to the galleries has been replaced by a monumental hall decorated with Homeric reliefs and a pair of winged genii symbolically guarding the art beyond. A columned staircase leads up to the gallery level. And, instead of the ungainly old gallery that felt like a converted squash court, there are three large, richly decorated galleries and a number of cabinet rooms, dramatically increasing the amount of art that can be shown to the public.

John Simpson's scheme for the Queen's Gallery is rich meat, bold, colourful, sculptural. It will be looked upon with deep suspicion by those who think Classical architecture had no place in the 20th century, let alone the 21st.

The old Queen's Gallery, which opened in 1962, was always a compromise. Carved out of the bomb-damaged remains of John Nash's chapel, it was a poor space in which to show art. Its air-conditioning was noisy and inadequate and there were few facilities for visitors. So the Royal Collection set out to improve it at a cost of £20 million – all of which has come from the Royal Collection's own resources. Simpson was appointed architect after a limited competition in which he put forward the only full-blooded Classical scheme.

For Sir Hugh Roberts, director of the Royal Collection, what appealed about Simpson's scheme was the way it created a palace-like setting for what is, after all, art collected to decorate palaces. But what has impressed him is the flexibility of the Classical language in coping with a very constricted site and accommodating the extremely sophisticated technology, particularly climatic controls, that art galleries now need.

But what impresses the visitor is the architectural ambition of the scheme. The portico sets up an anticipation that is not disappointed in the entrance hall beyond, which Simpson articulates with an unusual archaic Doric order from Paestum. The feel is that of a hall in Agamemnon's palace, as envisaged in the sort of reconstruction popular among 19th-century archaeologists, an impression emphasised by Alexander



Unusual: the entrance hall

Stoddart's 20-metre-long sculptural friezes. Stoddart's friezes take the language of Homer's *Iliad* to represent the 50 peaceful years of the Queen's reign and it is here that the political nature of Simpson's architecture becomes clear. The Queen's Gallery is not simply a neutral space for the display of art, it is a celebration of monarchy. Classical architecture, with its emphasis on order, precedent, tradition and hierarchy, and its ability periodically to reinvent itself, has always been the perfect metaphor for a monarchy. What it reveals at the Queen's Gallery is a surprisingly confident and unembarrassed assertion of monarchy in the 21st century.

As the visitor moves through the gallery, the archaic Greek of the entrance gives way to the sophisticated Ionic of the staircase, and through to the more Nash-inspired galleries beyond. It is as if the history of Classical architecture is being played in fast-forward, with homages to Sir John Soane, perhaps Britain's most inventive Classicist, in the shop and lecture hall. Simpson has clearly been having fun, allowed a freedom to be inventive that seldom comes the way of Classical architects in Britain. This shows in little details, such as the way tasselled ropes seem to be threaded through the bronze balusters in the staircase hall.

It is rare to find a client with the confidence to buck the modern presumption that new additions to historic buildings must be completely different from what went before. But, as Simpson points out, in the many times that Buckingham Palace has been altered and extended over three centuries the Classical language has always been used, apart from the unfortunate example of the old Queen's Gallery.

With its declaration of the importance of tradition coupled with its discreet integration of innovation into what appears timeless, the new gallery is a fitting architectural statement for a modern monarchy. And it makes seeing the Queen's pictures a much greater pleasure than it used to be. **GW**