

Enchanting the eye: Dutch painting of the Golden Age

**THE QUEEN'S GALLERY,
BUCKINGHAM PALACE
11 FEBRUARY—30 OCTOBER
2005**

Early models of kingship held that the country of which a man was sovereign was his personal property, and that any power or property held by anyone else was solely at his pleasure. While subsequent kings have allowed their untrammelled rights to property paid for by the people's contributions to the Treasury to be reduced, there is one area in which they have not — their art collections; their curator is still called, rather grandly, Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures. A fig leaf has been developed, however, so that when the Queen declares how rich she is, the value of the Royal Collections is not included, because these works are held in trust for the nation. If that is so, on what grounds does she charge £7.50 for citizens of that nation to see these pictures, while the Prince of Wales can see them for free whenever he wants?

Not that he would need to spend much time at this show of Dutch 17th century painting, which contains some half dozen masterpieces and a lot of work that is little better than burgerlijk wallpaper. Vermeer's 'Music Lesson' and an early Rembrandt of an elderly woman are perhaps the only genuinely great works, although there are some fine pictures by artists of the second rank, notably Pieter de Hooch and Jan Steen. Subject matter in which the Dutch excelled is well represented, such as flower painting and still life, and there are some attractive, if hardly thrilling, landscapes and a lot of charming genre pictures — charming, that is, if you like jovial servant girls and sinister old women with no teeth. However, much of the rest is so poor that even the captions acknowledge that the work is flawed. I wouldn't particularly recommend going

along, except that there is much more to be enjoyed in the building itself and in the current selection from the main collections also included in the price.

The ludicrous exterior of the gallery, a hollowed-out pediment on Doric columns, which look like decoratively peeled cucumbers, is a reminder of just how bad neoclassicising architecture can be, and the interior lobby is just as pretentious. Once away from this kitsch, however, and through security that would not be out of place at the Pentagon, there are some wonderful paintings to be enjoyed, notably a stunning Duccio portable altarpiece, a powerful portrait of the future Elizabeth I as a 16-year old princess, and Frith's panoramic 'Margate Sands'. A particular treat is a supposedly informal

family protrait of Queen Victoria, Prince Albert and their first five children by the ineffable Winterhalter, in which a relaxed Prince Consort sits surrounded by children wearing velvet knee breeches and the Garter. You can also revel in the staggering bad taste of the royal jewellery and china on show, more yellow gold and gilded porcelain than even the most extravagant nouveau riche would be able to cope with. So if you've got a spare hour, drop in, but don't go out of your way.

FRANK MINNS

Rembrandt (1606–1669) 'The Artist's Mother'.



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