

Life & Times Exhibition

Charles I — King and Collector

Royal Academy of Arts, London,
27 January 2018 to 15 April 2018

ALL THE KING'S PICTURES

This majestic exhibition contains many wonders, and is well worth a visit. Per Rumberg, curator at the Royal Academy of Arts, and Desmond Shawe-Taylor, surveyor of the Queen's Pictures, have done a fantastic job in bringing together about 150 canvases that formed part of the royal collection of Charles I in the early 17th century. Many have come to London from the Museo del Prado and the Louvre for the first time; many more are from the Queen's Collection.

The story began in 1623 when Charles travelled to Madrid in an ill-fated attempt to explore the possibility of marriage to the Infanta Maria Anna of Spain. He came home without a wife, but with some Titians and a Veronese, and a determination to collect works of art that would rival the splendours of the Italian Renaissance masterpieces he had seen in the Spanish court. He was crowned king in 1626 and began collecting, starting by purchasing the fabulous collection of the Gonzaga family, of Mantua, which included more Titians, some Raphaels and van Eycks, and Mantegna's astonishing series of nine huge paintings depicting the *Triumphs of Caesar*. Charles not only went on collecting, and amassing a treasure trove of masterpieces, but he also engaged Peter Paul Rubens to paint the ceiling of the Banqueting House, and appointed Anthony van Dyck as 'principalle paynter in Ordinarie to their Majesties' — the court painter. A number of van Dycks are on display at the Royal Academy, including the famous triptych of the king, and some impressive individual and family studies.

Tragically, as Charles's collection expanded, his political fortunes plummeted and by 1642 England was plunged into Civil War. Charles was tried and found guilty of high treason in 1649 and beheaded, ironically, in front of the Banqueting House. Oliver Cromwell put the royal collection on public show and sold the lot in what was known as the Commonwealth Sale, with many works going overseas. Leonardo da Vinci's *The Virgin and Child with St Anne and the Infant St John the Baptist* was valued at twice as much as the King's crown, and eventually found its way into the collection of Philip IV of Spain.



Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641), *Charles I in Three Positions*, 1635–1636. Oil on canvas, 84.4 × 99.4 cm. RCIN 404420. Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2018. Exhibition organised in partnership with Royal Collection Trust.

Among the big religious set-pieces and allegorical scenes, some of the most arresting paintings in this exhibition are the smaller portraits. There is a show-stopping study of Robert Cheseman, who was Henry VIII's chief falconer, with a hawk, and a fantastic pair of portraits by Quinten Massys of Erasmus and his humanist friend Pieter Gillis, painted in 1517. Erasmus and Gillis commissioned Massys to paint their portraits as a gift for Sir Thomas More. They are terrific, although not quite as jaw-dropping as the Holbein portrait of More in the Frick Collection in New York, where it shares a wall with his nemesis, Thomas Cromwell. With so many portraits to contemplate, I think I worked out how Holbein dealt with the age-old problem of painting hands — a challenge for almost everyone, even Titian. There are some very sausagey fingers in his *Alfonso D'Avalos Addressing his Troops*, for example. Holbein got round the problem, it seems to me, by making sure that the sitter's hand was always doing something, such as grasping a document, or cradling a hawk, or holding the opposite arm, or pointing.

There is an arresting Rembrandt portrait of his mother, and a wonderful, luminous study of an unnamed woman by Orazio Gentileschi, dated 1630–1635, but which could have been painted yesterday. There are, of course, plenty of Titians, and works from the next generation of Venetian artists, including Bassano and Tintoretto. Towards the end of the exhibition the sketch for *The Apotheosis of James I* by Rubens (1628–1630) is on show: this formed the basis for Rubens's painting of the Banqueting House ceiling, and is a masterpiece in its own right.

These treasures were scattered around London, some in the Cabinet Room at the heart of Whitehall Palace, others in the Queen's House in Greenwich. Almost 400 years later they are once again sharing the same space, where they provide not just a feast of artistic brilliance but also, in some strange way, a window into the world of the 17th-century English court.

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