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BEYOND THE PALETTE AND BEHIND THE FRAME

Curating art tours with a difference at the National Gallery

Having studied for a Masters in Art History, I discovered a fascinating and colourful world of drama which I felt compelled to share. My mission is to unveil the mysteries of art in an exciting and engaging way, so I focus on story-telling to animate each piece.

The first painting I talk about on my flamboyantly titled ‘Divas!’ tour at the National Gallery is *The Introduction of the Cult of Cybele at Rome* by Andrea Mantegna. As guests assemble in front of the work, I can often see slight disappointment. It’s true that the painting’s appearance isn’t terribly promising in terms of the fizz and sparkle advertised, but it does deliver on content. Free love, hallucinogenic plants, uninhibited dancing, the promotion of pansexuality and transgender politics as well as the odd sacrifice or two, *The cult of Cybele* was so wild that it even frightened the Romans. Who knew? That’s all before I mention the patron that Mantegna is commonly associated with is the fabulous Isabella d’Este.

D’Este was my gateway to discovering this painting. A firecracker of a woman, she was a leading cultural and political figure whose sense of style was so admired that it was even copied at the French court, despite living in Mantua. I was looking for divas and I knew she delivered. A fabu-

lously welcome surprise was the high diva count in the work’s extraordinary narrative.

So when I’m asked, as I frequently am, how I begin to go about curating a gallery tour, this is an example of an initial spark of knowledge taking me on a journey in exactly the right direction. How I came up with the idea of a tour called ‘Divas!’ in the first place is another story, which starts on a sun lounger in Ibiza. Think rosé wine, sequinned kaftans and Dame Shirley Bassey. Because art is never far from my thoughts, I began to wonder how I could sprinkle some glitter onto a world that is often considered unglamorous to entice a new audience.

My ‘Perspective in Focus’ tour had a more prosaic genesis, since it came about via a request. It required me to get technical and call on my familiarity with artists who were keen on employing geometry to create an illusion of depth in their works. This discipline largely flourished in Italy – Florence in particular – during the 15th century, where trade was the main source

of wealth and therefore calculating weights and measures was part of daily life. It must have been rather exciting to see all that precision translated into art. Northern artists, on the other hand, tended to ignore mathematical formulas, instead using their skill with oil paints to create convincing spatial depth through colour and shading. I spent many happy hours with 15th century artist Antonello da Messina, who skilfully straddled both techniques in *Saint Jerome* in his Study and more still, drawing circles and triangles over *The Baptism of Christ* by Piero della Francesca, all the while trying to banish thoughts of the man in transparent underpants to the back of the work. Naturally he made it into the tour commentary; he’s irresistible.

Sometimes a painting or theme presents itself in the form of a current event or exhibition. The National Gallery purchased and restored the utterly compelling *Self Portrait as Saint Catherine of Alexandria* by Artemisia Gentileschi, displaying it with much fanfare last year. Rightly so as it’s not



Self-Portrait as Saint Catherine of Alexandria



Introduction of the cult of Cybele

Henri Rousseau's *Surprised!* was requested in a tour, and I'm so glad because I may never have indulged in the delights of this so called naïve work with a tiger drawn from Rousseau's visits to the botanical gardens in Paris and parts of the jungle looking suspiciously like the domestic house plants that in fact they were!



© National Gallery

When a painting is voted the nation's favourite and references the Battle of Trafalgar, and is in a building close to the statue of Admiral Nelson, it begs to be included in a tour. *The Fighting Temeraire* tugged to her last berth to be broken up is a poetic masterpiece by British artist J.M.W. Turner that speaks to loss and nostalgia but also points to an exciting future.



© National Gallery

“I had hoped that one of the faint lines visible on Venus’ otherwise perfect body was a stretch mark but it is in fact an expertly repaired cleaver slash.”

only a superbly accomplished painting, but also one of only 21 out of some 2,600 works created by a woman in the collection, and the gallery's first acquisition by a female artist in 27 years. Gentileschi was the starting point for my tour, 'Wonder Women', in celebration of female artists. When the painting went on loan and could no longer be the centrepiece of the tour, I looked to creative solutions to retain some of the other fabulous works I was discussing on this general theme. Voilà, 'Wicked Women' was born. Although I couldn't find a host of villainesses (nor could I find a female opera singer for Divas!), I went hunting for the wickedly fabulous, seductive or just rather naughty ladies in the gallery. This search yielded many options, from Palma Vecchio's saucy courtesan in *A Blonde Woman*, who is unsubtly sporting a dress that is not only off the shoulder but under the breast as well, to Diego Velázquez's famous *The Toilet of Venus* (The Rokeby Venus), for which the truly wicked element

lay with suffragette Mary Richardson, who smuggled a meat cleaver into the gallery and slashed the work repeatedly as a protest to highlight her cause. I had hoped that one of the faint lines visible on Venus' otherwise perfect body was a stretch mark, but it is in fact an expertly repaired cleaver slash.

And finally there are 'Conversation Pieces', which started as 'a romp through the gallery' and is still known as 'a romp' in some quarters in which all I have to do is select a pivotal painting from each century. Simple. Except what do you choose in a gallery full of treasures? The more I learn, the more I respect and admire each individual painting. From the crazy stories within the works to their bizarre biographies, not to mention obsessive artists, demanding patrons, artistic spats and lingering feuds, there are so many points of interest to select from. With such riches, how can I ever run out of material or enthusiasm for my tours?



Lynne Hanley is founder of Beyond the Palette Art Tours, curating themed tours for small groups and individuals in London's National Gallery.

In addition, she creates lively art talks for YouTube and social media. Instagram: *lynne_beyondthepalette*; Facebook: *arttoursbeyondthepalette*; YouTube: *Beyond the Palette*

For more information or to book a tour, please visit www.beyondthepalette.co.uk.

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