

Are blockbuster art shows worth queueing for?

The National Gallery's eagerly awaited Leonardo da Vinci exhibition opened last week. But are such shows the best way in which to enjoy art?



The Royal Academy's 2010 Van Gogh exhibition: loved by Saumarez Smith, hated by Sawyer.
Photograph: Nils Jorgensen / Rex Features

Miranda Sawyer, Observer writer

Leonardo da Vinci has arrived at the National Gallery! *Leonardo da Vinci: Painter at the Court of Milan* has been described as "the most eagerly awaited London exhibition in living memory", and "the hottest ticket in town". It's the art equivalent of Michael Jackson and Elvis coming back from the dead to sing Christmas carols at the O2. Everyone wants to go. And that's the problem. Because – assuming you can get a ticket – even though the National Gallery have restricted visitors to a mere 180 every half-hour, you can bet they'll all be congregating in the same places. The exhibition is based around nine pictures that survive from Leonardo's time in Milan in the late 1400s. Which means there'll be at least 20 people clustered in front of each, and the idea of trying to peer through 20 sets of legs (I'm not very tall) to try to catch a glimpse of a dimly lit masterpiece is about as appealing as trying to hear *Silent Night* from row Z in the upper circle.

I understand that it's a once-in-a-lifetime chance to see these paintings on walls quite near to one another. But the nature of these blockbuster shows means it's no chance at all. Art requires you to spend some time with it, to contemplate and think, leave and return. And there's no way you can do that with this type of show.

Charles Saumarez Smith, secretary and chief executive, Royal Academy

I don't agree. From what I've read, the National Gallery has been quite strict in limiting the number of visitors to 180 every half-hour. That sounds a lot and, of course, is. But it amounts to only just over 200,000 visitors during the run of the exhibition as a whole and will have been worked out quite carefully in order to allow for an exhibition that will be crowded, but not claustrophobically overcrowded. I haven't been yet, but I'm sure that there will be too many people reading the information at the beginning and crowded round the major works, particularly the two versions of *The Virgin of the Rocks*, but not nearly so many looking at the drawings. You just have to pace yourself.

MS Now you've primed me with my viewing technique, I'll rush to the drawings... but as they're not really the point of the show (the paintings are), it seems a bit silly.

What I find hard about blockbuster shows is not the art *per se*, or the crowds *per se*: it's the combination of the two. I love being part of a big audience at a rock festival or (back in ye olden days) at a club, because there, the crowd is the point. The communal experience is what you've come for. The music plus the people is what makes the art.

But with paintings, crowds spoil the art. A painting should be looked at alone, or with one or two others. Then, if you're lucky, you get something out of the experience – and the art happens.

CSS Like you, I have had bad experiences at exhibitions. But think of the extraordinary enjoyment that great exhibitions have brought to the world. It is a completely different experience from a permanent collection where you can only see a small number of works by a single artist: you can see and enjoy and study the evolution of an artist or see rooms full of works of a particular period. How wonderful it was last year to be able to see Van Gogh's drawings at the Royal Academy alongside his paintings alongside his letters (in spite of the crowds). And please don't miss our Degas exhibition where you can see an extraordinary array of works by Degas that have never been seen together before, and never will again.

MS I went to see the Degas, and enjoyed myself. This was because I had a press ticket and could get in before the general mêlée. I hated the Van Gogh exhibition, I'm afraid, because of the number of people... (I'm sure you'll agree with me when I say that, if you can afford it, becoming a member of an art institution is the way to go, because then you can pop into exhibitions, even blockbusters, whenever and as often as you like.) I understand that blockbuster shows are part of our New Cultural Experience: in a time when it's hard to get people to pay for anything, only enormous, star-studded, seeing-is-believing shows will get punters to open their wallets. They are economically necessary for our art institutions, and they are – they seem to be – exciting events. It's like films: expensive, show-offy Hollywood blockbusters make money. Little indie flicks, because of low outgoings, can make money too, but, essentially, the middle-sized offering no longer exists. It's *big*, or *teeny*, with nothing in between. And it's the same with art. Which is a shame.

Personally, I've found that there are easier ways to view masterworks. I went to Tate Britain a few months ago, and walked around the permanent collection rooms – and stood, quite alone, in front of Francis Bacon's *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*. I've also been the solitary viewer of one of Monet's waterlily paintings, because I went to Christie's to see it before it went under the hammer. I got a lot from those experiences – far more than I've got from any blockbuster show.

CSS Of course, you are quite right that you can often have a different order of experience if you are on your own with a work of art. But this shouldn't diminish the pleasures and opportunities that are provided by big exhibitions, which people flock to for good reason. It's true that our Van Gogh exhibition was incredibly crowded, but it was crowded precisely because people were fascinated by it in a way that is impossible in front of a single painting. Often, the suggestion that it's better to commune with pictures on your own comes from people who don't like the fact that the experience of art has been radically democratised in the postwar period and that many people much prefer the experience of looking at art together with the supplementary information that an exhibition entails. If this weren't true, exhibitions wouldn't be so crowded.

MS I am absolutely for the democratisation of art, as I am of all culture. And I like to have information next to a picture, otherwise how would you learn?

I think the only way of arguing that the blockbuster show is a good way of viewing art is to say that the crowd is part of the experience. If you can convince people that they're paying a lot of money in order to see art alongside a lot of other people – and that's part of the joy of the experience – then you're OK. But I don't think that is what ticket buyers are led to believe. I think they're hoping that they will be able to have an intimate, individual experience of the art on show. And, too often, they're disappointed.

CSS OK, let me give a final example. On 21 January we are opening a big exhibition on the work of David Hockney. It will include 193 paintings, drawings and sketchbooks, alongside an 18-screen film. It will provide a completely different order of experience from seeing a single painting. It will be exciting, absorbing and experiential and will totally transform your understanding of him as an artist. Yes, there will be a crowd. But I am confident that you will be able to enjoy the paintings in spite of the crowd.

The Observer, Saturday 12 November 2011