

# 'Art is vital for the soul of the country'

How does the National Gallery's new director Charles Saumarez Smith plan to stamp his personality on the institution? By Alice Thomson



New broom: Charles Saumarez Smith

## By Alice Thomson

Madame de Pompadour would have approved. At nine o'clock in the morning, some of the richest people in Britain were sitting down to a breakfast of quail's egg omelettes and miniature sausages discussing her cleavage.

Hoares, Sainsburies, Gettys and divorce lawyers had all come to see the French king's mistress in her splendour at the National Gallery exhibition. Charles Saumarez Smith slipped between them like the lace in her corset.

The National Gallery, like Madame de Pompadour, has extremely expensive tastes and needs money. Saumarez Smith, its new director, has to find it fast. In his first three months, he has announced a £21 million scheme for redevelopment and had a tussle with a descendant of a generous benefactor, Ludwig Mond, who threatened to withdraw 43 Renaissance masterpieces.

Next, he watched as Raphael's Madonna of the Pinks, loaned to the Gallery, was sold to the Getty Museum in Los Angeles for £35 million, subject to export licence. The former director of the National Portrait Gallery has faced criticism.

He's not cerebral enough. He's too populist. And he's taking over from a saint - Neil MacGregor, who was feted in the arts world as a "national treasure", and has now moved on to the British Museum.

"The Raphael has been a nightmare," says Saumarez Smith (the name is from Guernsey). "If the export rules mean anything, they must stop it. It can't just be ripped off the nation's walls. It's far too beautiful. I must find the money to buy it."

But it is astronomically expensive, and it's not as if we are losing an old gem. It was discovered only 10 years ago; before that, it was languishing in a dingy corridor on the Duke of Northumberland's estate, Alnwick Castle.

"That's the point," says Saumarez Smith. "The National Gallery found it. Before that, the family thought it was some minor copy. It illuminates all our other Raphaels, and is an important part of our jigsaw."

He doesn't think he's being greedy. Ten days after he became director, a Rubens came up for sale. It went for £49 million. "We couldn't even enter the bidding. Two private individuals were prepared to spend over £40 million. They even squeezed out the Gettys. Now few people will ever see it."

Saumarez Smith believes there must be a new method of funding. "Art is suffering a crisis. We have the Heritage Lottery Fund, but it has responded to political pressure and concentrates on small community-orientated projects. Raphael is considered too elitist."

Maybe the Government has a point: lottery tickets are bought by the least well-off, who rarely visit art galleries. "I've just been to Madrid and returned a jealous man. They have a wonderful project where companies can buy paintings for the Prado and get 100 per cent tax relief," says Saumarez Smith.

"In Britain, art is never going to flourish if it is always competing directly against schools, hospitals and community projects. But it is vital for the soul of the country."

Which is why he is spending hours fund-raising. "It's very satisfying when you succeed. You need to think carefully who would enjoy giving what to which cause. I took one person round our new building proposals and they were so enthusiastic they pledged £1 million."

Some say it's the reason he was chosen as director of the nation's most valuable art collection, at a salary of £100,000 a year. He's so charming, everyone wants to help him out. "Am I? I don't think so. In my interviews for the job they never mentioned fund-raising. The questions were far more terrifying," he says.

Saumarez Smith left Marlborough College at the age of 16 with five A-level grade As. He was a scholar at Cambridge, he has a double first, a Harvard fellowship, and he was head of research at the V&A. He was inspirational at the National Portrait Gallery, doubling visitor numbers; he can't have been that frightened?

"My PhD was in 18th-century architecture, at the V&A I studied design and interiors. The trustees were uneasy that I wasn't academic enough for the gallery.

"At the NPG it was easy. I had a great knowledge of British culture. The identity and significance of the sitters was as important as the quality of the art.

"At the National, I would be expected to look at a potential acquisition of an early Chardin still life and tell the board of trustees whether it was the best one on the market."

He wanted the job so much he spent hours preparing. "I used to wind down by wandering round the galleries, so I knew them pretty well. They're very therapeutic." So how did they decide he was right?

"They asked me all sorts of awful questions, such as: describe and discuss the questions of quality."

One trustee told me Saumarez Smith was confident and self-assured without being arrogant. "My wife, Romilly, would say that she was always the sociable one, I was awkward and rather swotty.

"But I've had to change, and the range of people I meet at this level is awe-inspiring. A lot of corporate people who have reached the top are extremely knowledgeable."

But he wouldn't need the businessmen if he charged admission fees. Commentator Simon Jenkins has suggested that he could raise £50 million a year by charging £10 per person. Research has shown that the people who benefit most from free entrance are middle-class families who come more regularly.

"There have to be some benefits to paying such high rates of tax, we can't redistribute it all. The art gallery should be for everyone. Five million people come here, that can't just be toffs. Twenty-two per cent are students for a start," he says.

Well what about the two million tourists, couldn't we charge them? "Art galleries are very important for the way people view countries. We need to give a good impression, it's an attitude of generosity." So fees will never be charged?

"I'd fight it to the death. We've had 20 years of experimenting. The Victoria & Albert's numbers plummeted when they asked for a voluntary charge. It's far better to entice five million people into shops and cafes."

Saumarez Smith is one of the few under New Labour brave enough to champion elitism. "Not in our visitors but in our paintings and exhibitions. Neil MacGregor's exhibition *Seeing Salvation* was extraordinarily successful, it brought in an incredible breadth of audience yet was highly serious.

"Paul Binski recently gave a series of talks on 13th- and 14th-century architecture for us and it was packed out. People are hungry for specialist knowledge."

Yet the nation doesn't seem inspired any more by our great artists. None of them made it into the BBC's poll of the top 100 Britons. "They should have had Lucian Freud doing Turner, he'd have been sensational. The BBC seems determined to ignore history of art.

"They've forgotten that 40 years ago Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation* almost invented the documentary. Now it's all about gossip. Why can't they raise the intellectual stakes? Why not Simon Schama on the history of art?"

He's been accused of dumbing down himself in the past, introducing an exhibition on Mario Testino to the National Portrait Gallery, hanging nude self-portraits of Tracey Emin next to Elizabeth I. "I'm in favour of diversification. Mario Testino attracted vast audiences who discovered the Portrait Gallery for the first time and loved it."

Now he's put an exhibition by Rolf Harris in the basement of the gallery. "He's a tricky one. A year ago he used the Gallery's expertise for four shows, it got seven million viewers and we were barely mentioned. It was a great lost opportunity for us, so the museum decided the next time we should collaborate.

"When I arrived here this summer and was told we were doing Rolf, I nearly choked. I knew we would be accused of dumbing down so we decided to show him in the cafe. He has been amazingly effective at bringing in new visitors. When I walked round the cafe with him one day I was stunned, he was feted as a folk hero."

We won't know Saumarez's own preferences until 2006. Until then the Gallery is booked with his predecessor's shows. "I can't wait. I'm keen to work closely with the Prado. I'd like to do Velazquez and Tintoretto."

It must be difficult following someone as lauded as MacGregor. The cloakroom women say they rarely see Saumarez Smith, while his predecessor chatted to them every day, which is strange because Saumarez Smith is the more relaxed character.

"I don't have time to wander round the gallery every morning. I'm rushing to take the children to the Tube for school. I'm in here by 8.30am but I prefer looking at the paintings in the afternoons."

MacGregor had no family to worry about, Saumarez Smith has two teenage sons. Both, he says, prefer military history to art. "But rather touchingly they say they love coming at weekends, so I dress in mufti and sneak around unnoticed with them." He smiles. "It's great fun watching people looking at paintings."

His favourite project is building a new entrance to the Gallery "to make it less intimidating". It is here, he thinks, that he differs most from MacGregor.

"I want to change the way people view and experience collections as well as chasing visitor numbers and displaying the best paintings," he says. "This is the best job in the world. I want to be here for a long time - and I'm patient."

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