

First person singular: funding the big picture

Blockbuster art shows need big investment, writes Charles Saumarez Smith.



Popular but problematic: the National Gallery's Titian show

Martin Gayford wrote here recently about the problems facing London's museums and art galleries in terms of their exhibition spaces, including the difficulties of seeing big shows in the National Gallery's Sainsbury Wing. I would be the first to accept that the National Gallery faced considerable problems with its Titian exhibition.

More than 250,000 people wanted to see one of Europe's greatest painters in a set of exhibition galleries never intended to accommodate such numbers. Before the Sainsbury Wing was opened, the National Gallery did not have a policy of showing major exhibitions. The new wing was planned to show small-scale, monographic exhibitions in order not to compete with the Royal Academy. But it has, in practice, enabled the National Gallery to become one of the major players in the international league of exhibition venues. To an extent, it has been a victim of its own success.

The trustees of the National Gallery considered displaying the Titians upstairs in the north galleries. But they concluded that it would be too disruptive. We would have had to put the great collections of 17th-century French and Dutch paintings either in store or switch them out of sequence to exhibition galleries that were not designed for them.

We would have found it almost impossible to accommodate, through our north entrance, the enormous numbers of school children who come to the National Gallery on school trips. And, worst of all, we would have had to make all the arrangements for ticketing and queuing, including an exhibition shop, in other main-floor galleries.

The trustees took the view that this was too high a price to pay and that our first responsibility should be to those people who come from all over the world to see the great paintings in our permanent collection. After all, approximately 80 per cent of the 4.5 million visitors to the National Gallery every year come not to see our major loan exhibitions, but to enjoy the narrative of western European art as shown in our permanent collection.

Like Martin Gayford, I was able to see the Titian exhibition in the Prado in Madrid as well as the National Gallery. Of course, there were advantages in showing the paintings in grand, early 19th-century galleries in the main building of the Prado. It meant more people could see the exhibition and they could do so in natural daylight.

But it is worth noting that the Prado is soon to open a huge new building designed by the great Spanish architect Rafael Moneo to show major exhibitions. It will cost more than €100 million (£66 million) and is being funded entirely by the Spanish government. They are determined that Madrid should be viewed as a major cultural capital. And they recognise that art attracts foreign tourists.

As to our El Greco exhibition, we did also investigate the possibility of showing it upstairs. But we feel that the exhibition gains immeasurably by being shown in purpose-built space, where the development of El Greco's art can be articulated in the sequence of rooms for which the exhibition was intended. I don't know if Martin Gayford had the opportunity to see the same exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. It was a less intense experience there, partly because it was shown upstairs alongside the permanent collection, where the noise of the exhibition could be heard.

In the long term, it might be possible for the National Gallery to adapt some of its extensive ground floor for additional exhibition galleries. Or it might be possible to convert part of the building north of the Sainsbury Wing for exhibition use.

But either of these solutions would require a major change of mind on the part of central government. The Treasury would have to invest much more in the development of the buildings of our national museums in order to attract those visitors who travel from all parts of the country and, increasingly, from Europe, to see our exhibitions.

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