Art in the Raw
Go hang!

Charles Saumarez Smith on the why the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition is democratic and eclectic – not to mention a jolly good show

It is slightly odd to think that the Royal Academy's annual Summer Exhibition has taken place every year for the past 242. First shown in Lambe's auction rooms at the east end of Pall Mall (on the site now occupied by the Institute of Directors), it then moved to the top-lit, top floor of the west side of Somerset House, where the whole of London's smartest society would climb the precipitous stairs to see pictures hung from floor to ceiling. For a period of 30 years from 1838 to 1868 it was shown in large rooms in the east end of the National Gallery; and, from 1868, in the wonderful, grand, first-floor galleries that were added by Sydney Smirke on the back of Burlington House and which are possibly the greatest public galleries in Europe.

The Academicians themselves (there are about 130 in all, although not all of them submit work) are allowed to show six works each. This means that the Summer Exhibition is a showcase of current work of the artists of the day, including architects, who tend to show drawings or models (and now sometimes photographs) of recent buildings or of work under construction. But because the Academicians are themselves an eclectic group, drawn from different generations of artistic practice – some figurative, some abstract, elected at different times over the past 40 years – this inevitably produces an eclectic result. It was intended to be, and still is, an 18th-century salon, the last survival of the idea that it is good for the public to see what is being produced by artists each year, however diverse the selection.

Alongside the work of Academicians is the work submitted by artists from all over the country and now, to a lesser extent, from other parts of the world. This year we have over 11,000 submissions, the equivalent of a medium-sized museum collection (to put it into context, the National Gallery only owns about 3,500 works of art). Painters, trained and amateur, young and old, as well as architects, sculptors and printmakers, submit their work to the annual ordeal of being judged by a panel of Academicians, who are constituted as the Summer Exhibition Committee and are selected by an immensely complicated system of annual rotation according to the medium in which they work. Only about one in 10 works of art is selected to be considered for the exhibition. These works are then taken across from the temporary warehouse at the back of 6 Burlington Gardens to the galleries in Burlington House. But not all those selected for consideration are hung. There is a double cut. So it is a fairly rigorous process.

In recent years, great efforts have been made to give the Summer Exhibition a bit more artistic shape and character. Two or three Academicians are given responsibility for choosing the overall theme (this year it is "Raw"), overseeing the hang, choosing who should hang individual rooms, and either encouraging or inviting other artists to submit (there is a critical distinction between encouragement, which means that

the person is required to submit to the jury process, and an invitation, which allows them to skip it). The convenors this year are Stephen Chambers, the printmaker, and Sir David Chipperfield, the architect of the Neues Museum. In so far as this year's exhibition has a distinctive character, it will be owing to their intervention.

Having observed the process of selection and hanging for the past two years, I have been impressed by the care, time and trouble that the Academicians put into the selection and, even more, the display. The whole process takes several weeks, from late March to late May, fortified by long lunches and beef tea, which is brewed to an 18th-century formula. To the critics it may look like a bazaar – too random and too miscellaneous to be a real showcase for contemporary work. But behind the display is a machine that ensures the selection of the best of the work submitted and its display in rooms, each of which has a subtly different character, depending on who has hung it.

There is another great, and possibly undervalued, aspect to the Summer Exhibition. It provides an opportunity for people who are not necessarily specialists to buy works of art, even if they are not interested in, or knowledgeable about, the art market. They can come and see the exhibition, choose a work of art, and buy it there and then, without having to negotiate with a Cork Street dealer, nor having to be eyed up by some smart young woman who guards the gates of the commercial art galleries. In this characteristic, as in others, the Summer Exhibition is deeply democratic, open to anyone to enter, not ruled by any single view of taste or fashion, the residue of the 18th-century view that the best judges of art are not the critics but the public.

Critics may sneer, but the public continues to enjoy it, precisely because it gives them an opportunity to make up their own minds about what to like.

Finch's Quarterly, Autumn 2010