On With The Show
Attention To Detail
Great Endings & Expectations

Charles Saumarez Smith looks back on the art world's winter highlights and forward to the Royal Academy's next great exhibition

The big event of the winter season was the National Gallery's great Leonardo exhibition, with all the tickets booked out after less than a fortnight, queues stretching all the way across Trafalgar Square, and tickets offered on eBay for £400. I missed the opening party and snuck in one morning in late November.

I was impressed by the sense of earnest seriousness of the visitors, hundreds upon hundreds of them all paying detailed attention to every aspect of the exhibition, the drawings as well as the paintings, in an atmosphere of extreme, slightly reverential attention. *The Lady with an Ermine* was much more spectacular than I had anticipated: what seemed hypnotic was the sheer scale of her right hand, far too large, lightly touching the neck of a devious and deeply sensual-looking stoat (calling it an ermine makes it sound more acceptable, and less verminous, than it actually looks); there is surely something deeply deliberate, as well as troubling, about the contrast between the extreme innocence of her expression, looking away from the viewer and out into the middle distance, and the sensuality – indeed, carnality – of the way in which she strokes the animal fur.

At the time that the exhibition was first proposed, the whole point was to provide a better understanding of the artistic context of the National Gallery's own version of *The Virgin of the Rocks*, which was due to be conserved. I have been interested in how little discussion there has been of the contrast between the Louvre's earlier version of the picture, which is so obviously unrestored, and the National Gallery's, so pristine. Perhaps this is why it was decided to hang the two versions at opposite ends of the same room, so that, slightly frustratingly, it was not possible to do a direct comparison between the much greater delicacy of the Louvre's version, where the principal figures are dimensionally much smaller, and the startling difference in the balance of the composition by the omission of the pointing hand of the angel on the right of the National Gallery's version.

Two of the works in the Leonardo exhibition had strong connections to the Royal Academy. The first is the great Leonardo Cartoon, which has been slightly dispossessed in recent years, having come out of the little shrine that was constructed for it at the top of the Sainsbury Wing stairs. It is described in the catalogue as *The Burlington House Cartoon*, as if it is still hankering after its previous home, which it left when it was sold by the Royal Academy in 1962. It first came to England in 1761, purchased by John Udny (or Udney), who was the British Consul in Venice and helped his brother, Robert Udny, acquire his collection of pictures, which were displayed in the gallery of his house in Teddington. It is

not known exactly how the Cartoon entered the collection of the Royal Academy, other than the fact that it is depicted, hung rather casually to the left of the door of the Antique School, in amongst a jumble of antique casts, in a drawing by Edward Burney in 1779. In 1802, Robert's collection was offered to the Royal Academy to establish a National Gallery. It turned the offer down and the whole collection, including two Raphaels and Correggio's *Danaë* ,was consigned for sale by Christie's.

The other picture that is still owned by the Royal Academy, but has recently been lent to Magdalen College, Oxford, is the early copy of *The Last Supper*, which is in an infinitely better state than the original and was used to help guide its recent restoration. It was hung upstairs, separately from the rest of the exhibition. I wasn't altogether surprised, as it's a curiously unsatisfactory work.

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The other exhibition I really enjoyed last autumn – leaving aside, of course, the Royal Academy's *Degas and the Ballet* – was the Palazzo Strozzi's exhibition *Money and Beauty: Bankers, Botticelli and the Bonfire of the Vanities*. This was a well-timed moment to remind us that the Renaissance was not just about the pursuit of beauty and the rediscovery of the antique, but also about banking, money-lending, international trade and usury. In fact, many of the patrons of the great Renaissance artists were just trying to assuage their guilt from their money-making activities by supporting the artists of the time to paint for the church, so that there is an indissoluble connection between the two: guilt to gilt.

I was one of the people invited to attend an international symposium to consider the lessons that might be learned from the exhibition; that is, what were the sociocultural characteristics of 15th-century Florence that led to such an astonishing efflorescence of intellectual and cultural activity, and is it imaginable that they might be replicated in the modern world? As is the way of such conferences, there was much bombast, but not so much in the way of calm analysis as to what were the particular characteristics of Florence that might hold lessons for the future.

One of the things that has long been known about the context of the Renaissance in Florence was the fierce competitive environment between rival city states in Italy for cultural prestige, such that the princes of Urbino and Mantua were keen to be as important artistically as Florence and Siena. I'm not convinced that Boris Johnson sees himself as a descendant of the Medici in trying to ensure that London retains its position of cultural hegemony over Berlin.

The other thing the exhibition demonstrated was that bankers wanted to demonstrate their trustworthiness and prestige in the international money markets through the intelligence of their choice of art. It was an international business, played out in Bruges and Ghent, as well as Florence and Genoa. They were showing off but, luckily, the choice of artists whose work they chose to show off with included Botticelli.

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Meanwhile, the Royal Academy has been preparing for its Zoffany exhibition, which opened at the Yale Center for British Art at the end of October and transfers to the Royal Academy in March.

Zoffany is an odd artist, a bit of a chameleon. He was born in Frankfurt, the son of a cabinetmaker at the court of Alexander Ferdinand, Prince of Thurn and Taxis. Like so many of his generation, he trained in Rome, where he worked under Mengs and painted himself as the young David. From Rome, he was employed as court painter to the Elector of Trier, but, after marrying a rich wife, they moved to London. She hated it, returned to Germany, and left him to scratch a living painting rather wooden theatrical scenes, which were commissioned by the great actor David Garrick.

Luckily, Zoffany was rescued from a life of drudgery by George III, who commissioned him to paint Queen Charlotte. He produced a most beautiful, immaculate portrait of her sitting in her dressing room with her two children, the Prince of Wales dressed as Telemachus and Prince Frederick, who was only aged one at the time, dressed up as a young Turk. In painting this picture, Zoffany seems to have found his *métier*, as, from this time onwards, he specialised in producing beautifully immaculate scenes of interiors, where individuals are shown surrounded by their belongings, including Sir Lawrence Dundas, the colossally wealthy merchant contractor, who is depicted with his grandson in his house in Arlington Street, Mayfair.

In the flesh, there is something faintly bloodless about these pictures: too polished; too concerned with the showing off of worldly goods; too immaculate in their technique, as if he were depicting the perfect model train set, with none of the swish of his contemporary, Gainsborough, or the strong and intelligent characterisation of Reynolds. But it will still be a pleasure to see them, particularly since in London it will be possible to see his *Tribuna*, which was painted in the 1770s, belongs to the Royal Collection, and was not lent to Yale.

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