

# Show & Tell

## A Feast For The Eyes

### Capital Art

### Exhibits A

## Making Exhibitions Of Themselves

**Charles Saumarez-Smith has his aesthetic antennae firmly tuned into London's best exhibitions this quarter**

By the time this article is published, the Royal Academy will have opened its major exhibition on *Modern British Sculpture*. I'm looking forward to the response to the exhibition, which is deliberately conceived as a challenge to received opinions of what were the major moments and movements in 20th-century sculpture. It has been planned as a series of discrete displays, one for each of the 10 rooms of our upstairs galleries. The question now is whether or not these individual interventions add up to a statement of the nature of 20th-century sculpture as a whole. We'll see. My own view is that up until 1970 the rooms are relatively conventional, following the established narrative in the development of sculpture, and that it is only after 1970 that it is necessarily more tendentious, concentrating on the more leftfield, less commercial — some of them anti-commercial — sculptors such as Richard Wentworth, now Professor of Sculpture at the Royal College of Art.

I should perhaps add that anyone coming to see the exhibition *Modern British Sculpture* can also enjoy the Royal Academy's new restaurant, which has been designed by Tom Dixon, the highly intelligent furniture designer, who used to be head of design at Habitat and now works out of a set of spaces on Portobello Dock. The restaurant is going to include a display of the works of sculpture from our basement, showing diploma works over the past 100 years.

What else is coming up in 2012 ?

I recently saw the exhibition *Jan Gossaert's Renaissance*, which opens at the National Gallery in London on 23 February, when it was shown at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. It's a sensationally beautiful exhibition and gives a good sense of Gossaert as an artist, something that I have previously found hard, if not impossible, to acquire — not least because of the complication that he has traditionally also been known as Mabuse (based on the fact that he was born in Maubeuge). It will presumably be centred on Gossaert's great *Adoration of the Kings* in the National Gallery's own collection, which was acquired by gift from the Countess of Carlisle in 1911 (her husband had been a long-standing Trustee) and which wasn't able to travel to New York.

I also recently saw in New York the very beautiful exhibition of prints by Tracey Emin and Louise Bourgeois, which was shown at the Carolina Nitsch gallery in Chelsea and comes to Hauser & Wirth on Old Bond Street on February 18. It's very mildly pornographic, but, as with so much of Emin's work, curiously moving, consisting of spidery graffiti added to the existing work of a much older (and, sadly, now departed) artist, but with an unexpected emotional tenderness.

Also opening in February (on the 16th) is Tate Britain's exhibition *Watercolour*. It's a slightly unexpected exhibition for Tate Britain because the national collection of watercolours is housed at the V&A and because the medium of watercolour, which is fresh, spontaneous and experimental, does not feel characteristic of Tate Britain's painting collection. This is probably exactly why it is doing it, to escape the stereotype that Tate Britain only interested in the history of British painting and to signal the movement of the traditional boundaries by which the national collections were divided, with watercolour going to the Victoria and Albert Museum as if it were a branch of the applied arts, while fine art was shown in a division of the National Gallery.

In March, the Royal Academy is doing an exhibition on Watteau's drawings, which is being curated for us by Pierre Rosenberg, the legendary French art historian and former director of the Louvre. It will provide an opportunity to see work by this most delicate and refined of artists, whose drawings are, for obvious reasons, only familiar to *habitués* of the drawings collections in the great European museums. Not long before he died, Watteau visited England in order to consult Dr Mead, who was himself one of the great connoisseurs and collectors of early-18th-century London. I can't imagine what an artist of such sensitivity made of the smoke and stewpots of London at that time – or, indeed, what Londoners, who were notoriously anti-Gallican, made of him – and it will be interesting to discover what contemporary attitudes are to Watteau's brilliant, and sometimes suggestive, red chalk drawings.

Finally, in April, I'm looking forward to the V&A's exhibition *The Cult of Beauty: The Aesthetic Movement 1860-1900*, which is being curated by Stephen Calloway, the V&A's long-standing aesthete with his waxed and beautifully curled moustache. It's one in the V&A's series of exhibitions on great art movements, including Baroque and Modernism. What I particularly enjoy about these exhibitions is that they are able to draw very deeply on the V&A's own incomparably rich collections, so that those of us who are provenance fetishists, always checking the labels to see where the works of art come from, can go round the V&A's exhibitions and recognise that a very high proportion of the exhibits could in theory be seen any day of the week in the V&A's own galleries. Aestheticism as a movement lies at the heart of the V&A's own collections as it moved from its origins in the 1850s as an instrument of didactic design, encouraged by its first director, Henry Cole, to an interest in a more refined sensibility in the late-Victorian period, encouraged by the writings and ideas of William Morris and, even more so, Walter Pater. So, it should be a feast of beautiful objects, including work by Edward Godwin, Christopher Dresser, Aubrey Beardsley and Walter Crane.

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