

Royal Academy coming to town



The Council of the Royal Academy selecting Pictures for the Exhibition, Charles West Cope 1875.

SIX months after a survey of Australian art opened at London's Royal Academy of Arts, an exhibition of British art from that institution is due to open at Bendigo Art Gallery. It is unlikely, though, that Genius and Ambition - the show of "diploma works" by academicians of the exclusive art society - will be subject to the same critical drubbing that greeted Australia when it opened in London last September.

Charles Saumarez Smith, the dapper secretary and chief executive of the RA, says he was surprised at the vitriol heaped on the exhibition by two prominent London critics in particular. He believes the antipathy was motivated by "old-fashioned, reactionary cultural prejudice".

"I think a small number of critics wrote with unusual and distasteful vehemence," he says, referring to Waldemar Januszczak of *The Sunday Times* and Brian Sewell of the *London Evening Standard*. "I thought their reviews were exceptionally and unhelpfully unpleasant."

The Bendigo exhibition is not a survey of two centuries of British art but a display of paintings, sculpture and drawings from its collection. Among the artists represented are Reynolds, Gainsborough, Turner, Constable and Millais. Stylistically, it traces an art history from 18th-century academicism to romantic landscapes, Victorian narrative pictures, orientalism and society portraits.

It includes a bust of "mad" King George by Italian-born Agostino Carlini, several Constable landscapes such as *A Boat Passing a Lock*, Victorian classicism by Lawrence Alma-Tadema and John William Waterhouse, and depictions of the leisured classes at play by John Singer Sargent. "Many people do not know, even in (Britain), that it is still a private institution run by a council of academicians," says Saumarez Smith. "Every academician has to give one work, and those works, historically, have provided a series of very important works."

The RA was established by decree of George III in 1768, and is unlike other art museums, being a private organisation not reliant on government funds. It has historically had three roles: as an art school, an exhibitor and an artists' club. Originally, it admitted only 40 academicians at any time; the roll was later expanded to 80.

The unique position of the RA gives it an independence not enjoyed by some other public collections. The 1997 exhibition *Sensation*, for example, could not have been held at the Tate, for example. The showcase of fashionable "Young British Artists" was from the collection of Charles Saatchi; a public

gallery would not have given such prominence to a single collection because the exposure tends to augment market value. (This was the reason the National Gallery of Australia cancelled the show in 1999.)

Reynolds's allegorical painting *Theory*, of 1779, may be emblematic of the RA's origins and founding principles, not least because Reynolds was its first president. It was painted for the ceiling of New Somerset House in London, one of the RA's several homes before its permanent move to Burlington House in Piccadilly, and shows a classical female figure in billowing drapery, mounted on a cloud. She holds a scroll of parchment as a symbol of learning.

Reynolds in his famous *Discourses* at the RA lectured on the primacy of intellect over intuition in art. Students were instructed to draw the forms of classical sculpture before they were permitted to draw from life.

"Reynolds through his *Discourses* was one of the key influences on the academy," Saumarez Smith says. "They became a great textbook of so-called academy theory, which is the idea that history painting was the greatest form of painting and landscape was a secondary genre. You learned to draw through hard work, observation, close attention to classical precedent and learning by copying from the great masters. Reynolds was the person who described and articulated the traditions of academic practice in a way that was dominant for a hundred years."

Academicism fell out of fashion as art movements such as impressionism and modernism presented dynamic new ways of seeing the world. A glance at the list of current academicians reveals how the RA has evolved: among them are sculptor Anish Kapoor, David Hockney and installation artist Tracey Emin, who in 2011 was appointed professor of drawing.

From its beginnings, the RA has hosted an annual exhibition to show the work of the artists of the day. It's a popular event for Londoners and visitors, where a stroll around the galleries is usually followed with a glass of Pimm's.

Australian artists were showing at the RA from the late 19th century, among them Robert Dowling, Nicholas Chevalier, Rupert Bunny, George Lambert, Arthur Streeton and Tom Roberts. By the early 1920s, there was sufficient interest for a survey show of Australian art.

The exhibition of Australian art of 1923 presented 212 works by Lambert, Streeton, Phillips Fox and others, attracting 28,000 people across 27 days.

Genius and Ambition picks up the connection by including paintings that were once shown in London. Many of these works have been lent from Australian collections, and include the Victorian social commentary of Chevalier's *Weary*, Lambert's dandyish *Self-portrait with Gladioli* and English landscapes by Streeton.

Saumarez Smith says last year's show of Australian art at the RA was long overdue, being 90 years since the 1923 exhibition. It attracted a "perfectly respectable" 125,000 people. "I was incredibly pleased we did it," he says.

"I've always been, like a lot of British people, incredibly impressed by the quality and interest of Australian art. I think it should be better known in this country."

Apart from the scorn of some British critics, several Australian gallery-watchers had reservations about the show, saying it aimed to be too inclusive and lacked focus.

Saumarez Smith, due in Australia this week for the Bendigo opening, says he will have a debriefing with the NGA's Ron Radford, whose gallery helped organise the show.

"We wanted to be true to all aspects of Australian culture because, as is obvious, these things come about not so often," he says.

"It remains an open question: would it have been better to do only Aboriginal art, or historical art, or contemporary art?" He says he is open to the idea of another, possibly more focused show of work by Australian artists.

Matthew Westwood, *The Australian*, 26 February 2014