

A Brief History of the Royal Academy of Arts

Background Notes

Peter Sawbridge - 04 May 2022



Figure 1 Sir Joshua Reynolds PRA, *Self-portrait*, c. 1780. Oil on panel, 127 x 101.6 cm. Royal Academy of Arts, London, inv. 03/1394

The Royal Academy of Arts was founded by direct act of King George III in 1768. At the time of its inception, no representative body for teaching, debating and representation of the visual arts existed in Britain. The monarch had been petitioned by an influential group of artists, architects and sculptors who keenly felt the need of one, aware that their counterparts in other countries had enjoyed these benefits for some time.

The fledgling Academy elected from among its founding members a President (the painter Sir Joshua Reynolds; **figure 1**), a Treasurer (the architect Sir William Chambers), a Keeper and a Secretary. These four key offices survive to this day. There were thirty-four Royal Academicians at the foundation, of whom two were women.

The new institution aimed to fund teaching activities within its art school, known as the Royal Academy Schools, by mounting an annual open-submission art exhibition, which continues to this day in the form of the renowned Summer Exhibition. The first setting for the Annual Exhibition was a small set of auctioneer's rooms at 125 Pall Mall, but the Academy also used a faded set of former royal apartments at Old Somerset House in the Strand.

Plans were already afoot to redevelop Somerset House. The handsome neoclassical palace we know today was designed in the 1770s by the Academy's Treasurer Sir William Chambers. The Strand frontage of these new buildings – which today house the Courtauld Institute of Art – became a purpose-built home for the institution. The elegant, winding staircase that still climbs the full height of the building was the scene of much jockeying for social position during the private views of the Annual Exhibitions.

Once in the Great Room, visitors could admire new paintings that had been selected by the year's hanging committee of Royal Academicians. The Royal Academicians could include a number of their own works without selection, a tradition that continues today, although they too were subject to the vagaries of the hang; they were particularly anxious not to be 'skyed', i.e. hung so high in the room that their works would be out of easy viewing range. The prominence of the Annual Exhibition in the social calendar of Georgian London cannot be overstated, and occasional royal visits merely added to this (**figure 2**).



Figure 2 Pietro Antonio Martini, after Johann Heinrich Ramberg, *The Exhibition of the Royal Academy, 1787*. Line engraving, 32 x 49.1 cm. Royal Academy of Arts, London, inv. 06/5356

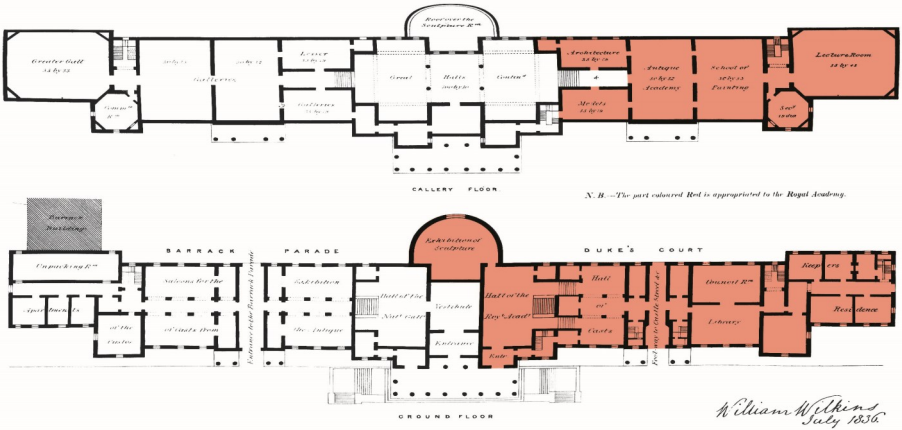


Figure 3 William Wilkins RA, *The Galleries and Ground Floor of the National Gallery, Trafalgar Square, 1836*. Engraved illustration, published 16 August 1836. National Gallery, London

As it moved into the nineteenth century, with such titans of British art as Turner and Constable at its forefront, the Academy again found itself challenged for space. The National Gallery had recently been established in a new building by William Wilkins at the head of Trafalgar Square, and it was proposed that the Royal Academy should occupy its eastern wing (**figure 3**). The move took place in 1837.

This next home was never a happy one for the institution. The Life Room of the Royal Academy Schools was located in the dome above the central portico, a chilly space both for the life models and the students. There was wrangling with the burgeoning National Gallery over access. Inconvenient temporary arrangements had to be put in place each year to permit viewing of the Annual Exhibition.

As the National Gallery grew in popularity over the ensuing decades, it became clear that the Academy would be the one to move. Several locations were proposed, one in London’s growing museums quarter at South Kensington. But Sir Francis Grant, the Academy’s then president, cleverly saw that this would be too far from the centre of things, and instead it was decided that Burlington House in Piccadilly (**figure 4**) would make a suitable and – at last – a permanent home for the institution.



Figure 4 Office of Sir John Soane RA, watercolour of the courtyard and façade of Burlington House, Piccadilly, c. 1817

Built in the seventeenth century in what was then open countryside to the west of London, Burlington House was refaced in the early eighteenth century by Lord Burlington, who had travelled extensively in Italy and admired the work of the Vicentine master-architect Andrea Palladio. Burlington's work on the house did much to establish the Palladian style of architecture in Britain. When the Academy signed its 999-year lease in the 1860s, the house had stood empty for some time. One of the understandings of the agreement was that the Academy would erect a new suite of galleries at its own expense on the garden behind Burlington House, and this it did, in just twelve months, to the designs of Sydney Smirke (**figure 5**).



Figure 5 The interior of Gallery III, the Royal Academy's largest exhibition room, by Sydney Smirke RA

These top-lit picture galleries, some of the grandest in Europe, provided the Academy with a magnificent blank canvas. Its Annual Exhibitions grew to a position of such importance and influence throughout the late nineteenth century that the institution found itself at the vanguard of the visual arts in Britain under the presidency of Frederic, Lord Leighton.

After these 'palmy days', as a former Secretary called them, the Academy's importance gradually subsided throughout the war years until 1948, when a live Home Service broadcast of a particularly disastrous after-dinner speech by the then president, Sir Alfred Munnings, left the institution widely regarded as a reactionary bastion of the old guard, scorning new developments in art and turning its back stiffly on the contemporary.

But since those days in the doldrums, the Academy's fortunes have again changed. The Royal Academicians of the 1950s and 1960s breathed new life back into the institution, and the election of Sir Hugh Casson as president in 1976 confirmed the Academy's return to the centre of the visual arts. Casson's genius for getting the best out of people saw the foundation of the Friends of the Royal Academy, a pioneering membership association that provides free access to all the institution's exhibitions. There are now some 80,000 Friends, and the income this provides is the bedrock of the Academy's finances.

Casson appointed the energetic, charismatic curator Norman Rosenthal as his Exhibitions Secretary, and Rosenthal's bold and exciting loan shows put the Academy on the global map of institutions mounting these, with a programme ranging from 'A New Spirit in Painting' (1981), through synoptic displays of British, Italian, German and American art in the twentieth century, to the controversies of 'Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection' (1997).

A new set of galleries was built by Norman Foster's practice in the early 1990s on the top floor of Burlington House. Restoration of the main picture galleries and the eighteenth-century Fine Rooms within Burlington House was undertaken. The Royal Academy Schools have increasingly fostered emerging talent, and the programme of loan exhibitions has gone from strength to strength, culminating in 2018, the Academy's 250th anniversary year, with a magnificent re-creation of

the dispersed collection of King Charles I. That year also saw the renovation by Sir David Chipperfield of the Academy's Burlington Gardens building (**figure 6**), providing a Lecture Theatre and a suite of new exhibition galleries as well as improved office space. The restored building was opened by Her Majesty The Queen, the Academy's royal patron.

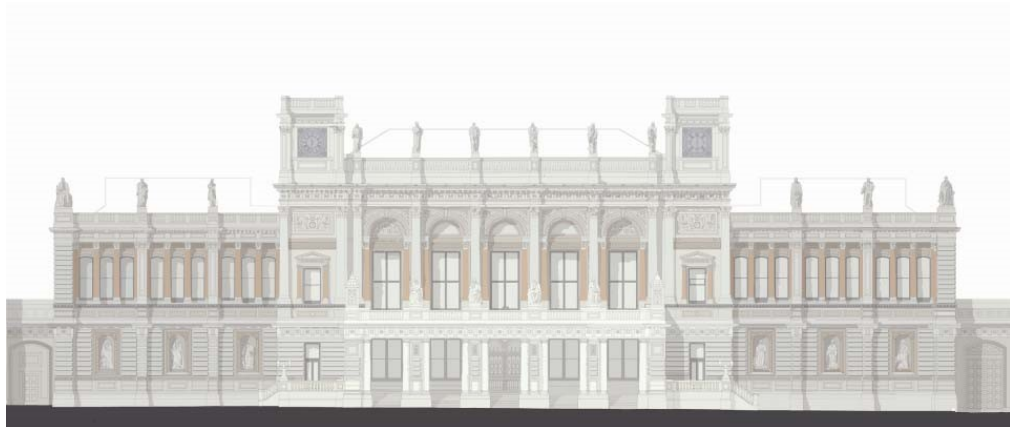


Figure 6 The façade of 6 Burlington Gardens, designed by Sir James Pennethorne

After so many recent successes, the Covid pandemic came as a bitter blow. Closure for many months exacted a severe toll, with many planned exhibitions postponed or cancelled, millions lost in revenue and many resulting redundancies.

Despite this, after a period of consolidation, with the Summer Exhibition twice taking place in the autumn because of Covid, the Academy is again beginning to look ahead and to plan for the future. The election of Rebecca Salter as president in 2019 – the first woman artist to occupy that office – was welcomed by Academicians, staff and the public alike, and many exciting loan exhibitions are in the pipeline.

Further reading

James Fenton, *School of Genius: A History of the Royal Academy of Arts*, London, 2006

Holger Hoock, *The King's Artists: The Royal Academy of Arts and the Politics of British Culture, 1760–1840*, Oxford, 2003

Sidney C. Hutchison, *The History of the Royal Academy, 1768–1986*, London, 1986

Sidney C. Hutchison, *The Homes of the Royal Academy*, London, 1956

Sir Walter R. M. Lamb, *The Royal Academy: A Short History of Its Foundation and Development*, London, 1951

Sarah Monks, John Barrell and Mark Hallett (eds), *Living with the Royal Academy: Artistic Ideals and Experiences in England, 1768–1848*, Farnham, 2013

Sir Charles Saumarez Smith, *The Company of Artists: The Origins of the Royal Academy of Arts in London*, London, 2012

Nicholas Savage, *Burlington House, Home of the Royal Academy of Arts*, London, 2018

Peter Sawbridge, *A Little History of the Royal Academy*, London, 2018

© Text Peter Sawbridge, 2022

These notes are for study use by WAHG members only and are not to be reproduced.



Winchester Art History Group
www.wahg.org.uk