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Exhibition Review

Redesigning, Reinterpreting and Revisiting London's National Portrait Gallery

BY JOHANNA C. E. STRONG  AND AMY SAUNDERS 

After a three-year wait, the National Portrait Gallery in London (NPG) has finally reopened to the public. The recent redesign includes physical changes to the building, a new layout for the works of art and updated interpretation text, all of which modernise the gallery. The new interpretation better reflects ongoing research and includes discussions of a wider variety of themes as they relate to the works on display. The re-designed NPG pays particular attention to the theme of decolonisation and has significantly increased its representation of women's narratives and art, ensuring that heritage and culture remain relevant in an ever-changing environment. The gallery continues to display works from the early modern to the modern periods, but it is the medieval and early modern narratives, especially as they relate to court studies, which serve as the focus for this review.

As part of the physical changes to the building, visitors are welcomed into an airy atrium where they can choose to take the stairs, lift or escalator to the floor of their choosing. Even before this, however, is the first redesigned aspect of the building: three four-metre-high bronze doors, which feature forty-five portraits of women. While they do not feature any identifiable women, British designer Tracy Emin's doors successfully reflect the new focus of the gallery, aiming as it does to better highlight female voices. As works of art in and of themselves, they call attention not only to women in historical and modern art but also draw attention to the role of female artists. What these reviewers found disappointing, though, was the fact that these women were not individuals but were designed to represent women in the abstract. While there are likely many reasons behind this artistic choice, which we can appreciate, it is disappointing that these unnamed portraits are found below the busts of several named historical men. This dichotomy seems to continue the narrative that history consists of 'great men' and other unnamed, rather generic figures. The doors are, however, a thought-provoking addition to the new gallery and encourage the visitor to engage with the material on display even before they have entered the building.

Part of the physical restructure of the building includes the utilisation of formerly back-of-house spaces. This has allowed the gallery footprint to increase significantly but creates a potentially complex chronological flow, in which lift-users, if going to the third floor, enter the gallery space in the middle of the narrative and must work forwards and backwards rather than entering at the earliest pieces of art and progressing chronologically. Greater signage would have helped lift-users to orient themselves within the space and would have better allowed them to decide where they wanted to begin their visit. Additionally, our desire to experience the redesigned gallery in a roughly chronological order reflected the general population's approach, meaning that the early modern portion of the gallery was overcrowded. Working in reverse chronological order — even if only visiting the early modern sections — may have made our experience more enjoyable and could have allowed us to enjoy the

works of art with more ease. Each room was self-contained to the extent that it could be understood without having engaged with other spaces and so, whether that will be seen as a positive or a negative for other visitors, jumping from one room to another or from one work of art to another did not intellectually hinder our experience. After orienting ourselves, however, we were impressed with the focus on early modern queenship, with portraits of Mary I and Elizabeth I being among the first we encountered. Monarchs who had previously been glossed over now feature prominently, with greater connections between sovereigns and between the styles and techniques used being explored throughout.

Our optimism at this interpretative development, though, was somewhat lost as we engaged with label texts on royal marriage and parenthood. Despite significant new research over the last decades, some of these label texts repeated inaccuracies or confusing ambiguities found in the interpretation which came before it. One of the present reviewers noted the promotion, in a family tree, of Philip II of Spain as a crowned king of England, despite none of the other consorts' names being accompanied by the crown designated for 'monarch of England'. Although the present reviewer questioned the curatorial decision, it may, perhaps, reflect ongoing research, such as Gonzalo Velasco Berenguer's, which argues for Mary and Philip's marriage as a joint monarchy more in keeping with that of Mary II and William III than of previous monarchs and consorts.¹ Moreover, Queen Jane was not labelled as a queen, regardless of the length and relative instability of her reign, and the appropriate symbol for 'monarch of England' did not appear above her name. Further, as with the pre-renovation interpretation, men's contributions were privileged over women's, especially within the Stuart sections of the gallery. For example, label texts referring to heirs connected children with their father and his titles while frequently omitting the mother altogether. Additionally, the interpretation accompanying the portraits of the Stuart queen consorts Anna of Denmark and Henrietta Maria were not dissimilar to those pre-dating the closure of the NPG. Given the opportunity to update this text, it remains to be seen why some works received significantly new written and digital interpretation and others did not. Furthermore, although the gallery had only been open for a few weeks, some label texts were already noticeably worn or damaged — perhaps suggesting record visitor numbers in the opening weeks and/or the need for a greater number of gallery staff to manage the space.

There has also been a concerted effort to decolonise the narratives within the gallery as a whole and this is particularly present within the Tudor and Stuart reconstructions. Here, a focus on international interactions and Elizabethan, Jacobean and later Stuart expansion explored themes of colonialism and empire, utilising the most current appropriate terminologies and recognising colonial violence and enslavement far more extensively and with greater nuance than previously seen at the NPG. For example, a portrait of Louise de Kéroualle and an unidentified girl now recognises the latter's presence in the title provided in the interpretation and goes on to explain that 'she was probably an enslaved African girl working either for the Duchess or the painter. Her inclusion in the portrait ... was intended to illustrate the Duchess's wealth and status, and probably also to highlight the whiteness of the Duchess's skin'.² This portrait has long been in the NPG collection, displayed in the

¹ For further discussion on Mary and Philip's joint-monarchy, see Gonzalo Velasco Berenguer, *Habsburg England: Politics and Religion in the Reign of Philip I (1554–1558)* (Leiden, 2023).

² Label Text, 'Louise de Kéroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth (1649–1734) with an unknown girl', National Portrait Gallery, London, visited 16 July 2023.

gallery, and has been included in various temporary exhibitions including most recently *Tudors to Windsors: British Royal Portraits* held at the National Maritime Museum in association with the NPG (2021). In that exhibition, though the interpretation stated that the child's inclusion '[is] to our eyes ... an uncomfortable reminder of imperialism and subordination', she was not present within the title or explored with the same detail found in the new NPG interpretation.³ Themes of colonialism and empire were therefore discussed in relation to the very earliest artworks on display and this focus continued throughout the later galleries, demonstrating the broad extent to which colonialism and empire are embedded within the collection. This also reflects current doctoral work being carried out in partnership with the NPG and National Gallery which will contribute to ongoing academic and public discussions around the theme of decolonisation within museums and heritage sites.

Furthermore, the NPG's goal to create a more even gender balance across the gallery was clearly achieved, especially in the later rooms. For example, in the Tudor section of the gallery, portraits of Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, and Katherine Parr hang on their own merit rather than being contextualised solely — or even primarily — by their relationship to Henry VIII. Later sections include photography by Julia Margaret Cameron and a display relating to Omoba Aina (Sarah Forbes Bonetta), a Yoruba princess and ward of Queen Victoria, demonstrating both the renewed focus on female narratives and on decolonisation of the gallery space and interpretation.

Although there were some portions of the redesigned National Portrait Gallery which we felt would have benefited from greater nuance and more consistent challenging of traditional historiography and narratives, as a whole it nevertheless touches on significant recent and emerging court studies themes, including gender, sexuality, and decolonisation. It is well worth a visit for those interested in aspects of decolonisation, art technique, gender, historical parenthood and monarchy more generally, and the redesign successfully encourages visitors to engage with challenging narratives in an interactive way as they move through the space. Despite some reservations about the new layout and interpretation, the physical structure — including lifts, escalators, and gender-neutral toilets — better reflects contemporary concerns and ensures that the gallery will remain accessible through the years to come.

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Johanna C. E. Strong is an independent scholar and a teacher of history. Her research on Mary I's legacy has appeared on various platforms, including on the 'Team Queens' and 'Tudors Dynasty' blogs and on a variety of podcasts. Her first academic chapter was published in early 2022 in Valerie Schutte and Jessica S. Hower's *Writing Mary I: History, Historiography, and Fiction*, and her review of *The House of Dudley* recently appeared in the *Royal Studies Journal*. She is currently co-editing a *Royal Studies Journal* cluster with Amy Saunders.

³ Label Text, 'Louise de K roualle, Duchess of Portsmouth', *Tudors to Windsors: British Royal Portraits*, National Maritime Museum, London, visited 26 July 2021.

Amy Saunders

Amy Saunders has recently submitted her PhD at the University of Winchester where her research examines reconstructions of early modern royal narratives in heritage sites. Her research interests include early modern history, heritage and museums studies, representation and memory, gender, sexuality, confessional and foreign identity, conflict, and colonialism. Amy's article examining Christina of Sweden in heritage and fiction is available open access via the *Royal Studies Journal* and she is currently working towards a number of publications, including a co-authored article cluster with Johanna C. E. Strong.