

## In What Ways Did Art Become More Widely Accessible in England in the Eighteenth Century?

In this day and age we take public art displays for granted; every town has its own small gallery and each city has at least one building for the presentation of art works. However, there were no real public art exhibitions until more modern times, with the exception, perhaps, of in Ancient times when the Greeks and Romans would display artefacts and paintings looted from other countries, and decorated the exterior of their buildings with statues. In Europe they were more forthcoming in presenting exhibitions. From the sixteenth century an annual public exhibition of art was held in the Pantheon and in other churches in Italy, although this was designed more to honour the saints than to display art. "In France, Napoleon's plunder of works of art was parade through the streets of Paris in a revival of ancient roman triumph"<sup>1</sup>. Also in France the French Academy<sup>2</sup>, exhibited artists' work in order to familiarise French people with French art as a way of allowing the state to manipulate public taste.

In Britain however public art display is a more recent idea. In the Medieval period art tended to be commissioned and therefore was rarely displayed, it was also only the wealthy who could afford to buy paintings. After the reformation in the 1500s when England became a protestant country, puritan antagonism to images and extravagance meant there were far fewer works of religious art<sup>3</sup>, relenting progress and development of British art. Although the first British museum/art gallery, The

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.groveart.com>

<sup>2</sup> The first private academy to become "official" is the "Académie française", founded in 1634 by Cardinal Richelieu. Work was displayed in exhibitions called 'Salons', entry to which was free although printed catalogues were published to be sold.

<sup>3</sup> Gombrich, E H, *The Story of Art* (Phaidon Press 1995) p461

Ashmolean Museum, was opened in Oxford, June 1683<sup>4</sup>, it was only in the eighteenth century when art became more general public friendly. Castle Howard<sup>5</sup> in York was the first stately homes to open its doors to the general public, permitting them to enter and see the various paintings and objects on display inside. This also gave the opportunity to expose the work of contemporary artists for the general public to see.

William Hogarth<sup>6</sup> was a famous eighteenth century artist whose goal was to make art accessible to everyone. He was also a pioneer of ‘conversation’ pieces; painted or engraved scenes with a moral message. He was mostly renowned for his satirical representations of ‘modern moral subjects’<sup>7</sup>, generally a sequence of images relating a story of six to eight scenes recounting in each case a reproofing tale of conceit, dishonesty and treachery, leading to the downfall of the character and ultimately, to their demise. Hogarth aimed for a lower-class audience and adopted a moralizing approach for his popular remarkably imaginative works, which were overflowing with vibrant characterisations and a wealth of detail<sup>8</sup>. Through his choice of subject (every day scenes, the ‘down-and-outs’ of society, etc.) made his pictures more accessible to the general public, being easier for the lower classes to relate to. Furthermore his depiction (and ridicule) of current affairs in his work made his paintings and engravings more relevant, for example the satirical genre painting *An Election*<sup>9</sup> based on the campaign in the Oxford elections of 1754. Apprenticed as an engraver, Hogarth made engraving of the majority of his paintings so that prints could be made.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.wikipedia.org/> The museum contains one of the best collections of Pre-Raphaelite paintings.

<sup>5</sup> The baroque style Castle Howard was built from 1699–1712 for the 3rd Earl of Carlisle, to a design by Sir John Vanbrugh. It has been the home of part of the Howard family for over 300 years.

<sup>6</sup> (1697-1764) a major English painter, printmaker, pictorial satirist, and editorial cartoonist whose work ranged from realistic portraiture to comic strip-like series of pictures. Prominent figure in the introduction of copyright laws.

<sup>7</sup> Hogarth’s own phrase, [www.groveart.com](http://www.groveart.com)

<sup>8</sup> Cite: [groveart.com](http://groveart.com)

<sup>9</sup> 1753, Soane Museum, London

These prints were cheaper and thus permitted the lower classes to afford to have art in their homes.

After the puritan eradication of holy imagery in churches, the Crown failed to encourage secular art, with an exception of perhaps portraiture, although this was only available for the wealthy due to high costs. Almost the only demand for painting was that of supplying likenesses and even this role was “met by foreign artists such as Holbein and Van Dyck, who were called to England after they had established their reputations abroad”<sup>10</sup>. Yet in the mid- 1700s this began to change with native British artist beginning to attain portrait commissions from royals and aristocrats. In the 1740s the Foundling Hospital and Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens<sup>11</sup> displayed British history paintings, religious scenes and landscapes to the public. The Foundling Hospital was a children's home, founded in 1739 by the philanthropic sea captain Thomas Coram. William Hogarth set a permanent art exhibition in the building, and encouraged other artists to produce work for the hospital. Several contemporary English artists decorated the walls of the hospital with their works, including Sir Joshua Reynolds<sup>12</sup>, Thomas Gainsborough<sup>13</sup> and Francis Hayman<sup>14</sup>. The paintings by Hogarth and others for the Foundling Hospital after 1740 had by 1760 begun to draw a crowd of spectators on a daily basis. “The Foundling had shown artists that it was possible to construct a public sphere united by the bonds of sympathy and

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<sup>10</sup> Gombrich, E H p461

<sup>11</sup> Situated on the south bank of the river Thames. The height of the gardens' popularity was reached under the management of Jonathon Tyers, who became the owner in 1758.

<sup>12</sup> Sir Joshua Reynolds 1723 - 1792 was an important and influential 18th century English painter, specialising in portraits and promoting the “Grand Style” in painting which depended on idealisation of the imperfect. He was one of the founders and first President of the Royal Academy.

<sup>13</sup> 1727 – 1788 an influential landscape and portrait painter. He also decorated supper-boxes at Vauxhall Gardens.

<sup>14</sup> Cite: <http://www.wikipedia.org>

benevolence.”<sup>15</sup> However due to the hospital’s charitable quality, exposure of the art was limited; unlike the Vauxhall Gardens, which was first and foremost a centre for public entertainment.

Vauxhall Gardens (formerly New Spring Gardens) were “the largest and most spectacular of the capital’s commercial pleasure grounds”<sup>16</sup>, which became a key element of London evening social life. The gardens were immortalised by several artists in prints or paintings, for example *Vauxhall Gardens, the Grand Walk* by Antonio Canaletto<sup>17</sup>, *Vauxhall Gardens* by Samuel Wale<sup>18</sup> and *Vauxhall Gardens* by Thomas Rowlandson<sup>19</sup>. The gardens also inspired further artworks; the clientele were satirized in the work of Thomas Rowlandson. Admittance to the gardens was charged at one shilling<sup>20</sup> thus this garden and the treasures within were restricted to those who could afford it. William Hogarth provided artistic guidance for a Ridotto al’ fresco when Tyers updated and relaunched the gardens in June 1732<sup>21</sup>. “He added supper boxes decorated with paintings, statues, arches and a cascade. Also installed were a music room, Chinese Pavilion and a Gothic orchestra boasting fifty musicians”<sup>22</sup>. Possibly the most renowned statue that was erected in Vauxhall gardens was that of George Frederick Handel<sup>23</sup>, who had provided musical entertainment in the garden. Each supper-box was decorated with a vast mural painted by Francis Hayman<sup>24</sup>, for

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<sup>15</sup> Solkin, D H, p179

<sup>16</sup> Solkin, D H, *Painting for Money, The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth Century England* (Yale University Press 1992) p106

<sup>17</sup> 1751, private collection.

<sup>18</sup> 1751

<sup>19</sup> 1785 The Metropolitan Museum of Art

<sup>20</sup> Solkin, D H p110

<sup>21</sup> groveart.com

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.vauxhallandkennington.org.uk/>

<sup>23</sup> 1737 by Louis-François Roubillac (1695 – 1762), a French Baroque sculptor.

<sup>24</sup> Francis Hayman (1708 - 1776) was an English painter and illustrator, who became one of the founding members of the Royal Academy in 1768. He painted conversation pieces but could also turn his hand to landscapes and portraiture; he was influenced by the French Rococo style.

example *The Milkmaid's Garland*<sup>25</sup>. The way art began to be incorporated into popular social environments, such as Vauxhall gardens, illustrates the way in which art was becoming more widely accessible to the general public of Britain.

New royal interest in the arts further elevated the status of the artist in society. From 1760 London's earliest public exhibitions of the work of living artists were held at the Society of Arts<sup>26</sup>, predecessor of the more exclusive Royal Academy (RA) summer exhibitions. Through activities and societies who held annual exhibitions – notably the Society of Arts and the Society of Artists, contemporary fine arts had begun to occupy an increasingly public position. George III<sup>27</sup> felt one of his public duties was to promote the arts<sup>28</sup>, consequently he gave his patronage to the RA, and this was critical for its status as the most prominent establishment in British artistic life of that time. Founded in 1768 the RA's membership comprised of forty academicians and twenty associates, "the founders' intentions were to raise the status of their profession by providing thorough academic training, the free exhibitions of works chosen by a jury of academicians, and the promotion of a national school of art"<sup>29</sup>. Originally housed in Pall Mall, the RA moved to the larger premises of Somerset House in 1780, before relocating to Wilkins' Trafalgar square building (which was shared with the National Gallery) in 1837 before ultimately transferring to its current premises in Burlington House, Piccadilly, in 1869. The academy began to hold general exhibitions each summer to display the work of academicians and members, it was at such

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<sup>25</sup> 1741 - 1742

<sup>26</sup> Originally called The Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, who first met at Rawthmell's coffee house in Covent Garden in 1754. Benjamin Franklin, William Hogarth and Samuel Johnson were among the first members. Exhibitions held by the society had free admission yet, as with the French 'Salons' printed catalogues of the exhibits were sold for profit.

<sup>27</sup> George III, third monarch of the Hanoverian Dynasty is the longest reigning king of England (1760 – 1820) the eldest son of Frederick, Prince of Wales, and Princess Augusta of Saxe-Gotha.

<sup>28</sup> Vaughan, William, *British Painting – The Golden Age* (Thames and Hudson 1999) p61

<sup>29</sup> Hutchinson, S, *The History of the Royal Academy 1768 – 1986* (Oxford University Press 1986)

exhibitions where the artists' reputations could be made or broken. The Academy gave artists a prestigious organisation powerful enough to promote professional status and provide the kind of organised training that had become associated with the visual arts. The first president of the RA, Joshua Reynolds claimed that the purpose of the Royal Academy exhibitions was "not to enrich the artists, but to advance the art"<sup>30</sup>. The RA did, however, have its drawbacks; due to the very strict selection process the academy had an unforgiving influence on the instruction of artists and on public preference<sup>31</sup>. This meant that the public was not exposed to as wide a range of styles and genres as could have been possible and to an extent this suffocated the development of art in the eighteenth century, by restricting and stifling the imagination and progress of those artists who were members. Despite this, simply the existence of any kind of public art exhibition was a great step forward in making art more widely accessible in eighteenth century Britain. Furthermore, the popularity of the RA's exhibitions promoted a more widespread opening of private collections in the provinces. By 1770 the commercial exhibition had become an important element of modern artistic life. Those who hadn't the means to buy a painting could still appreciate the oeuvre that was on display, and perhaps purchase an engraving of a favourite piece. In England, prior to the establishment of the Royal Academy in 1768, exhibitions were largely commercial, staged by dealers and auctioneers<sup>32</sup>.

The eighteenth century was a key transitional period bringing art closer to the public with the introduction of public exhibitions of art. One of the main issues was charging to get into some of the exhibitions which made it less accessible to the lower classes.

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<sup>30</sup> Groveart.com

<sup>31</sup> An upshot of this stifling of imagination is breakaway groups of those artists whose paintings were not accepted forming, such as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. A similar consequence to rejection from the French Salons was the formation of the Impressionists.

<sup>32</sup> Cite: Groveart.com

By the end of the eighteenth century the exhibitions moved away from being so commercially based with a view to sell the art to all. Additionally artists began to experiment with subject matter; art which was more related to the lower classes began to emerge notably in Hogarth's conversation pieces. Through the increased number of public exhibitions, availability of cheaper engravings of paintings and new choices of subject which made it easier for the lower classes to relate to, art became more physically and emotionally accessible to the general public.

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