ROYAL COLLECTION TRUST

Masterpieces from Buckingham Palace

Plain English Script

THE QUEEN'S GALLERY,
PALACE OF HOLYROODHOUSE

Welcome

Welcome to the Queen's Gallery, and to our exhibition *Masterpieces from Buckingham Palace*. These notes contain the same information as the audio-description provided for hearing visitors. They are adapted from a script produced by ATS with information from a number of experts whose names are included at the end of these notes.

Stop 1

Welcome to the Queen's Gallery and to *Masterpieces from Buckingham Palace*. This is an extraordinary selection of Dutch, Flemish and Italian paintings from the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. Most of them usually hang in the splendid Picture Gallery in Buckingham Palace, designed by the architect John Nash. They are arranged on the walls there in two rows.

In today's exhibition we see these paintings outside the grand interior of Buckingham Palace. We can get much closer to the paintings, which allows us to focus more on the works themselves. We can think about why they caused a stir at the time they were painted, why they are called 'masterpieces', and why some people think they are still important for us today – or maybe why they aren't.

The artists who created these works have become famous because of the wonderful quality of their paintings. We suggest that their fame is because of some fairly simple characteristics of their works. People can be really good at something, but that does not mean that what they do is complicated. We can see how they use paint to make a picture of their world in different and exciting ways. But what they are doing is copying nature. They are making something real in front of you. We want visitors to the exhibition to stop and

look closely and slowly at the paintings. Try to find a detail which shows that the artist is doing something different to everyone else.

As we explore the exhibition we will see images of people and places which were made centuries ago. But even so, they give us new ways of looking at ourselves and our surroundings today. We want visitors to make up their own minds about why some paintings deserve to be called ‘masterpieces’.

Stop 2

Andrea del Sarto (1486–1530) *Portrait of a Woman in Yellow, c*.1529–30 RCIN 404427

This painting of a woman in a billowy, yellow dress is not finished. It tells us something about the creative process of artist, Andrea del Sarto. It is the first stage of an artist filling his subject with movement and life. The painting could be described as a number of layers: the bottom layer is a panel made of poplar wood, then there is a ground colour and then a sketch of the composition of the painting. This sketching is called 'underdrawing'. It provides a guide to the artist. Here, for example, it shows where he is going to paint the creases in the skin on the woman's neck as she turns her head slightly towards us.

When he had finished the under-drawing, del Sarto applied the first layer of coloured paint, known as *imprimatura.* He applied it in quite a physical way – in the largest yellow triangle in the woman's sleeve, we can see palm prints and hand prints where the artist has worked the paint and spread it across the surface of the painting. The creases of his hand are left behind in the paint. When he had decided what the woman's pose would be, and the position of the folds of her dress, Del Sarto left them and turned his attention to her face.

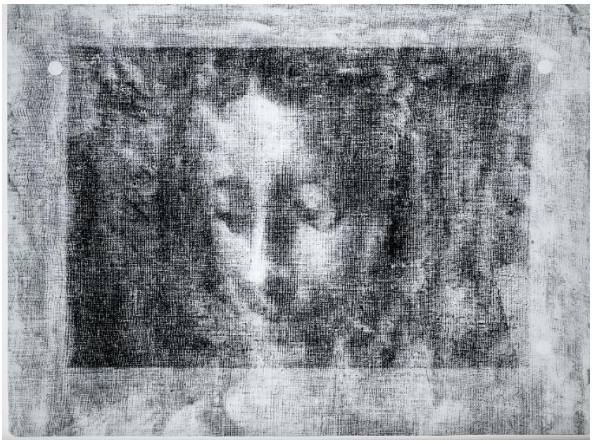
It is clear that he did a lot more work on her shirt and her face than on her sleeve. It looks like he intended to come back to the sleeve later. In fact he never came back to it. Del Sarto died, aged 44, during the second wave of a plague that swept through Florence in 1529. This unfinished portrait is a very sad sign that his life was cut short at a young age.

Stop 3

Parmigianino (1503–40) *Pallas Athene, c.*1531–8, RCIN 405765

This looks like a portrait of a noblewoman, but her metal breastplate and the decorated, highly polished gold brooch she is pointing to reveal who she is. On the brooch is a winged figure of Victory carrying an olive branch. Below her is a city, which seems to be Athens. And below the image of the city there is an inscription 'Athene'. All these clues together tell us that we are looking at the Greek Goddess of wisdom, warfare and handicraft. She is also the goddess who takes care of Athens. Her name is Athena. The green material with an exposed hem, around her shoulders, is an unusual detail in a portrait of a goddess, but no doubt suggests the other activities she looks after, weaving and spinning.

Parmigianino's red chalk drawing in preparation for this work shows he originally planned to paint Athena with more rounded features. He had already started to transfer the sketch onto this canvas using lead white paint when he also changed his mind about her pose. This can be seen in the x-ray below:



His original drawing is still there underneath the finished painting. It can be seen in an X-ray because X-rays show up areas of white paint, which contains lead. That means we can see both the drawing underneath the paint at the same time as the paint on top of it. In the finished painting Athena looks downwards more. The artist's changes to his original ideas have made her seem more like she lost in her thoughts.

Stop 4

Self-portrait as the Allegory of Painting (la Pittura) c.1638-9 RCIN 405551 Cat 34

A woman raises her arm, paintbrush in hand, to make the first strokes on a blank canvas. Her left forearm rests on a stone, perhaps were she's earlier ground the colours to mix her palette. Initials on the edge of the stone tell us –that the work is by Artemisia Gentileschi, one the 17th century's most accomplished artists.

Gentileschi has painted herself, her self-portrait, to represent the art of painting – 'La Pittura' in Italian.

Artists painting figures like this one consulted hand-books that gave precise instructions. A successful painting of 'La Pittura' must show a woman with dishevelled hair, wearing a necklace with a mask-shaped pendant, and clothing made from shimmering fabric. Gentileschi has an advantage over her male contemporaries- as a woman artist she's able to identify directly with the female figure. She knows a woman's physical experience of working at the easel for long hours, body arched and concentrating intently- something she emphasizes with thick brushstrokes on the woman's forehead.

Gentileschi's version also takes practical considerations into account. She knows that long sleeves need to be rolled up and tied, and that green shot silk will only continue to shimmer if protected from daubs of paint by a dull brown apron.

It's been suggested that this picture we're looking at is the finished version of blank canvas in the scene. That would mean that the woman's right hand is about to paint…her own right hand! Whether or not that was the original intention, this picture captures Gentileschi's boldness, vitality, technique and creativity. As she wrote to one of her patrons "I will show Your Illustrious Lordship what a woman can do."

Stop 5

Sir Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641) *Christ Healing the Paralytic, c.*1619, RCIN 405325

This was painted by Anthony van Dyck when he was just 20 years old. People looking at it in the 17th century would have 'read' the canvas from left to right, starting with the grimy faces of the two men in the left-hand corner, waiting to be healed. In front of them, looking at Jesus with eyes full of hope and thankfulness, is the hunched form of the paralysed man who has now been cured. He has got up from his bed but is still holding his frayed blanket. His shirt falls from his shoulder revealing pale skin, prominent veins and bones.

The way he is painted shows that he is ill. In the 17th century people would have also seen him as a sinful person. For them there was no difference between a person's physical and moral condition. Behind the central figure of Jesus is an apostle. He is healthy but disapproving. He does not yet understand the miracle that has just taken place.

Putting together a scene in this way was very popular at this time. It is very much an 'in your face' way of painting. There is no space above or on either side of the figures. As viewers we are taken right into the middle of the scene. If feels as though we are next in the queue to meet Christ. Anthony van Dyck tells us as much about these three main characters through their hand gestures as through the expressions on their faces. The paralysed man's hand is bent at the wrist but is opening us as the paralysis leaves his body; Christ's healing hands reaching out; the apostle's fingers peep out from beneath his cloak, wrapped defensively around his body.

Stop 6

Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69), *Portrait of Agatha Bas ('Lady with a Fan'),* 1641, RCIN 405352

Portraits can make their subjects look distant and cold, frozen in time and space. But here Rembrandt and Frans Hals paint a more complete picture, filling their sitters with life, character and movement.

In other places in both these portraits Rembrandt builds up the paint in dabs and piles. The painting becomes like a piece of sculpture. He uses thick lead white paint to create three dimensional forms, like an old man's skin or a ruff, but especially the bodice worn by Agatha Bas. The threads running across it, and the jewels, look like something the viewer could actually reach out and touch.

It feels like the sitters might reach out and touch us too. The plain backgrounds push them forward and their poses make us feel like they are in our world and not just in the artist's imagination. Rembrandt's Agatha Bas holds onto the edge of a false, painted frame. It feels like if she dropped her fan, it would fall at our feet.

This portrait was acquired by George VI when Prince Regent in the 19th century. George IV was a collector of many fine works of art, particularly of 17th century Dutch and Flemish paintings. In this exhibition, 24 of the 33 works on display were acquired by him.

This year marks the 200th anniversary of George IV's visit to Scotland.

George IV's visit to Scotland in the summer of 1822 was the first visit of a reigning British monarch in two centuries. It was a big occasion, with parades, ceremonies and celebrations. These were directed by the famous poet and novelist Sir Walter Scott. The King's visit to Scotland in 1822 gave Scott an opportunity to put on a display of national ceremony, historical tradition and his own romantic invention.

During the visit, lots of receptions and activities took place here at the Palace of Holyroodhouse. A reception took place at the Palace on 17 August, where the King wore full Highland dress, as captured in this remarkable portrait by Scottish artist David Wilkie.

Whilst in Edinburgh, the King attended dances and balls, the theatre, and visited Edinburgh Castle and other sites across the city. Though many of the events of the visit presented a romantic and even fictious view of Scotland, it also marked a historic moment in bringing the ruling monarch into the public view of the people of Scotland for the first time in nearly two centuries.

Stop 7

Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69), *Christ and St Mary Magdalen at the Tomb,* 1638, RCIN 404816

This is the scene at dawn on the third day after Jesus Christ was crucified. Mary Magdalene arrives at his tomb to anoint his body with oil from a glazed jar, but she finds his body has gone. Instead there are two angels sitting where Jesus's body had been. Rembrandt's painting captures the moment just after Mary has asked a passer-by if he knows where the body has been taken. When the man says her name, a startled Mary recognises him as Jesus.

Mary Magdalene is half lit and half in shadow. The light is coming from the rising sun but also from where Jesus is standing. She is in a moment of confusion, between recognition and uncertainty.

In the Bible story in St John's Gospel, Mary at first mistakes Jesus for a gardener. In this scene Rembrandt shows us his naughty sense of humour. He paints the scene with Jesus dressed as a gardener wearing a big sun hat and carrying pruning shears and a spade.

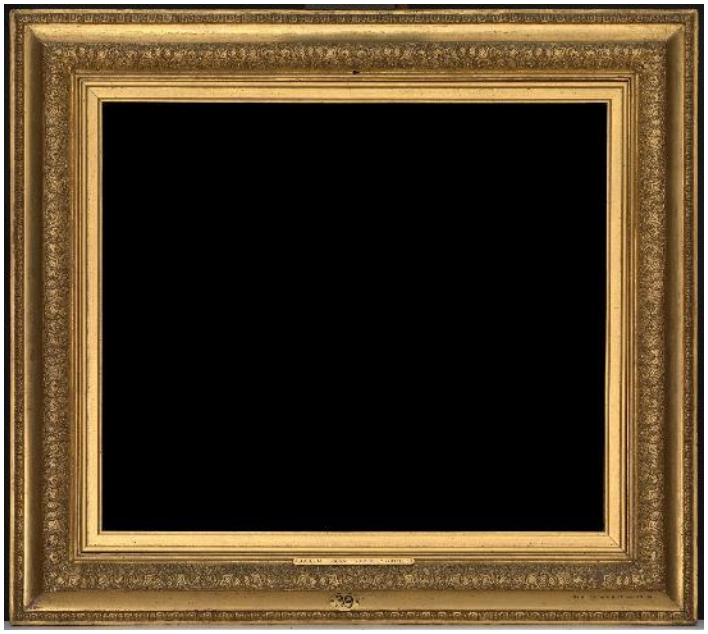
Towards the bottom left hand corner of the painting, we see an expensively dressed couple going down the stone steps into dark shadow away from Jesus and Mary Magdalene. On the bridge in the middle ground a tiny figure walks on his own towards the rising sun. On the way he meets three others who have turned their backs on it.

This seems to be the artist stressing the idea of turning towards the light of God. Some people are not turning towards the light and some people are turning towards the light. The message for us is that we should be with those turning towards the light. This is a perfect subject for Rembrandt, who was a master of painting light. He was also master of storytelling.

Like many of the Dutch paintings in this room, *Christ and St Mary Magdalen at the Tomb* was reframed in the 1970s with a dark moulded wooden 'ripple' frame. It has a gilded 'sight edge', which is the inner section of the frame around the picture. This style was chosen to go with the painting and to imitate the type of frame it might originally have had in the 17th century. It is similar to the one hanging on the wall in de Hooch's Cardplayers below:

Nowadays, we are much more thoughtful about the frames that we use for our paintings. We look back at historical examples, and about when the painting came into the Royal Collection, and also about where it is going to be hung.

Some of George the Fourth's frames were changed later on. Prince Albert disliked the shadows cast by the high outer edge of deep Regency frames. He also wanted to give the Collection a more uniform look. Many of the paintings in this room have the frames that Albert ordered for the Picture Gallery at Buckingham Palace. They are shallow gilt frames with a moulded ornament decorated with a leaf pattern, like the one below:



Glass was introduced to the frames in to the gallery in 1859 to protect the paintings from the pollution and smog of London.

Stop 8

Jan Steen (1632–75), *A Woman at her Toilet,* 1663, RCIN 404804

The woman in this painting is rich. Her jacket is made of expensive material – it looks like silk-satin and it is trimmed with fur. She is wearing a silk petticoat as well. If we look closely at her legs, we see that there are slight marks just below her knee. These are where her garters – made of ribbons – held up her stockings. It looks like she may have just taken her stockings off, so perhaps she is undressing.

Dutch art is interesting for all sorts of reasons. One of them is that it shows us a very wide range of interiors, from luxurious to basic. What tells us that an interior is luxurious? One sure sign is a marble floor, and silk hangings on beds with beautiful linen, and Turkish carpets on tables. All of these are signs of an expensively furnished interior. But natural daylight is a good sign too, because it means there is a large window, which was a very expensive thing to have at the time.

It is almost as if the artist, Jan Steen, has painted two pictures. There is the scene inside the room, and then a view in front of the open door, framed by a decorated archway, with objects on a stone ledge. One of them is a lute, which has a broken string so it can't be played. There is a musical score and a skull with ivy vine growing through it. The reference to music is about something which exists for a moment and then disappears. The skull reminds us of death.

This is a type of still life suggesting that life is fragile and it comes to an end all too quickly. It is known as vanitas painting. The meaning of these paintings is that it does not matter how rich you are – in the end you will die just like everyone else.

These Dutch artists were also very good at creating a three-dimensional feeling in their paintings, as in the paintings below by Vermeer and de Hooch (the painting Cardplayers in a Sunlit Room by de Hooch is hanging nearby). They used patterns on the floor – alternating squares of different colours to create the illusion of three-dimensional space. They used mathematics to work out the distance between objects in real life and how to paint them on a canvas in a way which makes the viewer feel they are looking into a room.

Stop 9

David Teniers the Younger (1610–90), *A Kermis on St George's Day, 1649,* RCIN 405952

A banner of St George flutters in the spring breeze over a crowded tavern yard. David Teniers the Younger has painted a *kermis,* a service at the local church, visible in the top right-hand corner, followed by festivities at the local tavern – with a fight along the way …

There are so many people, so many different episodes, so much to look at. It's a non-stop record of life in action.

A bagpiper looks on as two men at a crowded table in the foreground make a bet; a couple kick up their heels in an energetic dance; behind them a woman wards off the amorous advances of a leering suitor. An old man standing back from the crowd leans on his staff, looking on knowingly.

One of the strongest influences in art in Holland and in Flanders in the 17th Century, was the work of Pieter Bruegel the Elder in the previous century. Pieter Bruegel the Elder had so many strings to his bow, including landscape and figure painting, but one thing that he was extremely influential in was the idea of the comic, peasant figure that could be used to tell stories. Teniers followed that tradition – he uses these different comic figures again and again in his paintings.

In the bottom right hand corner of the scene the day's festivities have caught up with one red-capped reveller. He's passed out, face down, on an upturned barrel; the half-empty bottle in front of him and the earthenware dish and mussel shells on the ground are evidence of a day of feasting and indulgence.

Stop 10

Willem van de Velde the Younger (1633–1707), ***A Calm: A States Yacht, a Barge and many other Vessels under Sail,*** **1659, RCIN 407275**

Other countries in Western Europe were jealous of Dutch transport in the 17th century. Passenger ferries criss-crossed the country through interconnected rivers and canals, whilst herring boats fished the waters of the North Sea. Ships belonging to the wealthy Dutch East India Company returned from south-east Asia full of spices, tea, coffee, porcelain and silk. The central place of ships and boats to Dutch power and wealth gave rise to a new branch of art – maritime paintings.

At first artists were mainly interested in the way the ships were built and the latest techniques used by builders to make them better. But later on in the 17th century the landscape part of the painting became as important as the ships. This painting is by Willem van de Velde in the 1650s – the middle of the 17th century. Here we have a calm sea, where the sea reflects the sky. The ships do not stand out as much as the viewer expects. Their sails look a bit like clouds; their forms are reflected in the water. The artist includes a very wide range of ships in the painting but the sky and the sea dominate the scene.

And even though there is just enough breeze in this scene to cause the flags on the boats to flap – magnificent red, blue and gold on the ceremonial ship – the water hardly ripples. If you have a perfectly flat sea, reflecting a blue sky with clouds, there is nothing to give the viewer a feeling of distance. That feeling of the distance between the foreground and background of the paintings is created by objects getting smaller, and also by a change in contrasts and intensity of the colours, so that everything gets greyer as it goes further into the distance.

Today we describe 17th-century paintings as Dutch if they were created in the Dutch Republic, which is modern-day Holland. But if they come from what is now Belgium and Luxembourg we describe them as Flemish. The difference dates back to 1648 when the

Eighty Years' War ended and the Peace of Münster recognised that the Protestant United Provinces in the north of the Netherlands were independent from the Catholic-dominated south, ruled by Spain. The Protestant provinces were the Dutch Republic.

But in reality there is no real difference between Dutch and Flemish paintings at this time. They are not two different traditions – they come from the same tradition which went in different directions. The royal collectors during the 18th and 19th centuries did not see any difference between Dutch and Flemish paintings. They used the word Dutch or Flemish to refer to very skilful painters who could make landscapes and scenes from everyday life very effectively.

Flemish painting was dominated by Peter Paul Rubens. He worked in the manner of an Italian old master, tackling every possible art form, working from a huge studio, specialising in religious paintings. Nothing was too large or too ambitious for him. The other great Flemish artist is Anthony van Dyck, a portrait painter who painted for royal families all over Europe. These artists had many other artists working in their studios but they also influenced lots more.

There are no artists quite like them in the Dutch Republic. Rembrandt perhaps comes close. He had a large studio like they did, but he was never as powerful as Rubens. There are other great names in Dutch art, like Johannes Vermeer, but they never had the influence that an artist like van Dyck had. To viewers today, Vermeer is a fantastic artist, but in the context of Dutch art in the 17th century, he was just another painter of interiors.

Stop 11

Gerrit Dou (1613–75), *The Grocer's Shop,* 1672, RCIN 405542

A striped curtain hanging from a stone archway has been pulled back. We are being invited into a grocer's shop on a busy morning. There are pots planted with flowers in front of a stone ledge and objects on top of it – a wicker basket, salt, a dish of lemons, a red covered glass jar and a cake that looks like a cushion. The objects seem to project into our space, drawing us into the scene.

The artist, Gerrit Dou, was one of Rembrandt's first pupils. He founded the *fijnshilders,* which means 'fine painters', in his native city of Leiden, 50 kilometres south-west of Amsterdam. They were known for their careful attention to detail.

Gerrit Dou painted with very fine brushes. People said he was obsessed with getting the details right. He was very worried that dust settled on his paintings so he had them covered with an umbrella constantly to keep dust off them. Being concerned about the effect of dust on his painting just shows how much he wanted to get the details absolutely right.

He lived in the Dutch Republic which had just become independent. Political and economic power was in the hands of the middle class people. There were no aristocratic patrons to commission works, so artists painted first and found a buyer later. To make works which would please their new clients – enthusiastic shopkeepers and merchants – they painted the world that those people lived in, with home interiors and scenes of everyday life. In the 18th century they became known as 'genre' paintings.

Everybody wanted to have a painting in this style. The paintings are astonishing. You would not believe that an artist could paint such realistic detail, with such an accurate glimpse of the world. Dutch paintings in the 17th century were often valued by the amount of work that the artist had put into it.

Stop 12

Sir Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), *Milkmaids with Cattle in a Landscape ('The Farm at Laken'),* c.1617–18, RCIN 405333

This countryside image is full of girls with rosy cheeks, plump dairy cows and a sturdy bull. There is a wheelbarrow full to the top with onions, cabbages and celery. A basket is piled so high with fruit that the girl cannot carry it by its handle, so she balances it on her head.

The artist is Sir Peter Paul Rubens. He did not have enough space to show all the richness of the Flemish landscape. After doing quite a lot of the painting he realised that the wooden panel he had chosen for it was too small. So, he added pieces of wood to the left, the top and the right edges. About seven centimetres was added on the left, and about 13 or 14 centimetres on the top and the right sides. The join shows as a slight ridge or crack along the surface of the painting.

The original composition of the painting was carefully planned. But the extra portions on the left and the right are painted much more freely – Rubens seems not as concerned about these sections compared with the area he designed in advance. In some places the perspective does not quite work: for example, on the right-hand side the farmer riding his horse and leading another to water looks a little bit too small for that position in the painting.

Rubens was a devout Roman Catholic: he painted the Church of Our Lady of Laken in the distance – in the top right-hand corner of the original panel. Making the painting larger

meant he could extend the broad, sweeping sky into a vision of Heaven with a flock of descending doves. This landscape is a message about peace and the positive effect it has. For Rubens peace was the single most important thing to hope for.

Rubens starts to paint landscapes right at the end of his career. By then he had done everything and had nothing to prove. He had bought a country house and everything that goes with being a gentleman. It seems that Rubens painted landscapes for his own pleasure: they were not for sale. This makes Rubens landscapes particularly special – it feels like they have been made with love.

Rubens is a Flemish artist, but he learned about the tradition of painting landscapes when he travelled around Italy. His work combined Italian and Flemish traditions.. The Flemish tradition started with artists like Pieter Bruegel. Bruegel's landscapes were not simply the scenery where something was happening – they became the subject of the painting.

Rubens wanted to show as much of the land as he possibly could. Just as he had done with the *Farm at Laken*, Rubens also extended these two landscapes, *Summer* and *Winter*, hanging on either side of this work.

Stop 13

Claude Lorrain (1604/5–1682), *Harbour Scene at Sunset,* 1643, RCIN 401382

As the sun sets over the sea, the artist Claude Lorrain takes us on a journey to a Mediterranean harbour at the end of a hot summer's day.

The lightest part of this painting is the bright white sun, setting just above the horizon. The white turns slowly into a hazy yellow which becomes a light blue and then a much darker blue. The architecture in the distance is grey and misty but even so there is a surprising amount of detail. On the other hand, the architecture in the foreground is picking up sunlight. It appears to be a shade of orange and the light has a sparkle, so that even the areas where the building has started to crumble away pick up the light in a clear and attractive way.

His style was often imitated by other artists, and also by forgers, so Claude (which is how he is known in English) kept track of his paintings by listing them in a book known as *Liber Veritatis* or 'Book of Truth'. This book is now in the British Museum. Keeping a record meant that Claude's customers could ask him to make another version of an earlier work which they liked. The original painting of this scene, listed in the *Liber Veritatis*, is now lost, but this version shows how Claude's careful observation could stir up memories and make people think – something his imitators did not often manage to do.

We have now reached the end of our tour. We hope that, as you've explored the rooms of the exhibition, you have been drawn into the different worlds of the paintings and that you have decided which of them that you think are 'Masterpieces'.

To find out more about works of art in the Royal Collection, please visit our website at www.rct.uk. There you can find out about future exhibitions and keep in touch by signing up to our e-Newsletter or by following us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

If you have bought your ticket directly from us, you can return to The Queen's Gallery, free of charge, for a year, by converting your ticket into a 1-Year Pass. Just sign the back and ask a member of staff to stamp it before you leave.

We hope you have enjoyed the exhibition.

When you have finished, please return this guide at the desk.

This script has been compiled from a tour produced by ATS with information from the following experts from Royal Collection Trust: Desmond Shawe-Taylor, Isabella Manning, Anna Reynolds, Alex Buck, Rosie Razzall and Claire Shepherd.