

# TEACHERS' RESOURCE

PETER LELY: A LYRICAL VISION



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TEACHERS' RESOURCE

## **PETER LELY: A LYRICAL VISION**

Compiled and produced by Naomi Lebens and Joff Whitten  
with thanks to Sarah Green

SUGGESTED CURRICULUM LINKS FOR  
EACH ESSAY ARE MARKED IN GREEN

TERMS REFERRED TO IN THE GLOSSARY  
ARE MARKED IN PURPLE

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A full set of academic references for material  
included is available on request

Cover image:  
Peter Lely  
*The Concert*  
c.1650  
Oil on canvas

This page:  
*Reuben Presenting Mandrakes to Leah* (detail)  
Peter Lely  
1640-50  
Oil on canvas

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# WELCOME

The Courtauld Institute of Art runs an exceptional programme of activities suitable for young people, school teachers and members of the public, whatever their age or background.

We offer resources which contribute to the understanding, knowledge and enjoyment of art history based upon the world-renowned art collection and the expertise of our students and scholars. I hope the material will prove to be both useful and inspiring.



Henrietta Hine  
Head of Public Programmes

The Teachers' Resources are intended for use by secondary schools and colleges and by teachers of all subjects for their own research. The essays are written by early career academics from The Courtauld Institute of Art and we hope the material will give teachers and students from all backgrounds access to the academic expertise available at a world renowned college of the University of London. Each essay is marked with suggested links to subject areas and key stage levels.

We hope teachers and educators will use these resources to plan lessons, organise visits to the gallery or gain further insight into the exhibitions at The Courtauld Gallery.

Sarah Green  
Gallery Learning Programmer  
The Courtauld Institute of Art



# 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE EXHIBITION

Sir Peter Lely (1618 -1680) was Charles II's Principal Painter and the outstanding artistic figure of Restoration England. Since the 17th century, he has been celebrated for his flattering pictures of the great and the beautiful of Charles II's court. However, Lely never wished to be a portraitist. When he arrived in war-torn England in the early 1640s, hoping to step into the vacuum left by the death of Sir Anthony van Dyck, Lely had high ambitions and devoted himself to paintings inspired by classical mythology, the Bible or contemporary literature. His pastoral subjects resonate with a lyrical dream of England, an Arcadia far removed from the political upheaval of the age. Still relatively unknown, Lely's paintings of figures in idyllic landscapes are among the most beautiful and seductive made in 17th-century England.

The Courtauld Gallery's exhibition is the first to examine Lely's remarkable group of large-scale narrative paintings produced in the 1640s and 1650s. Typically depicting a sensuous pastoral world of shepherds, nymphs and musicians in idyllic landscapes, these ambitious pictures are all the more extraordinary for having been painted during the turmoil of the English Civil War and its immediate aftermath. Organised around The Courtauld's enigmatic *The Concert*, the exhibition includes an important group of little-known paintings loaned from historic private collections.

Born in Westphalia, the son of a Dutch officer, Lely received his artistic training in Haarlem and it was in Holland that he first began painting narrative subjects. One example, depicting the *Finding of Moses*, is now known only through its inclusion in the background of two paintings by Vermeer (*Woman Writing a Letter, with her Maid*, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, and *The Astronomer*, Musée du Louvre, Paris). From this exhibition, *A Pair of Lovers in a Landscape* is another striking example of Lely's early interest in Arcadian subjects. Observed by two satyrs, an enraptured shepherd gazes longingly at his companion.

Lely left Holland around 1643 and arrived in England at a time when few painters had stayed in London following the move of the Royal Court to Oxford. By 1650 he had moved to Covent Garden Piazza, where he remained for the rest of his life. His major patrons in this early period in

London were the 'Puritan Earls', a group of cultivated noblemen including the Duke of Northumberland and the Earls of Pembroke and Salisbury, as well as the circle surrounding the Countess of Dysart at Ham House in Richmond.

In England Lely had the opportunity to study paintings by Van Dyck and by the great Venetian 16th-century artists Giorgione and Titian in the houses of his wealthy and cultivated aristocratic patrons. He began to buy these works himself, and by the end of his life had amassed one of England's richest collections of 16th and 17th-century Italian paintings and drawings (several examples from The Courtauld's collection are on display alongside the main exhibition). It was probably in response to the work of Van Dyck and the Venetian Renaissance that Lely made his most ambitious works of the 1640s and early 1650s. They include *Nymphs by a Fountain*, *The Concert* and *The Rape of Europa* which are all exhibited here.

The sensual *Nymphs by a Fountain* is one of Lely's greatest paintings. Here he created a unique and compelling evocation of quiet, sensuous beauty. It is as if we have stumbled into a forest glade in the evening to discover these nude figures in varying states of abandon. They are arranged so that the viewer is able to admire the perfect youthful body from every possible angle. The erotic qualities of this work were not lost on the early 20th century schoolmasters of Dulwich College, who ensured that *Nymphs by a Fountain* was kept under lock and key in the lumber room, 'for fear it should injure the morals of the boys'. The work brilliantly updates the mythological paintings of Titian and Van Dyck, which Lely knew, but it is indebted to no single literary or pictorial source.

*Boy as a Shepherd* belongs to the same unspoiled Arcadian world as *Nymphs by a Fountain*: a mythic place of harmony and repose. One of Lely's most celebrated works, this painting was once owned by the collector Horace Walpole (1717-1797) who eulogised the boy's 'impassioned sentimental glow, the eyes swimming with youth and tenderness'. Framed by a rocky niche, the young shepherd is shown with a flute and one finger of his left hand curled elegantly over his crook. Lustrous hair and full lips emphasise his youthful sensuality and the evening light adds to the elegiac mood. Lely's beautiful boy evokes the rural

idyll described by ancient poets such as Virgil.

Once thought to show the painter's family, *The Concert* seems more likely to be a highly personal and allegorical interpretation of *Music in the Service of Beauty*. It transports its viewers into an enchanted and timeless woodland paradise, where musicians entertain beautiful women. The man who plays the viol da gamba in the centre is the painter himself. Life and art intersect in Lely's paintings, and a significant number of works in the exhibition bear witness to the artist's love of music and song and he is said to have liked to hear music playing as he worked. *The Concert* belongs to the pastoral mythologies which dominated cultural life in 17th-century England, from the court masques of Inigo Jones and the plays of Shakespeare and his successors.

Unusually in England, Lely worked extensively from life models, both male and female. Later in his career, he ran a drawing school from his home in Covent Garden, encouraging artists to draw from the live model. A small number of identifiable individuals appear in various guises in his narrative pictures. For instance, the dark-haired woman at the top right of the group of sleepers in *Nymphs at a Fountain* reappears as an attendant in another of Lely's major compositions, *The Rape of Europa*.

Despite its complexity, scale and ambition *The Rape of Europa* did not find a buyer during Lely's lifetime. Evidently there was only limited interest in such narrative paintings by contemporary artists. Lely's friend Richard Lovelace blamed the ignorance of 'an un-understanding land'. Much to Lely's disappointment, his narrative paintings did not find favour with many English patrons, and he produced no more than thirty. By 1654 Lely was judged to be 'the best artist in England' but from then on, aided by a flourishing studio, he almost exclusively produced portraits.

Peter Lely: A Lyrical Vision looks beyond our conventional understanding of Lely to reveal a neglected chapter of this major painter's career. It sheds new light on one of the most ambitious group of paintings to have been produced in England in the 17th century.

ONCE THOUGHT TO BE THE PAINTER'S FAMILY, *THE CONCERT* SEEMS MORE LIKELY TO BE A HIGHLY PERSONAL AND ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATION OF MUSIC IN THE SERVICE OF BEAUTY. THE MAN WHO PLAYS THE VIOL DA GAMBA IN THE CENTRE IS THE PAINTER HIMSELF.

”



Image:  
Peter Lely  
*The Concert* (detail)  
c.1650  
Oil on canvas

CURRICULUM LINKS: KS3+  
Art and Design, History, Art History, and  
other Humanities

## 2: SIR PETER LELY AND THE SISTER ARTS: PAINTING, POETRY AND MUSIC

The earliest printed account of Lely's career, published by Richard Graham in 1695, states that when the young painter arrived in England he:

'pursu'd the natural bent of his *Genius in Lantschapes with small Figures, and Historical Compositions*: but finding the practice of *Painting after the Life* generally more encourag'd, he apply'd himself to Portraits'.

Noble in their choice of narrative subject and atmospheric in their handling of paint, Lely's *Historical Compositions* were acclaimed throughout Europe.

In contrast, Lely received harsh criticism for the production of portraits which became the focus of his later career. The portrait genre was perceived to lack the theoretical and intellectual gravitas of narrative painting, and Lely's critics believed he was motivated purely by financial and social gain. In 1718, Arnold Houbraken wrote that 'when I was in London I saw with amazement that with a few exceptions there were only portrait painters to be found.... for it is certain that, the majority abandon more praiseworthy pursuits driven to this by the glittering profit they see in it'. This view appears to have been widely held. Though the biographer, art historian and painter Joachim Sandrart (1606 - 1688) had never seen a painting by Lely, the painter's reputation was strong enough to elicit his disdain: 'What rhymes with true art? Mr Lely says: "the favour of kings"'.

Lely is still today known for painting portraits, but this essay, akin to *The Courtauld* exhibition, focuses on those narrative paintings completed early on in his career, around his move to England sometime in the 1640s.

The genre of History painting, that is, narrative paintings which depict episodes from classical literature or biblical events, had been considered the highest form of pictorial art since the Renaissance. This status was conferred through the authority of ancient texts, particularly the epic poems of Homer, Virgil and Ovid which provided inspiration for artists throughout the 16th and 17th centuries.

Of all the paintings in this exhibition, only *The Rape of Europa* visualises a precise story from Greek mythology (Fig. 1 depicts a similar composition). First narrated by Homer in the *Iliad*, the story goes that Jupiter, king of the gods, fell in love with the young noblewoman Europa. In order that he might seduce her, Jupiter transformed himself into a tame white bull and set out for the place where Europa and her maidservants were gathering flowers. Sure enough, Europa began to pet the animal and decorate its horns with garlands. Eventually she climbed upon its back, where upon Jupiter took flight to the sea, swimming with her on his back to the island of Crete.

Before Lely's version, this subject was famously rendered by Titian (painted 1562, now housed in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston), whose canvas was copied and re-interpreted by Rubens (c. 1630, Museo del Prado, Madrid). Adhering closely to Ovid's picturesque re-telling of the tale in his *Metamorphoses*, Titian captures a dramatic moment full of movement. Europa clings to one horn of the bull, her 'fluttering tunic floating in the breeze' as her maidservants look on in despair from the distant shore. Lely, however, chose to portray a different moment in the narrative sequence. Here Europa is mounting the bull, crowning him with a further garland of flowers. This is the very turning point of the story, the moment just before tranquil bliss gives way to fear and abduction.

Lely's *Nymphs by a Fountain* (Fig. 2) constitutes a looser interpretation of textual sources, simply presenting characters described by the Ancient poets. But, in the previous decade Lely painted *Diana and Nymphs Bathing* (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nantes), a myth recounted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Diana, the goddess of hunting, was a chaste virgin. Bathing in a secluded pool one day in the company of her nymphs, she is spotted by the hunter Actaeon. Diana is so enraged that she changes him into a stag as a punishment. Like the Rape of Europa, the myth of Diana and Actaeon was commonly portrayed by artists in the 16th and 17th centuries, and was also rendered by Titian (National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh).



Image (Fig. 1):  
Willem van Mieris  
*The Rape of Europa*  
late 1600s  
Black chalk on blue paper

Due to copy right issues we are unable to reproduce the Chatsworth picture. The van Mieris depicts a very similar composition to the Lely.

LELY'S NYMPHS  
BY A FOUNTAIN  
CONSTITUTES A  
LOOSER  
INTERPRETATION  
OF TEXTUAL SOURCES,  
SIMPLY PRESENTING  
CHARACTERS  
DESCRIBED BY THE  
ANCIENT POETS.



All of the paintings in this exhibition are set within an idyllic landscape, depicting shepherds and musicians in a pastoral setting. These landscapes are richly atmospheric, shaped by Lely's knowledge of Dutch Italianate landscape painters during his training in Holland. He finds a poetic balance between the figures and the abundant wooded landscape, surrounding and emphasising the sensuous human form through pools of light and colour. Thus Lely presents a vision of Arcadia, the mythical kingdom of the pagan god Pan, whose bountiful lands were described by Ovid and Virgil. Lely owned printed copies of Arcadian poetry by both the Italian Torquato Tasso (1544 – 1595) and the English Edmund Spenser (1522 – 1599), and would almost certainly have known Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*, written in the 1570s and republished many times during Lely's lifetime. In the 17th century, Arcadia was understood as a place of rural bliss far away from the stresses of contemporary urban life. Virgil's 'Golden Age', a time of plenty and happiness, contained none of the immoral dangers of the modern world - far from the torment of the Civil war that tore apart the fabric of the England in the late 1640s.

In the 17th century a desire to increase the social standing of the artist became increasingly justified through the conceptual marriage of painting and poetry. With an absence of classical literature devoted specifically to the visual arts, theorists turned to the poetic treatises of the classical world which made references to a familial relationship or association between painting and poetry. The 'doctrine of the sister arts', as it became known, was developed from Aristotle's *Poetics* and Horaces' *Ars Poetica*. The latter contained the famous simile "ut pictura poesis" (as is painting so is poetry), which was taken to support the assertion that painting and poetry were intimately related. The connection between

the 'sister arts' was described with even greater clarity by the Ancient Greek poet Simonides (c. 556–468 BC), who wrote that "painting is silent poetry and poetry painting that speaks". At the very heart of the pairing of painting and poetry was a shared emphasis on narrative vibrantly conveyed to the mind by means of the senses; poets painted pictures in the mind's eye with words, painters spoke poetry on canvas in paint.

The connection between painting and poetry was also shaped by the classical literary topos of *Ekphrasis*, in which a work of art was evocatively and vividly described with words, bringing it to life in the imagination of the reader. Ekphrastic description was common throughout Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries, employed by numerous poets and playwrights including Shakespeare in his description of the Greek army before the gates of Troy during the *The Rape of Lucrece*.

Peter Lely's paintings became the subject of Ekphrasis in two poems composed by the lyrical poet Richard Lovelace (1618 – 1658). The poet and painter were close acquaintances, both admitted to the Painter-Stainers Company of London on 18 October 1647. An active Royalist, Lovelace spent his fortune in support of the King and was twice imprisoned during the course of the Civil War. Shortly after his second spell in prison during 1648-9, Lovelace published a collection of verse entitled *Lucasta* for which Lely provided illustrative engravings. Printed in this collection, *To my Worthy Friend Mr. Peter Lilly: on that excellent Picture of his Majesty, and the Duke of Yorke, drawne by him at Hampton-Court* is one of the best-known 17th century poems on a work of art. As a poetic tribute to his friend, Lovelace describes his experience of viewing Lely's portrait of Charles I and his son:



See what a clouded Majesty! and eyes  
Whose glory through their mist doth  
brighter rise!

See! what an humble bravery doth  
shine,

And griefe triumphant breaking  
through each line;

How it commands the face! so sweet  
a scorn

Never did happy misery adorne!

So sacred a contempt! that others  
show

To this, (oth' height of all the wheele)  
below;  
That mightiest Monarchs by this  
shaded booke

May copy out their proudest, richest  
looke.

....

Thou sorrow canst designe without a  
teare,

And with the Man his very Hope or  
Feare;

So that th'amazed world shall  
henceforth finde

None but my Lilly [Lely] ever drew a  
Minde.

Lovelace's praise arises from the emotional response demanded by the painting. He does not as such describe the visual appearance of the painting, but uses expressive language, exclamations, and lyrical rhythm to emulate the effect of the painting. Lovelace highlights that which is common to both painting and poetry – the ability to give form to human feelings,

and in turn to move or affect the viewer or reader. The concluding lines make clear that Lely has captured something beyond the physical appearance of the King; he has portrayed the complex psychological state of a monarch whose reign had collapsed.

In the poem *Peinture. A Panegyrick to the best Picture of Friendship Mr. Pet. Lilly*, Lovelace declares that Lely's paintings rival Nature herself:

....

So by your art you spring up in two  
noons

What could not else be form'd by  
fifteen suns;

Thy skill doth an'mate the prolific  
flood,

And thy red oil assimilates to blood.

....

O Sacred Peinture [Painting  
personified]! That dost fairly draw

What but in Mists deep inward Poets  
saw;

'Twixt thee and an Intelligence no  
odds,

That art of privy council to the gods!

Lovelace conveys a sense of the vividness of Lely's paintings; from his depiction of blood, to the conjuring of the taste and smell of fruit. For Lovelace, Lely conjures a world which becomes real in the imagination of the viewer, appealing to our senses and constructing an illusion which robs nature of her creative powers.

Lovelace owed much of his knowledge of painting to the writings of Franciscus

Image (Fig. 3):  
Peeter Boel  
*Still life with musical instruments*  
17th century  
Red chalk on paper

Junius the Younger (born Heidelberg, German, 1590) who was librarian to Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel. Junius published *De Pictura Veterum* in 1637, with an English translation, *The Painting of the Ancients*, following the next year. This text was widely read and greatly influential, providing a compilation of quotations from a variety of classical sources in an attempt to elevate the prestige of the pictorial arts. Junius asserts that painting is first and foremost an art of imitation, reflecting the world visible around us. However the painter must not merely copy nature, but use imagination to elevate the visual arts to the level of poetry. He also argued that imagination must be brought to the painting by the beholder, so that it may become 'vivid'.

Whilst the poet has rhythm, meter, and the sound and association of words at his disposal, the painter uses the 'language of the eyes' to stimulate the imagination of the viewer. Lely evokes a certain, overtly sensuous, mood in his paintings through the use of deep colour and contrast between light and shade. In *Nymphs by a Fountain* the exposed skin of the Nymphs is luminous, bathed in a glowing light which enters the frame from the left – the hand of the Nymph whose back is turned to us casts a shadow which caresses the form of his buttocks, poised perfectly still in this scene of abundant fulfilment.

Above all others, Lely revered the work of Van Dyck: for a time he owned Van Dyck's *Cupid and Psyche* (Royal Collection, Windsor), which is the only known mythological composition to survive from Van Dyck's time at the English Court. Van Dyck was inspired by the Venetian painters of the High Renaissance, principally Titian, who featured prominently in the collection of Charles I. Both Titian's and Van Dyck's compositions rely heavily on colour, counterbalancing warm and cold tones, as well as evocative strokes of the brush. The same saturation of colour is found in Lely's *Sleeping Nymphs by a Fountain*, as well as *The Rape of Europa*, where the prismatic colours of the protagonists' robes are echoed in the distant sunset. In all of the works on display in the exhibition, 'Lely shows himself to be a pictorial magician full of charm and poetic delicacy' (Jacques Foucart, *Peter Lely, Dutch History Painter*).

At this point in the 17th century painting not only shared a close relationship with poetry, but with music. Lyrical poetry, such as that penned by Lovelace, was naturally closely aligned with the work of court composers; his poems were set to music by Henry Lawes, John Wilson and John Lanier. Indeed it was common for poetry to be performed with a lute accompaniment. The three arts of painting, poetry, and music, were fused together in the performance of court masques, the most famous of which is *The Triumph of Peace*, written by James Shirley for music by William Lawes. This production was staged by the court architect Inigo Jones, performed in 1634 at Whitehall Palace. John Milton and Henry Lawes also collaborated closely, producing a pastoral masque entitled *Comus* which told the story of a young girl who, in the midst of a dense forest, cried out for help to Ovid's nymph Echo (four songs of which are available on YouTube).

Lely had a sincere love of music, and his relationship with figures such as Lovelace meant he was undoubtedly part of a social circle which included those musicians and composers who worked on Masques. However, even before Lely arrived at the English court music was a defining element of his artistic practice. Trained in Holland, Lely was intimately acquainted with the Dutch traditions of genre painting and still life, which frequently centred upon the act of music making or included musical instruments. Indeed it is estimated over ten percent of Dutch paintings and prints of the 17th century depict music in various forms. One such example from The Courtauld collection is the *Still life with musical instruments* by Peeter Boel (Fig. 3) which displays a lute, harp, violin, bass viol, guitar, bagpipes and tambourine amidst an assembly of other expensive objects. In the foreground are the discarded tools of the artist: a pair of compasses, paint brushes and palette, sculpted head and chisel. Boel has also included a globe and a suit of armour, both of which function as symbols of power and nobility. As a united composition, this drawing expresses the education, wealth and status of the patron; the tools of the artist show a working knowledge of the visual arts, the musical instruments and songbook serve to indicate the accomplishment of their owner. Lely included musical instruments as

attributes of cultural refinement in both *The Music Lesson* (1654), and in *The Concert*. Yet musical instruments also served as a symbol of transience, for musical performance is a fleeting pleasure which quickly passes with the experience assigned to memory. Painting, on the other hand, stills and fixes time. The same distinction was noted in the 17th century with regards to poetry and painting, becoming the sticking point of the doctrine of the sister arts: whilst poetry and music are temporal arts, painting is ultimately spatial. However it is those shared properties of painting, poetry and music which are central to Lely's artist conception. He appeals to the eyes through the vividness of his representations, and evokes the sound of music through the inclusion of musicians who produce sweet harmony. It is these sensual aspects of his paintings which bring Arcadia to life.



Image:  
Peter Lely  
*The Concert* (detail)  
c.1650  
Oil on canvas

**SIR PETER LE LY AND THE SISTER ARTS**  
Written by Clare Baron

**CURRICULUM LINKS:** KS4+  
Art and Design, Art History, History, Music,  
English Literature and other humanities

### 3: THE ART OF CHARMING: PETER LE LY'S PORTRAITS OF BEAUTY

Peter Lely is a painter we associate with glamorous portrayals of the English aristocratic and political elite. But, as we have seen, before he built up his reputation as a fashionable portrait painter, Lely was known for painting subject pictures, such as *The Concert*. In this painting, we can see early indications of the elements that would go on to define Lely's later portraiture style. The three women on the right hand side of the painting are particularly characteristic of Lely's depictions of beauty and femininity, with their fashionable and elegant hairstyles and their revealing, but luxuriously painted, costume. The large swathe of pinky-red fabric that falls behind the three women is also a feature that Lely would repeat in his later portraits.

Lely arrived in London at an opportune moment. William Dobson, the portraitist currently favoured by members of the court of Charles I, had died recently in 1648. The young Lely was able to step into the gap left by Dobson and to secure a number of important and extremely wealthy patrons, in particular the earls of Leicester, Salisbury, Pembroke and Northumberland. The four earls had occupied very influential positions in Charles I's court, but had chosen to remain in London rather than follow the King when he left the city. Lely spent a great deal of time in the grand houses of his new patrons and this allowed him to study their extensive collections of European and British art. Most significantly, Lely was able to see paintings by Antony van Dyck, one of the most successful and popular portraitists in Europe. Van Dyck was responsible for the familiar images of Charles I, such as famous, *Equestrian Portrait of Charles I*, from 1637-8, now in the National Gallery, London.

Van Dyck's portraiture style was highly influential on Lely's own work in terms of its scale, composition, the use of dress and accessories, pose and painting technique. If we look at Van Dyck's portrait of *Katherine, Countess of Chesterfield*, and *Lucy, Countess of Huntingdon*, painted between 1636 and 1640 (Fig. 1), it is possible to see the lessons Lely learned from his predecessor. Scale is important here, about three quarters of the bodies of both women are shown, and they take up the majority of space in the picture. This makes it clear that they are the focus of



## VAN DYCK'S PORTRAITURE STYLE WAS HIGHLY INFLUENTIAL ON LELY'S OWN WORK IN TERMS OF ITS SCALE, COMPOSITION, THE USE OF DRESS AND ACCESSORIES, POSE AND PAINTING TECHNIQUE.



the painting. Van Dyck was also famous for using elegant and fashionable accessories and costumes in order to show his subjects to their best advantage.

In this portrait, both the women are wearing luxurious silk gowns. Capturing the effect of light reflecting on rich fabrics and jewellery was a key skill for a successful painter. These costly materials advertised the wealth and social importance of the people in the painting. Props, such as the stringed instrument in this painting, were also used to highlight sitter's accomplishments or skills. The two women are painted in front of an idyllic rural background, which was designed to hint at the land and property of their families. Although their poses may look stiff and unnatural to us today, Katherine and Lucy are holding themselves in a way designed to appear easy and graceful. The position of Katherine's arms, for example, allows her to show off her delicate wrists and long, tapering fingers, which were considered to be desirable attributes in the seventeenth century.

Lely also followed Van Dyck's painting style. Van Dyck would often prepare his canvases with a coloured background before he began painting. He then painted his design for the portrait directly onto the canvas using a neutral earth-coloured pigment. Once the main elements of the picture were laid out, he would build up the areas of colour using many layers of transparent oil paint. The viscosity of the paint results in the loose and relaxed brushwork seen in the areas of fabric and in the landscape backgrounds. He used smaller brushes and more opaque paint mixtures to add details, such as the pearls and lace trimmings seen in the portrait of Katherine and Lucy. We can see these techniques feeding into Lely's own paintings.

Lely remained successful throughout the Commonwealth period and even painted one of the official portraits of Oliver

Cromwell in 1654. Far from the idealising style that would go on to define Lely's portraiture practice, for this stark portrait of the Lord Protector of the Commonwealth he was directly instructed to:

'paint my [Cromwell's] picture truly like me. & not Flatter me at all, but... remark all these ruffness pimples warts & every thing as you see me'

Yet, despite this early success, it was when Charles II reclaimed his father's throne in 1660 that Lely's career really went from strength to strength. Lely was given the title of Principal Painter to the Restoration court, a title previously held by Van Dyck, and he was granted a pension of £200 a year by the King. After the austere and authoritarian rule of Cromwell's Commonwealth (suggested by his austere portrait), members of Charles II's court were intent on enjoying an exuberant and glamorous lifestyle. Beautiful women were celebrated in the Restoration court, not least the King's own favoured circle of mistresses. In years before the Restoration, it was important for women to appear chaste and virtuous. This changed after Charles II returned to London and a new kind of female portrait began to emerge. Lely captured the more permissive mood of court in his paintings and thus found himself in great demand.

These changes can be seen clearly in Lely's portrait of Diana Kirke from 1665 (Fig. 2). Diana was closely connected with the new King's court. Her father was Groom of the Bedchamber and she married the Earl of Oxford, Aubrey de Vere, who had been one of Charles I's most loyal supporters and was richly rewarded by Charles II. In her portrait, she poses in a similar attitude to that of Katherine in the earlier van Dyck portrait, but her dress is very different. The saffron coloured drapery, known as 'studio drapery', is wrapped loosely around her body, almost slipping off her shoulders and exposing her creamy breasts. The diarist Samuel Pepys commented on the irony of the Countess being named after the chaste goddess Diana. In this portrait she appears more like Venus, and in her left hand she holds a rose, which was an attribute of the goddess of love. Women were often painted as goddesses or figures from classical history in the Stuart period.

Image (Fig. 1):  
Anthony van Dyck  
*Katherine, Countess of Chesterfield, and Lucy, Countess of Huntingdon*  
1636-1640  
Oil on Canvas  
© Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection



IN HER PORTRAIT, DIANA KIRKE POSES IN A SIMILAR ATTITUDE TO THAT OF KATHERINE IN THE EARLIER VAN DYCK PORTRAIT, BUT HER DRESS IS VERY DIFFERENT. THE SAFFRON COLOURED DRAPERY, KNOWN AS 'STUDIO DRAPERY', IS WRAPPED LOOSELY AROUND HER BODY, ALMOST SLIPPING OFF HER SHOULDERS...



Lely was sometimes accused of making all his female sitters look like one another, and Diana's face exhibits several typical features of the painter's style. The flesh tones are made from a mixture of fresh pinks and bright whites, with the lips painted a deeper pink. Her eyes are large and elongated, with slightly hooded and shadowy eyelids. Her finely arched eyebrows frame her high forehead and long straight nose. Her hair is styled into a loose, but careful arrangement of shining curls. She is positioned in front of a romantic landscape, though Diana Kirke would never have appeared like this outside of her own home. The painting would probably have hung in one of the most intimate areas of her house, only on view to the family's close friends.

In 1662, Lely received a commission for a series of female portraits from Anne Hyde, the Duchess of York. She was one of Lely's most important patrons and as the wife of the King's brother, played a key role in the Restoration court. Anne was known for her intelligence and wit rather than her beauty, but the portraits she commissioned from Lely were a celebration of all kinds of feminine attractions. The 'Windsor Beauties', as the portraits came to be known, included images of the most dazzling women of Charles II's court, including notorious courtesans, some of the King's own mistresses, such as Barbara Villiers, the Duchess of Cleveland, and other respected members of the nobility. Barbara was a noted beauty and often played a leading role in court events, such as balls and ceremonial performances known as masques. Barbara built up

a mutually beneficial relationship with Lely and he painted her in many guises, including penitent Magdalene, the Madonna, an exotic 'Sultana' and as St. Catherine. Lely's portraits secured Barbara's reputation as a beauty. People became familiar with her image, with her raven dark hair and startling blue eyes.

In these portraits of Barbara and in the other Windsor Beauties, Lely's trademark painting style came to the fore. This was noted by Samuel Pepys, who described the set of eleven paintings as 'good, but not like.' By this he meant that the portraits were highly idealised by Lely and were not life-like representations of the real women. The group originally hung in the Duke of York's rooms in Whitehall Palace, but were later moved to Windsor Castle by James II and hung in the Princesses' dressing room. The success of Lely's paintings sparked off a trend for further series of 'beauties'. In 1689 Queen Mary followed in her mother Anne Hyde's footsteps and commissioned her court painter Godfrey Kneller to paint portraits of the most beautiful women in the Dutch and English courts. This series has become known as the Hampton Court Beauties.

In Stuart England, beautiful women became celebrities. Their physical attractions allowed them to build relationships with men who could provide money and power and they climbed the social ladder until they became part of the nobility. Their images were reproduced and they became well-known figures, with engravings and **mezzotints** being passed around in the same way we read celebrity

Image (Fig. 2):  
Peter Lely  
*Diana Kirke, later Countess of Oxford*  
c.1665  
Oil on Canvas

© Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection

gossip in magazines and on websites today.



No one demonstrated the fame that beauty could bring more clearly than Eleanor (Nell) Gwynne, who rose from selling oranges outside of London's theatres to become the King's most infamous mistress. This engraved copy of one of Lely's portraits of 'pretty, witty Nell', casts her in the role of country shepherdess (Fig. 3). The image combines courtly sophistication with idealised simplicity. It was fashionable to be painted as an innocent shepherdess, but her simple blouse falling open to expose her breasts reveals to us that this is another of Lely's highly sexualised images of femininity. Her facial features have been painted to resemble those of Diana Kirke, although she comes from a very different social class. Nell became the King's mistress in around 1669 after he had seen her performing on stage; she was a popular actress at the time. Her relationship with Charles II immediately boosted her social status and she was given a grand house on the fashionable street of Pall Mall, close to the Palace. She had an unconventional approach to court life and was known for her mischievous nature, which Lely hints at in this portrait. She looks boldly out of the picture, apparently unconcerned about her state of undress. Her full lips show the traces of a smile.

Nell Gwyn was well liked by the public, but this was not the case for all of the King's mistresses. There was great rivalry between these women as they jostled for the King's attention and favour. Nell was once mobbed in her carriage when she was mistaken for Louise de Kéroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth, the King's hated French mistress. Louise was painted by Lely in the 1670s (Fig. 4). We can see many similarities with the earlier portraits of Diana Kirke and with the Windsor Beauties series. Louise came to England in 1670 to take up the position of Maid-of-Honour to Charles II's sister, but she served as a spy in the court for Louis XIV of France. She soon negotiated herself into the position of the King's favourite mistress and as mark of his approval he granted her the title of Duchess of Portsmouth. She was known as one of Charles II's most expensive mistresses and was eventually receiving an allowance of £11,000 a year,

as well as occupying sumptuous rooms in Whitehall Palace. By entertaining the King and his friends in her apartment, Louise demonstrated her power over the court in the domain that should have belonged to the Queen, Catherine de Braganza.



Louise's beauty was central to her position at court and in this portrait by Lely, it is clear that she knew how to use it. She holds up her luxuriant long dark hair with one hand, a gesture that Lely adopted from earlier Italian paintings of ideal beauties. This pose draws attention to her delicate hands and also suggests the pleasurable feel of soft hair. Like Diana Kirke, she wears a loose dress, made out of long drapes of fabric pinned together at the shoulders and chest. She has the same almond shaped eyes, arched eyebrows and reddened lips that Lely gave to his earlier sitter. Her eyes gaze downwards and she appears both modest and appealing. Diana, Nell and Louise are all depicted as ideal Restoration beauties and, because of their beauty, they were able to gain power and influence in the male world of the court. Through her personal relationship with Charles II, Louise was also able to strengthen the diplomatic relationship between England and her home country.

The Restoration court was a pleasurable place to be young and beautiful. Women found themselves celebrated in plays, poems and portraiture. Peter Lely's paintings captured the graceful and sensuality of the women of Charles II's court in idealised images of beauty, which continue to be worshipped today.

Middle image (Fig. 3):  
Gerard Valck, after Sir Peter Lely  
*Eleanor ('Nell') Gwyn*  
17th century  
Line engraving  
© The National Portrait Gallery, London

Right image (Fig. 4):  
Paul van Somer, after Sir Peter Lely  
*Louise de Kéroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth*  
c. 1680  
Mezzotint  
© National Portrait Gallery, London

## THE ART OF CHARMING

Written by Katie Faulkner

CURRICULUM LINKS: KS4+  
Art and Design, Art History, History,  
English Literature and other humanities

## 4: SIR PETER LELY AND THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY CULTURE OF COLLECTING

In addition to achieving wide renown as a painter, Sir Peter Lely amassed one of the first great collections of paintings, prints and drawings in England by some of the most highly sought-after artists of the time. Yet before discussing Lely's collection, its specific character and its uses in more detail, it is first important to highlight that, in this endeavour, Lely was a key participant in a broader 'culture of collecting' that had, by the late 17th century, come to characterise certain elements of European society.

### A CULTURE OF COLLECTING

By the late 17th century, collecting, and particularly that of works of art, had become a prominent social practice across Europe. Principally used as a mechanism of display, kings, princes, curates, courtiers, artists and other assorted **virtuosos** all vied with one another to build up collections which would advertise their superior taste in the arts and stand as a visible mark of their prestige.

Of course, it should be noted that a cultural focus on sumptuous display was nothing new to the 16th and 17th centuries. Long before the great art galleries built up by figures such as Philip II and Phillip IV of Spain, the Holy Roman Emperor, Rudolf II and Charles I of England, collections of valuable jewels, weapons, tapestries and goldsmiths' works had openly displayed their owners' 'magnificence'. However, a particular emphasis upon the visual arts in collections, and specifically painting, drawing and sculpture, was qualitatively different from these other more traditional forms of material display.

Previously derided as 'low' or 'manual' arts without intellectual substance, these arts of **disegno** had depended upon a sea change in learned opinion before they could become the mainstays of great collections. This had first been provided by the discussions which sprung from the Italian Renaissance. Notable figures such as Leonardo da Vinci, Leon Battista Alberti, and the great father of art-historical writing, Giorgio Vasari, all wrote works which actively emphasised the intellectual and scientific qualities of the visual arts. They argued for their place alongside, rather than beneath, the celebrated and widely accepted 'liberal' arts of poetry and

geometry. In a culture pervaded by the currents of **humanistic** learning, in which scholars were keen to absorb the surviving lessons of classical antiquity, such views were increasingly accepted. Indeed, the ancient Greeks and Romans had both prized the visual arts which, when practised by accomplished figures, they saw as expressions of great genius.

In comparison to precious objects like jewels or gold plate, pictures and sculptures remained relatively inexpensive - their value to collectors was not one composed solely of raw materials. Rather, they became desirable marks of status as the ability to understand and appreciate artistic genius increasingly became a recognised symbol of noble refinement and learning. The skill of judgment was central - a point evidenced by the first known work on **connoisseurship**, Giulio Mancini's *Considerazioni sulla pittura*. Written between 1617 and 1619, and widely circulated in manuscript form throughout the seventeenth century, this work was essentially a practical guide which aimed to instruct **amateurs** and laymen in the proper appreciation of painting.

As the major subject of this essay is an artist-cum-collector, it is perhaps important to mention here that one of the primary sticking points of seventeenth century writing on connoisseurship was the question of whether an artist or a non-artist was better placed to judge pictures. Whilst Mancini, no artist himself, obviously insisted that key elements such as colour, **perspective** and the **expression of the passions** were common enough subjects in pictures to mean that everyone could recognise and judge them, plenty of other writers believed the exact opposite. In the preface to his 1678 treatise, *Introduction to the Academy of Painting*, the Dutch painter Samuel van Hoogstraten was explicit in his assertion that a non-artist would never be able to evaluate a picture properly - at least not without the assistance of a knowledgeable painter on hand.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Lely left no writings to explain his own theories on collecting. Undoubtedly, the quality of the works in his collection is testament to his own fine connoisseurship, but whether he believed such judgment beyond the realms

IN THIS PORTRAIT, LELY WAS INCLINED TO EXPRESS HIS TWO INDIVISIBLE IDENTITIES, AS PAINTER AND AS COLLECTOR, THROUGH A SINGLE ATTRIBUTE



Image (Fig. 1):  
Peter Lely  
*Sir Peter Lely (1618-1680)*  
c.1660  
Oil on canvas,  
© National Portrait Gallery, London



of a non-practitioner is, unfortunately, unknown. However, this question is an interesting one to bring to bear with regards to Lely's assured self-portrait of c.1660 (Fig.1.), where he portrays himself holding a small classical statuette.

The statuette is of a kind that proliferated both in the collections of connoisseurs, as symbols of their taste, and in the studios of painters, as examples of perfection to copy within their own work. In this portrait, therefore, Lely was inclined to express his two indivisible identities, as painter and as collector, through a single attribute.

Before we go on to examine Lely's collection in greater detail, one final context for his collecting activities is worth outlining. Hailed as one of England's first great collectors, it is important to note here that, in many respects, English collectors came relatively late to this game. It was only in the final years under James I, and under his son, Charles I, that members of the English elite began to emulate the already flourishing European fashion for art collecting. Inspired by their travels in Europe, key figures such as the Earl of Arundel, the Duke of Hamilton and the young King Charles I began to import pictures from across the continent. Indeed, one result of an otherwise disastrous, and unplanned, trip to Madrid in 1623 was to show the young Charles how the arts could and should become a blazon of greatness. Awed by Philip IV's great collection of paintings, Charles secured a gift of pictures

to take home with him. This notably included two important works by Titian - although the English Prince was forced to forgo the Spanish bride that he had originally intended to secure on his travels.

Building upon this early success, Charles continued to acquire pictures throughout his reign, helped by his successful purchase of a large part of the famous Gonzaga collection of paintings from Mantua in 1627. By the time of his execution in 1649 at the end of the Civil War, Charles's picture gallery had become an overarching symbol of his reign. A jaundiced roundhead opponent of the late King complained in 1651 that, under Charles, 'great summes were squandred away on braveries and vanities: On old rotten pictures [and] on broken nosed marbles'. It was not only for the funds that it would raise, but also for its symbolic value in rejecting the past, that Cromwell and his fellow leaders of the English Commonwealth quickly organised the sale of the late King's art collection en masse to eager art-lovers across Europe.

#### LELY AND HIS COLLECTION

Lely, certainly the first artist to build a prominent art collection in England, enters the story again at this point. Although not on the scale of other key buyers at the Commonwealth Sale, such as the King of Spain or the Archduke of Austria, he acquired some important works from the late King's gallery. He purchased eight paintings, including Van Dyck's *Cupid*

and *Psyche* and Terbruggen's *Laughing Musician with Bass Viol* - the latter a work by a Dutch artist which echoes the features of some of Lely's own early musical paintings. Yet, unfortunately for Lely, whose collection was likely to have been in its nascent stages at this point, these early acquisitions were not to remain with him. Upon Charles II's restoration to the throne in 1660, an order for the requisition of his father's art collection was published to which Lely promptly responded. At the time, it must have seemed a fair exchange in order to secure the royal favour on which his future career depended.

Apart from this early interlude, the majority of the information we now know about Lely's collection comes from events that took place after his death on 30th November 1680. In order to clear his debts, to provide for his son and to pay the various legacies and bequests he had outlined in his will, he had instructed the sale of all of his movable effects - including his collection of paintings, sculpture, prints and drawings. This daunting task was charged to his exacting friend and executor, Roger North. A complete inventory of the contents of his house was taken (though now regrettably lost) and two main sales were organised - the first, in 1682, 'Of Sir Peter Lely's Great Collection of Pictures, and other Rarities' was described in the surviving catalogue:

'The Pictures all being of the most eminent Italian and other Masters in good condition... 'tis assured that no Picture shall be Exposed which was not of Sir Peter Lely's own Collecting...'

North obviously recognised that Lely's skills as a connoisseur were a saleable commodity that added an extra kudos, effectively a mark of authenticity, to the pictures he had selected. This is further corroborated by the fact that the sale was very well attended with a number of aristocratic buyers even being accommodated on chairs hired specially for the occasion.

The sale catalogue, whilst not completely clear, also gives us an idea of the sort of paintings Lely collected - or at least what Lely's contemporaries believed them to be (some of the attributions at the were optimistic at best - which, in itself, could be taken as another marker of Lely's prestige as a collector). The pictures in the sale numbered around 135 works, a figure which does not include a similar number of paintings by Lely's own hand and those of his workshop assistants. The largest proportion of works were by North Italian, Dutch and Flemish artists, with a few French and Spanish examples, and they ranged widely in terms of subject matter. Portraits, landscapes and religious paintings were predominant whilst a smaller number of mythological, still-life and *vanitas* subjects were also present. A wide selection of prominent artists were represented with single pieces, but there were also several works by famous artists such as Van Dyck, Rubens, Antonio Mor, Veronese, Tintoretto and Bassano. In fact, Lely owned no less

than 22 portraits by Van Dyck – a fact which is perhaps suggestive of Lely’s intentions to use his collection to promote a visible link between his own work at court, primarily in the genre of portraiture, and that of, Van Dyck, his hallowed predecessor as principal painter to the English King.

Yet, as impressive as Lely’s collection of paintings undoubtedly was, it paled in comparison to the contents of the second major sale of his valuable effects – prints and drawings. Staged in 1688, no detailed catalogue of the sale remains but Roger North claimed that Lely’s collection of works on paper numbered an impressive 10,000 sheets. In his memoirs, North detailed how he ‘stamp’d every individual paper’ with a distinctive P.L. mark, which is still today how we can identify works from Lely’s collection in museums and galleries around the world. Strongest in sixteenth century Italian drawings, especially the work of artists such as Parmigianino (Fig.2.)



and Giulio Romano, Lely also owned a small number of drawings by more contemporary seventeenth century artists such as the Bolognese Annibale Carracci, the Spanish Ribera (Fig.3.), and the French artists Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorraine. His print collection was of an equally high standard, including a number of examples of rare prints by Marc Antonio Riamondi, the print maker who worked closely with Raphael.

Lely’s particular emphasis on prints and



drawings is interesting – it draws us towards the key questions of how Lely used his collection, and the major motivating factors behind it. Drawings and prints were an unusual specialism for an English collector to have at this time. Much more common on the continent, only really Nicolas Lanier, art dealer and Master of the King’s Music during the reign of Charles I, had seriously collected drawings in England before Lely. Roger North wrote that when abroad buying paintings for his clients, Lanier would ‘at the same time agree to have a good parcel of waste paper drawings, that had been collected, but not [yet] much esteemed, for himself’. In fact, Lely acquired a large number of drawings from Lanier’s collection when it was sold following his death in 1666, including one study after Polidoro da Caravaggio, today in The Courtauld’s collection of Prints and Drawings (Fig.4.). Here, beneath the main decorative motif, Lanier’s star-shaped collector’s mark is visible, whilst Lely’s own collector’s mark, applied by Roger North, is displayed in the lower right-hand corner.

One potential reason for Lely’s bias for works on paper is that the status of drawing was flourishing in Europe during the seventeenth century. It was increasingly recognised by a growing body of connoisseurs, critics and collectors as the most immediate expression of artistic genius. Unlike painting, which could be considered and revised over a period of time, and further worked on by a number of different hands, drawings were the singular products of the artist’s unmediated mind. As an artist himself Lely perhaps understood this more than most; he himself once commented that ‘Painting is nothing more than Draught’. Whilst other English collectors may have been slower to realise this, it is likely that Lely had his sights on other European collections of prints and drawings as the major point of comparison for his own – which he openly and proudly considered to be ‘the best in Europe’.

As such, and akin to his many fellow collectors, the simple prestige of ownership was obviously one motivating factor in Lely’s accumulation of pictures, both on canvas and on paper. As well as his own practice, Lely’s quality collection in both of



Middle image (Fig. 2):  
Girolamo Francesco Maria Mazzola  
known as Parmigianino  
*Sheet of studies (recto)*  
16th century  
Pen and Ink on Paper

Top image (Fig. 3)  
Jusepe de Ribera  
*Sheet of studies with a seated man reading  
and two cherubim*  
c.1635  
Pen and ink on Paper

Bottom Image (Fig. 4)  
After Polidoro da Caravaggio  
*Decorative motif of classical armour*  
1620s  
Pen, ink, watercolour and body colour on paper



LELY'S USE OF HIS COLLECTION OF DRAWINGS, BOTH FOR HIS WORK AND FOR GRAND SHOW, DID NOT PREVENT HIM FROM BECOMING A PROLIFIC DRAUGHTSMAN IN HIS OWN RIGHT



these spheres would have given him the status and the authority to comment on artistic matters – which, as we have seen, was an increasing requirement of social protocol in contemporary high society. If nothing else, Lely was certainly acutely aware of the importance of rank and social status. Indeed, he was described by Samuel Pepys, an avid diarist whose daily musings provide a rare insight into the realities of seventeenth century London, as a 'mighty proud man, and full of state'. In an even more cutting remark, referring to the frequent criticism that Lely's portraits looked very little like their sitters, the poet and playwright John Dryden pointedly wrote of a 'late noble painter...who drew many graceful pictures, but few of them were like. And this happened to him because he always studied himself more than those who sat to him'. A man like this, however exaggerated in Dryden's caricature, would surely know the value of putting on a grand show.

Yet, as well as this, we have seen that Lely prized drawings on an artistic level, and it is thus further likely that at least a proportion of the works that Lely collected, and particularly the prints and drawings, would also have held a practical and didactic function. According to his biographer, Bainbridge Buckeridge, the primary reason behind Lely's collection was eminently practical. He describes how:

'In his younger days, he [Lely] was very desirous to finish the Course of his studies in Italy, but being hinder'd from going thither by the great Business he was perpetually involv'd in, he resolv'd to make himself amends, by getting the best Drawings, Prints and Paintings of the most celebrated Italian hands'.

Further, according to Buckeridge, Lely's own great skill was actually the direct product of 'daily conversing with the Works of these very great Men'.

Such comments, themselves revealing of contemporary attitudes towards artistic training (in which young artists learnt

from copying established masters), were not completely without foundation. Van Dyck's influence, for example, is visible in a number of Lely's female portraits, whilst Parmigianino's drawings provided, at least in a few documented cases, direct models for poses in Lely's own oeuvre. Over two thirds of the drawings Lely assembled were rough **working drawings** of figures or drapery, both elements which featured heavily in Lely's own practice. Taken as a whole, his collection would have provided a fruitful source of ideas, compositions and poses which he could manipulate and build on for use in his own work. It also probably provided a valuable training tool for his numerous apprentices and workshop assistants, who could be set to copying work, not from Lely's hand alone, but also a plethora of other established masters.

As a concluding point, it is important to stress that Lely's use of his collection of drawings, both for his work and for grand show, did not prevent him from becoming a prolific draughtsman in his own right. If anything, it must have encouraged him to appreciate the importance of drawing for the development of one's art. Lely produced numerous independent preparatory studies for his paintings (Fig. 5) and he also organised one of the first artists' academies in England, where students would gather to draw from the live model. Lely's large scale drawings of figures in the ceremonial dress of the Order of the Garter provide particularly fine examples of his own skillful draughtsmanship (Fig. 6) Equally celebrated for both his taste and his own art, particularly on paper, Lely therefore holds the unique honour that his admirers are able to look for, not one, but rather two marks – that of Lely's own hand and that of his collector's stamp.



Top image (Fig. 5):  
Peter Lely  
*Study of an arm and hand*  
c.1665  
Red, white and black chalk on paper

Right image (Fig. 6):  
Peter Lely  
*Study of two heralds in ceremonial dress*  
c.1667  
Black and white chalk on paper

SIR PETER LELY AND THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY CULTURE OF COLLECTING  
Written by Naomi Lebens

CURRICULUM LINKS: KS4+  
Art and Design, Art History, History, and other humanities

# 5: IN COMPANY

## AN ARTIST'S PROJECT

The photograph on the opposite page is an in-situ shot of *In Company* (Fig.1.) - a diptych commissioned for a bar in the Old Bengal Warehouse, one of London's oldest surviving warehouses. Hoxton Art (the gallery that represents me) had been collaborating with Conran & Partners/D&D London to supply artworks for their new venues across London. This commission offered me an exciting opportunity to create a piece that reflected its surroundings. I had made works in response to collections before, but responding to a building where the work would be permanently displayed was a new challenge. The Old Bengal Warehouse was built by the East India Company, a trading company founded in 1600 which enjoyed the monopoly of trading with Southeast Asia, East Asia and India for over 200 years. Constructed between 1768 - 1771, it once stored rich spoils from the company's expeditions overseas, including crates of tea, spices, cigars and port. With such history within the warehouse's walls, there was a lot to take in. Yet, rather than simply illustrating or narrating specific events within the building's history, I was keen to create a painting that would more subtly acknowledge its heritage, its age and its experience. I would take inspiration from the building, but not be limited by it.

My practice sits in between **figuration** and **abstraction**. My paintings act like memories, delving into nostalgia, depicting fragments or traces of people. A fascination with portraiture drives my practice: I often use works by the 18th-century British painters Gainsborough and Reynolds as starting points for my own. In my work I explore tensions between the expressionistic qualities of paint and direct observational representation. I feel a deep affinity with the European tradition of portraiture; I love the flamboyance, grandeur and stature of full-length portrait paintings by old masters. Portraiture traditionally presents the viewer with a prescribed identity, clearly presenting who the sitter was, whereas my works are more abstract in their essence. They present the viewer with a depiction of a figure that deliberately poses more questions than it answers. My work leans away from a prescribed narrative and, through *In Company*, I wanted to explore the multiple

ideas concerning adventure, travel and history that the warehouse brought to mind. The painting would be wholly imaginary, but it would touch on something real from the past.

With this in mind, my approach to the commission was to see it from a figurative point of view. I began by developing ideas of characters that would represent the ideas I wanted to express. I researched images of officers, soldiers and traders that had links to the East India Company. I would not be working from the model or copying a photograph to create the figures, but I needed a starting point, a spark to fire up my imagination. The starting point for each painting is exactly that, a point of departure with no predetermined end point. The outcome of painting is not predictable, but this by no means reduces the significance of research. Proper preparation for every painting is essential; the right source imagery and background is a fundamental building block. Tapping into history is a passion within my practice, and I can spend days and days visiting London collections. However, as the commission timeframe was so short (a mere six weeks) I limited my research time to a week.

To maximize this time I did a lot online, mainly through the V&A website, and, after speaking to family and friends, I soon discovered I knew someone who was a descendant of an Indian officer in the East India Company! Discussing the figures and roles with her fuelled my imagination: it was then that I decided that the paintings would be based on one Indian and one British styled officer. The inspiration for the figures' costumes came from works by Tilly Kettle (1735-1786), a portrait painter and the first English painter to work in India. He sailed to India in 1768 with the British East India Company, and remained there until 1776. During his travels he painted both formal portraits of noblemen and sketches of local ceremonies. His portraits of British and Indian officers would inform my drawings.

As with most of my paintings, I began by building a portfolio of reference images on the studio walls. This included black and white copies of Tilly Kettle's portraits, details of faces and colour sketches from my imagination. This continued for a week,

I WAS KEEN TO CREATE A PAINTING THAT WOULD MORE SUBTLY ACKNOWLEDGE ITS HERITAGE, ITS AGE AND ITS EXPERIENCE. I WOULD TAKE INSPIRATION FROM THE BUILDING, BUT NOT BE LIMITED BY IT.

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Image:  
Nadine Mahoney  
*In Company*  
2012  
Oil on canvas

images courtesy the artist and  
Hoxton Art Gallery, London  
[www.nadinemahoney.co.uk](http://www.nadinemahoney.co.uk)

### IN COMPANY

Written by Nadine Mahoney

CURRICULUM LINKS: KS3+  
Art and Design



covering the walls with simple sketches based on photocopies with various colour combinations worked on top. The aim was to create a pairing of figures that touched on the history of the building, without commenting on the politics of the time. The characters would be based on military figures but the context of the painting would not be about war. The drawing and colour choices were important in defining my concept and focus within the painting. I wanted both to maintain the formal qualities of stature and stance of 18th century portraiture and to introduce a dreamlike quality and sense of adventure. The scale and pose of the figures were drawn and reworked as simple pencil studies over several days. These sketches were then traced onto acetate sheets to be projected upon the studio wall. Once scaled up to two metres high, several variations of the drawings were made directly onto the wall (Fig.2.). This helped me to get the scale right - it can take a few attempts to enlarge an initial sketch, as an image can be perfect on an A4 sheet of paper but still disappoint when projected.



I work on various surfaces, but due to the size of the commission for *In Company* this work would be on canvas, as it is lighter than wooden or metal panels. With the concept and composition decided, I prepared the canvases. A simplified version of both figures was sketched directly onto the canvas with oil paint, which was then blurred with turpentine. The drawing was to act more as a compositional guideline than anything else, so it was useful to keep it as muted as possible. Referring to my colour studies I selected pigments and started to grind paint. I can recall Henri Matisse's influence from an early age, and always have this quote from Matisse in mind when grinding or mixing colours:

'It is not enough to place colours, however beautiful one beside another, colours must also react on one another'

Just like for Matisse, colour holds a significant role in my practice; the mood, feeling, character and spirit of a painting

comes from its colour combinations. With this painting I wanted the colours to evoke a sense of two cultures - Indian and British. The palette of turquoise, fuchsia and copper were also chosen to contrast with the traditional pose of the military figures and to capture an imagined sense of history and adventure in an exotic land. Turquoise would be the principal hue; it seemed to suggest the sea, a voyage of discovery - a visual representation of my romanticised thoughts of the East India Company. The red/orange tone of the copper would be a strong contrast to the green/blue tone of the turquoise. The palette choice was simple but it included various tones and opacities of each colour. By making my own oil paints, I am able to develop varying shades of translucent layers, including matt and gloss versions.

Making paint, or grinding as it is formally known, is very important to my practice. It provides me with the time to carry out an in depth and sustained observation of colour, to survey the tonal changes as the paint shifts from powder to paste to liquid. The process involves moving the glass muller around the palette in a figure of eight, forcing the pigment and the linseed oil to bind together to make paint (Fig.3.). It gives me great control over my medium, and nods to the artist alchemists of the past. It is a relatively uncommon practice within contemporary fine art as paints are so easily bought in tubes. However, it is a process that has become a defining aspect of my studio practice, engaging with raw materials and pure colour is a core interest of mine. It is a simple process and I repeat it until the pigment is evenly dispersed. Different mediums are added to the paste, depending on the desired effect. For the first layer of turquoise I added a mixture of Shellsol T and Stand oil; other oils can be added to slow or speed the drying time, or to change the paint to matt or gloss. About one third of the first day was spent at the palette, dedicated to grinding, mixing and to what I like to call my dedicated 'play time' - this involves pushing and scraping the paint over the glass plate. It acts as type of warm-up and it gets my mind in the right place.

The first colour on the canvas was turquoise. An initial layer (thinned with turpentine) was applied to both canvases using a large brush and broad strokes. Subsequent layers using varying brushes were built up over the following days to create the tone of the background. Thick layers of paint were then applied to the figures to block them out. To develop the contrasts and define the figures, I wiped off paint in certain areas. Rather than apply white to lighten areas of the painting, I worked the surface back to the initial off-white ground colour. This process involved a lot of turpentine and, to limit paint dripping, layers of paint were applied whilst the canvas was lying flat across studio floor (Fig.4.). The paintings were worked on simultaneously and large batches of paint were mixed to make sure the same hue covered both canvases. I spent four solid weeks applying and removing paint from the canvases. Colour and texture were built up in layers, covering the initial drawing.

MAKING PAINT, OR GRINDING AS IT IS FORMALLY KNOWN, IS VERY IMPORTANT TO MY PRACTICE. IT PROVIDES ME WITH THE TIME TO CARRY OUT AN IN DEPTH AND SUSTAINED OBSERVATION OF COLOUR



Fig. 2-4:  
Artist's own photograph  
2012



The darker tones in the background were built by adding translucent coats of a bright fuchsia colour between the darker layers of turquoise.

I maintained fluidity to the composition whilst working, and the painting went through many changes until it finally resolved itself. Limbs were moved up and down, left and right, and details such as facial features were defined and blurred until I was satisfied with the end result. A particular challenge was to make the two elements of the diptych feel as though they were one painting. Even though there would not be a direct dialogue between the two figures, they still needed to relate to each other. My work purposefully denies prescribed narratives, so the aim was to depict two isolated figures that were joined yet ultimately remained separate. During the process of painting, many details of the original drawing were eroded and lost. The copper tones were used at the end to catch the light and to bring details of the drawing back to the foreground.



The final composition was determined only a week before the completion date. As I work intuitively, knowing when to stop is always the hardest part. Rather than working from photographs, my paintings are driven by my own feelings. As I neared completion, I started working at a much slower pace, each dab or smear of paint was very carefully considered. At this point much more was being taken off than was applied. During the last week of painting, each studio day began by spending hours simply looking at the painting, assessing the successes and the failures of the day before. With each new mark a matter of great deliberation, my progress was very slow.

It is hard to put into words, but there is a sense when it is 'just right'. As an artist, my principal guidance comes from trusting my instincts, from having the confidence to follow my gut feelings. *In Company* offered several new challenges and working to a tight deadline was one of them! Mediums can be added to speed up the drying time of oils, but I try to limit the use of **siccatives** as it can deteriorate the shine and vibrancy of the colour in oil paint.

Each painting offers a new opportunity to experiment and learn, and in this sense a painting is never made as an isolated piece. Every painting that has come before has influenced it in part. For me, the intrinsic qualities of paint are a major source of inspiration, and painting involves constantly testing both my materials and myself. Breaking rules and inventing new ones are all part of the studio process. The 80 year old Goya titled one of his last drawings 'I am still learning' which aptly describes the experience of making art.

## 6: GLOSSARY OF TERMS

### ABSTRACTION

Pertaining to abstract art, abstraction describes a manner of representation that has little or no obvious derivation from figures or objects.

### AMATEUR

A person without professional knowledge who engages in the study of art as a pastime.

### CONNOISSEURSHIP

A connoisseur, practising connoisseurship, can be loosely defined as an expert judge in matters of taste in the sphere of the arts. It also involves the ability to discern the hand of a particular artist in a given work and thus provide accurate attributions.

### DIPTYCH

A painting on two hinged panels that may be closed like a book.

### DISEGNO

Translatable from the Italian as 'drawing' or, more generally, 'design', disegno was viewed by many during the Renaissance and long afterwards as the essential beginning of any artistic endeavour. As such, it was seen to provide the joint foundation of all the visual arts – painting, sculpture and architecture.

### EKPHRASIS

A graphic, often dramatic description of a visual work of art.

### ELEGIAC

Commonly used to refer to works of art, music or literature which have a mournful quality.

### EXPRESSION OF THE PASSIONS

Seen by many to be one of the major functions of painting in the 17th century, the expression of the passions meant the proper portrayal of emotion in any given painting. A successful painting would allow the viewer to read the narrative of the story by following the expressions and gestures of its characters.

### FIGURATION

Pertaining to figurative art, figuration describes a manner of representation which draws from real life objects and particularly the human form.

### HUMANISTIC

Pertaining to Renaissance humanism, humanistic scholarship was based on the study of the studia humanitatis or humanities: grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry and moral philosophy. At its heart was an endeavour to revive the moral and cultural lessons of classical antiquity through the study of surviving texts and artefacts from these ancient civilizations.

### MEZZOTINT

A type of tonal engraving dating from the 17th century. To make a mezzotint, the surface of a metal plate is roughened so it holds ink. The rougher the plate, the more ink is retained. In comparison with line engraving, a much greater range of tones can be achieved with mezzotint. Mezzotint was often the preferred technique for reproducing paintings, as it was possible to closely imitate the variety of tone and texture of oil paint.

### MULLER

A stone or heavy weight used for grinding artists' pigments or other materials on a slab.

### OEUVRE

An artist's body of work.

### OPACITY

A measure of opaqueness, opacity refers to show much you can see through the paint.

### PERSPECTIVE

The art of drawing solid objects on a two-dimensional surface so as to give an impression of their three-dimensional qualities.

### SICCATIVE

A liquid added to oil paints to accelerate the drying time.

### VANITAS

Most common to 17th-century Dutch painting, the vanitas genre of painting contained symbols of death or change and were intended to operate as a reminder of life's temporality and the inevitability of death. Most often composed in the form of a still-life, frequently used symbols included skulls, rotting fruit, candles and flowers.

### VIRTUOSO

A common term in use in the 17th century to describe a person with special interest in and knowledge of fine art, antiquities and, often, a wide range of other related fields.

### WORKING DRAWING

A drawing or study whose purpose is to aid the artist in working out elements of a composition in preparation for another drawing or painting. Often roughly drawn and partially finished, such drawings provide a stark contrast to highly finished drawings intended as works of art in their own right.

# 7: TEACHING RESOURCE CD

This CD is a compilation of key images related to the *Peter Lely: A Lyrical Vision* exhibition, held at The Courtauld Gallery from 11th October 2012 to 13th January 2013.

The images offer an insight into Peter Lely's work and that of his contemporaries, especially in relationship to portraiture. They include works by Lely, Van Dyck, Rubens and many other European artists of the time.

The Power Point presentation included in the CD aims to contextualise the images and relate them to one another.

All the images (and an accompanying image list) are also included individually in the 'images' folder.

#### FURTHER DETAILS:

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**CURRICULUM LINKS: KS2+ Art and Design, History, Art History, and other humanities.**

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# WITH THANKS

1: INTRODUCTION TO THE EXHIBITION  
Exhibition curator Caroline Campbell and  
Naomi Lebens

2: SIR PETER LELY AND THE SISTER ARTS:  
PAINTING, POETRY AND MUSIC  
Clare Baron

3: THE ART OF CHARMING:  
PETER LELY'S PORTRAITS OF BEAUTY  
Katie Faulkner

4: SIR PETER LELY AND THE SEVENTEENTH  
CENTURY CULTURE OF COLLECTING  
Naomi Lebens

5: IN COMPANY  
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6: GLOSSARY OF TERMS

7: TEACHING RESOURCES CD

TEACHERS' RESOURCE  
**PETER LELY: A LYRICAL VISION**  
**THE COURTAULD GALLERY**  
First Edition

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Sarah Green  
Gallery Learning Programmer  
Courtauld Institute of Art  
Somerset House, Strand  
LONDON, WC2R 0RN

0207 848 2705  
[sarah.green@courtauld.ac.uk](mailto:sarah.green@courtauld.ac.uk)

All details correct at time of going to press