

# BURLINGTON HOUSE

## A BRIEF HISTORY

Royal  
Academy  
of Arts

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# BURLINGTON HOUSE

## A BRIEF HISTORY

An Introduction to the Architecture of the Home  
of the Royal Academy for Teachers and Students

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For the Education  
Department ©  
Royal Academy of Arts

Designed by  
Niten Patel, London

Printed by  
Tradewinds Ltd

**Front cover**  
Gallery III detail  
Royal Academy of Arts,  
London

Photo © Royal Academy of Arts/  
Paul Highnam

**Back cover**  
The Sackler Wing of  
Galleries Staircase  
(viewed from below)  
Royal Academy of Arts,  
London

Photo © Royal Academy  
of Arts/Paul Highnam

**Right**  
Courtyard of Burlington  
House and facade of  
Royal Academy of Arts,  
London

Photo © Alys Tomlinson

Royal  
Academy  
of Arts



## Introduction

Passing through the gateway from Piccadilly into the Burlington House courtyard, the visitor is met with three hundred and fifty years of architectural history. Though undetectable in its exterior, Burlington House itself, standing to the north of the courtyard and home to the Royal Academy since 1867, is the last surviving town palace of four that were built along Piccadilly in the 1660s. For its first 200 years it housed two aristocratic families related by marriage. Over that time it was subject to dramatic and still visible transformations as each owner sought to remake it according to their particular requirements and imperatives. In 1854 it was bought by the government and during the 1860s the site was remade for institutional use as a home of arts and sciences – a great statement of national cultural and intellectual might. The house's already heavily altered facade was extended upwards; around its courtyard rose grand new buildings for six Learned Societies; and on its gardens to the north were constructed a range of purpose-built galleries, considered amongst the finest in London.

A building rarely remains as it was when first built, and at Burlington House the successive transformations enacted by those who have occupied it are especially vivid. This guide provides a brief introduction to this remarkable history, charting Burlington House's complex and fascinating evolution from its beginnings to the present day.

The playwright and architect Sir John Vanbrugh (1664–1726) famously wrote that such multi-layered historic buildings have the power to create 'lively and pleasing Reflections ... On the Remarkable things which have been transacted in them, Or the extraordinary Occasions of Erecting them.' Vanbrugh was suggesting that the experience of visiting historic buildings can fire the imagination and conjure a wealth of ideas about their builders and occupants. Similarly, through looking at and understanding a building such as Burlington House one can begin to appreciate the motivations and circumstances of those who left their mark upon it.

## Restoration town-palace

When Charles II came to the throne in the Restoration of 1660, he rewarded four of his supporters with plots of land on which to build houses, on the north side of Piccadilly. The street, also called Portugal Street after Charles's Portuguese queen, Catherine of Braganza, was the main thoroughfare of what was then a light and airy suburb on the western edge of town, far removed from the narrow, winding streets of the City.

The four town-palaces erected on these plots were built to designs that broadly resembled the Parisian model of an *hôtel particulier* or 'town palace', set back beyond a formal courtyard which was protected from the street by a high wall. One of these town-palaces was Burlington House. It was erected in the 1660s by the poet Sir John Denham (1615–1669), who as well as receiving the house's three-and-a-half-acre plot, was appointed Surveyor-General of the King's Works, the body charged with the task of building and maintaining royal palaces and other state buildings. In the words of the diarist John Evelyn, Denham was 'a better poet than architect', and so relied on his department's craftsmen to design the house. However, he was never to occupy it. In 1667, before the house was complete, his wife died and he sold the unfinished shell for £3,300 to Richard Boyle, 1st Earl of Burlington (1612–1698).

**Fig. 1**  
*Burlington House*  
in *Pickadilly*

Line engraving by Johannes Kip from a drawing by Leonard Knyff, 325 x 478 mm  
Published in *Britannia Illustrata*, London 1707, pl.29  
Royal Academy of Arts, London  
Photo © Royal Academy of Arts/Prudence Cuming Associates



### CORNICE

The horizontal projection at the top of a building or wall.

### PEDIMENT

A typically triangular gable end with horizontal cornice.

### DORMER WINDOW

A window which protrudes from the plane of a sloping roof.

### COLONNADE

A series of regularly spaced columns supporting an entablature.

### DORIC



### IONIC



### CORINTHIAN



**Fig. 1** The surge in building following the Great Fire of 1666 had made materials and labour expensive, but the architect Hugh May (1621–1684), Denham's deputy, was able to complete the house for Burlington by 1668 at a cost of £5,000. As can be seen in Knyff and Kip's aerial view, the house was designed around a broad central block with projecting wings on each side. As was typical of the period, the house featured a steeply sloping roof above a thick wooden cornice. A first-floor balcony and rather undersized pediment provided a central emphasis to the facade. Numerous chimneys show that there were fireplaces in many of the rooms. The dormer windows protruding through the roof brought light into the garrets where the servants lived. The windows gave the house something of a continental look, which extended to the *parterre* or formal geometric garden behind, comparable to Dutch models. In front of the house, the symmetrical single-storey courtyard outbuildings housed stables to the east (on the right of the picture) and kitchens to the west (on the left). Providing access to the house from Piccadilly, the courtyard served as both service yard and ceremonial space.

Despite its relatively plain facade, Burlington House was one of the grandest houses in London and even in the 1690s still paid the highest residential rates in the city.

What can we learn about this area of London from Knyff and Kip's view?

What is the relationship between the house and the gardens? How is the style of the garden in keeping with that of the main house? How do the two relate to the surrounding landscape?

## Architectural manifesto

In the next stage of Burlington House's development, the figure of Richard Boyle, 3rd Earl of Burlington (1694–1753), looms large. Famously, Burlington House was the site of the first exposition of Lord Burlington's architectural ideas, which were to have a great impact on architectural taste in Britain for much of the first half of the eighteenth century. However, before he came into his inheritance, the first steps in renovating the house, which by this time would have looked somewhat dated, were taken by Burlington's mother, the Dowager Countess Juliana.

To undertake this renovation Lady Juliana employed James Gibbs (1682–1754), one of the most fashionable of contemporary architects, who was fresh from his training in Rome. Gibbs is thought to have made alterations to the interior of the house, but his most visible known work, though now long since demolished, was the construction in 1715–17 of a semi-circular Doric colonnade in the courtyard (**fig. 2**). Gibbs would have seen Gian Lorenzo Bernini's great colonnade in Saint Peter's Square in Rome (1656–67), although his own colonnade was designed to impress a select few rather than act as a theatre for



public spectacle.

Coming into his inheritance in 1717, Lord Burlington was clearly determined to imprint his own personality and architectural ideas on the house. He dismissed Gibbs and in his place employed the Scottish architect, Colen Campbell (1676–1729). Two years earlier Campbell had published *Vitruvius Britannicus*, an explicitly nationalistic architectural manifesto in which he documented the current state of architecture in Britain and attempted to formulate and codify a distinctly British style of classical architecture. Though it included, and celebrated, works by the Baroque architects Sir Christopher Wren (1632–1723) and Sir John Vanbrugh, Campbell's key exemplars were the Italian architect Andrea Palladio (1508–1580) and the English architect Inigo Jones (1573–1652).

**Fig. 3** The importance of Inigo Jones for Campbell and Burlington is vividly demonstrated in this painting by William Kent (c. 1685–1748). It shows a heavenly allegorical scene depicted in a strongly architectural setting amongst two Palladian buildings. At the centre of the composition sits the figure of Architecture, with two figures to the right, one of whom presents an easily identifiable portrait of Jones. On the other side, a putto points towards an architectural elevation, quite clearly a depiction of Burlington House. The painting thus suggests a clear link from Campbell and Burlington to Jones, and through him to Palladio and, ultimately, to the hallowed architecture of the ancient world. The painting is now installed in the ceiling above the central stairs.

**Fig. 4** Interestingly, Campbell had included an elevation of Hugh May's original Burlington House façade in the first volume of *Vitruvius Britannicus*, published in 1715. However, by the time the third volume of *Vitruvius Britannicus* was published in 1725, May's façade had been entirely replaced by Campbell's own design which he included in that volume. Campbell's work is still largely visible on the ground and first storeys: the heavily rusticated ground storey with comparatively small rectangular windows surmounted by thick voussoirs;



**Fig. 2**  
*Burlington House, Piccadilly: perspective of one side of the colonnade, looking east, c.1815*

Drawn to illustrate one of Sir John Soane's lectures as Professor of Architecture at the Royal Academy  
Watercolour, 714 x 641 mm  
By courtesy of the Trustees of Sir John Soane's Museum

**RUSTICATION**  
Roughly hewn masonry blocks, usually found on the lower floors of buildings.

**Fig. 3**  
William Kent,  
*The Glorification of Inigo Jones*, 1719–20  
Oil on canvas, diameter 182.9 cm  
Royal Academy of Arts, London  
Photo © Royal Academy of Arts/John Hammond



**PIANO NOBILE**  
The principal floor in a classical building, usually the first floor.

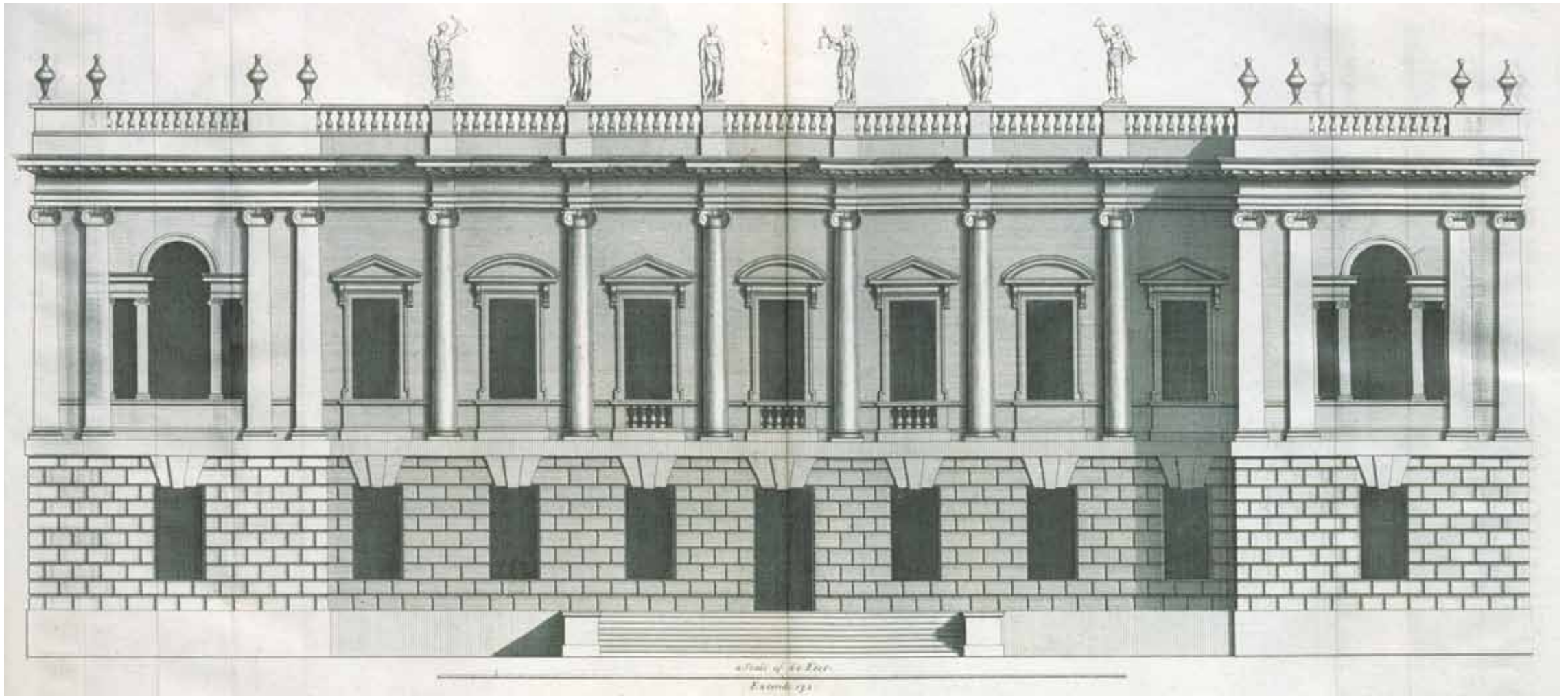
**ENTABLATURE**  
The upper part of a classical order, consisting of the whole horizontal section supported by columns or pilasters.

**PARAPET**  
A low wall projecting from the edge of a platform, terrace or roof.

and the first-floor *piano nobile* whose tall windows are topped by alternating triangular and segmental pediments. The windows are separated by Ionic half-columns whose entablature projects forward. The overall scheme was likely inspired by Palladio's Palazzo Porto in Vicenza (begun around 1546). A source closer to home was Jones's Banqueting House on Whitehall (1619–22; **fig. 5**), which employed an architectural scheme similarly inspired by the Palazzo Porto and, like Burlington House, was also surmounted by a heavy cornice and balustraded parapet to hide the sloping roof behind.

The first floor has tripartite windows on the projecting wings. Behind these lay a double-height chapel to the east (on the right of the picture) and Burlington's bedroom to the west (on the left). Although Palladio famously used tripartite windows at the Basilica in Vicenza, the motif here actually derives from the Italian architect Sebastiano Serlio (1475–1554), and it is sometimes named the Serlian window (though it is often called a 'Palladian' or 'Venetian' window in light of its later uses). It was to become a key motif in eighteenth-century Palladian architecture.

The aristocratic architectural taste Lord Burlington sought to promote was inevitably soon emulated by those lower down the social ladder. For the middle classes, adopting such aristocratic modes of display was a way of improving one's standing in society. In this quote from his Epistle to Burlington (1731), the poet Alexander Pope (1688–1744) satirises these 'imitating fools' for vulgarly

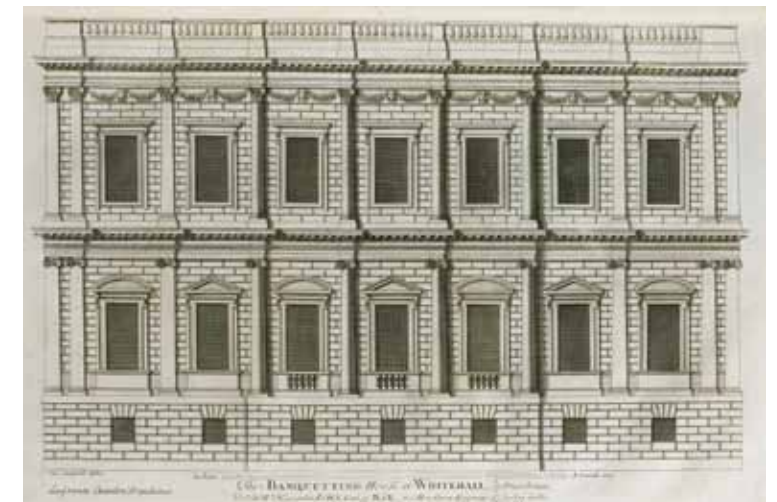


The Banqueting House was built as part of Whitehall Palace, then the monarch's primary London residence. What do you think it says about Burlington House that it used such a prestigious building for its inspiration?

The Banqueting House was likely intended as the first part of a larger palace that was never built, while Burlington House was always intended to be a separate building. Can you see anything in the designs to suggest this? What are the similarities and what are the differences between the two designs?

**Fig. 4**  
*Burlington House in Piccadilly [south elevation], designed by Colen Campbell anno 1717*  
 Line-engraving after a drawing by Colen Campbell, 251 x 503 mm  
 Published in *Vitruvius Britannicus*, vol. III, London 1725 [pl.23–24]  
 Royal Academy of Arts, London  
 Photo © Royal Academy of Arts/ Prudence Cumming Associates

**Fig. 5**  
*The Banqueting House at Whitehall*  
 Line-engraving after a drawing by Colen Campbell, 243 X 375 mm  
 Published in *Vitruvius Britannicus*, vol. I, London 1715 [pl.13]  
 Photo © Royal Academy of Arts, London/Prudence Cumming Associates.





copying rather than truly understanding the thinking behind Burlington's architectural ideas:

Yet shall (my Lord) your just, your noble rules  
Fill half the land with imitating fools;  
Who random drawings from your sheets shall take,  
And of one beauty many blunders make;  
Load some vain church with old theatric state,  
Turn arcs of triumph to a garden gate;  
Reverse your ornaments, and hang them all  
On some patch'd dog-hole ek'd with ends of wall;  
Then clap four slices of pilaster on't,  
That lac'd with bits of rustic, makes a front.  
Or call the winds through long arcades to roar,  
Proud to catch cold at a Venetian door;  
Conscious they act a true Palladian part,  
And, if they starve, they starve by rules of art.

Campbell also completed Gibbs's courtyard scheme with a great central gateway based on a Roman triumphal arch marking the route from the street through the courtyard to the grandly refaced house. The result was a wholly coherent and, for Britain, radically new architectural ensemble. It acted as a fantastical stage-set for the fashionable aristocrats arriving at Burlington's great townhouse for sumptuous banquets or musical performances, as the great commentator, Horace Walpole (1717–1797), remarked after such a night:

at daybreak, looking out of the window to see the sun rise, I was surprised with the vision of the colonnade that fronted me. It seemed one of those edifices in fairy-tales, that are raised by genii in a night's time.

## The evolving interior

Burlington House's interiors as they exist today are the result of the cumulative series of changes enacted by almost every owner. Nothing visible survives of Hugh May's 1660s interior. Yet the marks of each of the subsequent campaigns have been left in various ways – especially on the principal spaces of the entrance hall, staircase and the suite of first-floor rooms, now called the John Madejski Fine Rooms.

### Lady Juliana's staircase

Fig. 6 The first main change to the house's interior, still largely intact from the 1660s, occurred in the early 1710s. It was instigated by Lady Juliana who wanted to make over Hugh May's functional stair into a grand compartment to rival other Baroque staircases in England by Italian and French architects. The architect of these stairs is not recorded, but, given the design's similarity to another staircase by Gibbs, it is quite possible that he was commissioned for



**Fig. 6**  
A reconstruction of Lady Juliana's staircase at Burlington House as decorated by Sebastiano Ricci.

Photo © Country Life

Only the ceiling painting, depicting *Cupid Before Jupiter*, is still in situ. *The Triumph of Bacchus* (centre) on the north wall now resides on the ceiling of the General Assembly Room. *The Triumph of Galatea* (right) and *Diana and her Nymphs* (left) flank the present central staircase. An almost identical staircase by Gibbs decorated with large-scale canvas paintings by William Hogarth is extant today in Gibbs's north wing of St Bartholomew's Hospital, Smithfield.

this project alongside his work in the courtyard. Situated to the right side of the present entrance hall, the new stair rose in three flights of oak into the space that is now the Council Room, with plinth-like newels and bottle-shaped balusters.

To decorate this new stair, Lady Juliana employed a Venetian artist, Sebastiano Ricci (1659–1734), to paint a series of large decorative canvases to line the walls and ceiling. A computer reconstruction shows the mural canvases arranged in their original positions with the painted shadows echoing those that would have been cast by the natural light coming in from the windows. The paintings' complex iconography is based on the theme of love. Rooted in classical mythology, the scenes would have been familiar to the literary and artistic circle that surrounded Lady Juliana and her son. The Baroque exuberance of Ricci's sensuous nudes was conceived as a theatrical entrance to the rooms above. Suggestive of a magical ascent to Olympus, they would have signified to the youthful Burlington and his guests that they were leaving the world of mortals below, symbolised by the oak staircase, to feast to the music of the gods above. The poet John Gay recalled such an evening in his *Trivia* (1716):

Yet Burlington's fair Palace still remains;  
Beauty within, without Proportion reigns.  
Beneath his Eye declining Art revives,  
The Wall with animated Picture lives;  
There Handel strikes the Strings, the melting Strain  
Transports the Soul, and thrills through ev'ry Vein;  
There oft' I enter (but with cleaner Shoes)  
For Burlington's below'd by ev'ry Muse.

The staircase was removed in 1815, and Ricci's two wall canvases now flank the present central staircase. The ceiling painting remains in situ, though cut down, in what is now the Council Room.

### William Kent's classical interiors

The second phase of transformation to the interior occurred in 1719–22 when Lord Burlington employed the painter and later architect and garden designer, William Kent (c. 1685–1748) to replace Colen Campbell, who had fallen from favour. Later in the century, Horace Walpole described Burlington as the 'Apollo of the Arts', with Kent as his 'proper priest', alluding to the fact that the aristocrat's high-minded cultural ideals were often realised by Kent. Burlington and Kent certainly enjoyed a good working and personal relationship. Kent lived for a time at Burlington House and Lord Burlington was instrumental in securing him a position in the office of the King's Works as well as several major commissions. Initially at least, Kent acted as the professional counterpart to Burlington, the aristocratic amateur.

#### NEWEL

The upright post about which the steps of a staircase wind, usually the principal post at the foot of a staircase.

#### BALUSTER

A moulded shaft used in series to support the rail of a staircase or balustrade.



**Fig. 7**  
View of the Saloon  
looking south-west  
Royal Academy of Arts,  
London  
Photo © Francis Ware

#### PIER GLASS

A tall mirror set in the pier, or section of wall, between windows.

**Fig. 7** Begun in December 1719, just after he had returned from a period in Rome, the Saloon is the best preserved of Kent's rooms. For the design, Kent drew inspiration from some of the great classical interiors he saw while in Rome. He extended the classical order of Campbell's facade inside with a strongly architectural, though far more exuberant, decorative scheme. Here, we see Corinthian cornices; pedimented doorcases symmetrically balanced with false ones; pier glasses on pedestals between the windows; and highly ornate picture frames, perhaps intended for further paintings that were never produced.

Overhead, Kent continued the themes of Ricci's paintings around the adjacent staircase with a painting of a heavenly crowd at the wedding feast of Cupid and Psyche, possibly inspired by Raphael's *Loggia of Psyche* (1517) in the Villa Farnesina in Rome. In the centre of the Saloon one long table would have been covered in the best white damask for banquets for Burlington and his friends – the sumptuous banquet below mirroring that of the gods above.

Rediscovered in 2003 on the surrounding vault under fourteen layers of paint are paintings by Kent of episodes from the Cupid and Psyche legend. A suspended ceiling is currently in place while a benefactor is awaited to complete their restoration.





**Fig. 8**  
Enfilade view through  
the Fine Rooms  
Royal Academy of Arts,  
London  
Photo © Francis Ware

### Samuel Ware's Regency transformation

With the death in 1753 of Lord Burlington, the title became extinct. The property passed by way of marriage to the Devonshires, whose seat is Chatsworth, where Burlington's collection of drawings is now held. In 1815 the house was sold by the 6th Duke of Devonshire to his uncle, Lord George Cavendish, for £70,000. Fittingly, Cavendish was made Earl of Burlington (second creation) in 1831.

Lord George Cavendish's immense wealth allowed him to make radical alterations to the first-floor rooms, for which he employed the architect Samuel Ware (1781–1860). Deeply inspired by Kent's commitment to symmetry and Baroque decorative schemes, Ware replanned the whole floor creating a grand unified ensemble of rooms.

To create further symmetry, Ware designed a central staircase, demolishing the stair commissioned by Lady Juliana. The new staircase, with its cast-iron balustrade in Regency style and a projecting bay built at the rear for its half landing, acted as the pivot for a north–south processional route running from Piccadilly through the courtyard and up to the Saloon, still the house's principal room. Two of Ricci's paintings were relocated from the earlier staircase to flank Ware's new stair, where they still reside.

**Fig. 8** By moving the staircase, Ware was able to create a cross axis centred on Kent's Saloon, producing an uninterrupted east–west enfilade of five rooms linking the two side wings along the entire south front of the house. With their doors in line, the view through the rooms is one of the most dramatic in Burlington House. The Saloon was balanced by two square anterooms, the one to the east – the Council Room – created by flooring over Lady Juliana's stair. All three rooms retained their ceiling canvases painted by Ricci and Kent a hundred years earlier.

**Fig. 9** The top half of Burlington's double-height chapel in the east wing had already been floored over in 1774. Ware consequently made the whole east wing into a triple-cube ballroom (now the Reynolds Room) for Regency entertaining on a grand scale, though its six-metre width was more suited to demure early-Georgian dances than the sweep of the then fashionable waltz. The walls were lined with damask and the ceiling decorated in a style similar to Kent's, with deep coves and gilded scrolls supporting gilded octagonal compartments finished with interlacing ornament. Ware's new ceiling cut across Campbell's triple window, blocking up its arched centre inside, though it remains visible on the facade. The result was the grandest room in Burlington House.

To match this in the west wing, Ware created the State Dining Room, now the Royal Academy's General Assembly Room. He designed the ceiling around Ricci's *Bacchus and Ariadne* (relocated from Lady Juliana's staircase), though half the sky in the painting was obscured to fit the ceiling's Kent-inspired decorative scheme. On the north wall, Ware relocated an Ionic screen (now altered) from elsewhere in the house, which neatly corresponded to the Ionic order of the exterior facade. In 2004 Ware's interiors were restored to their Regency condition and renamed the John Madejski Fine Rooms.

The symmetry in both axes which Ware realised through his interior alterations was carried outside too. In a commercial venture, Cavendish employed Ware to design Burlington Arcade on a narrow strip of land along the western boundary. The rear garden facade, which still had its Restoration brickwork, was made into a mirror image of Campbell's front, but plainer and in economical stucco rather than stone. This facade is still visible as one ascends the stairs or lift up to the Sackler Wing of Galleries. Thus, with the completion of these schemes the house reached its apogee as a private residence.

**STUCCO**  
A durable finish for  
exterior walls, usually  
composed of cement,  
sand and lime, and  
applied while wet.

Ricci's paintings were specifically created for Lady Juliana's staircase. How do you think moving them from this now destroyed location to a new position in the house alters our experience of them?

Why do you think so much attention was given to a staircase?





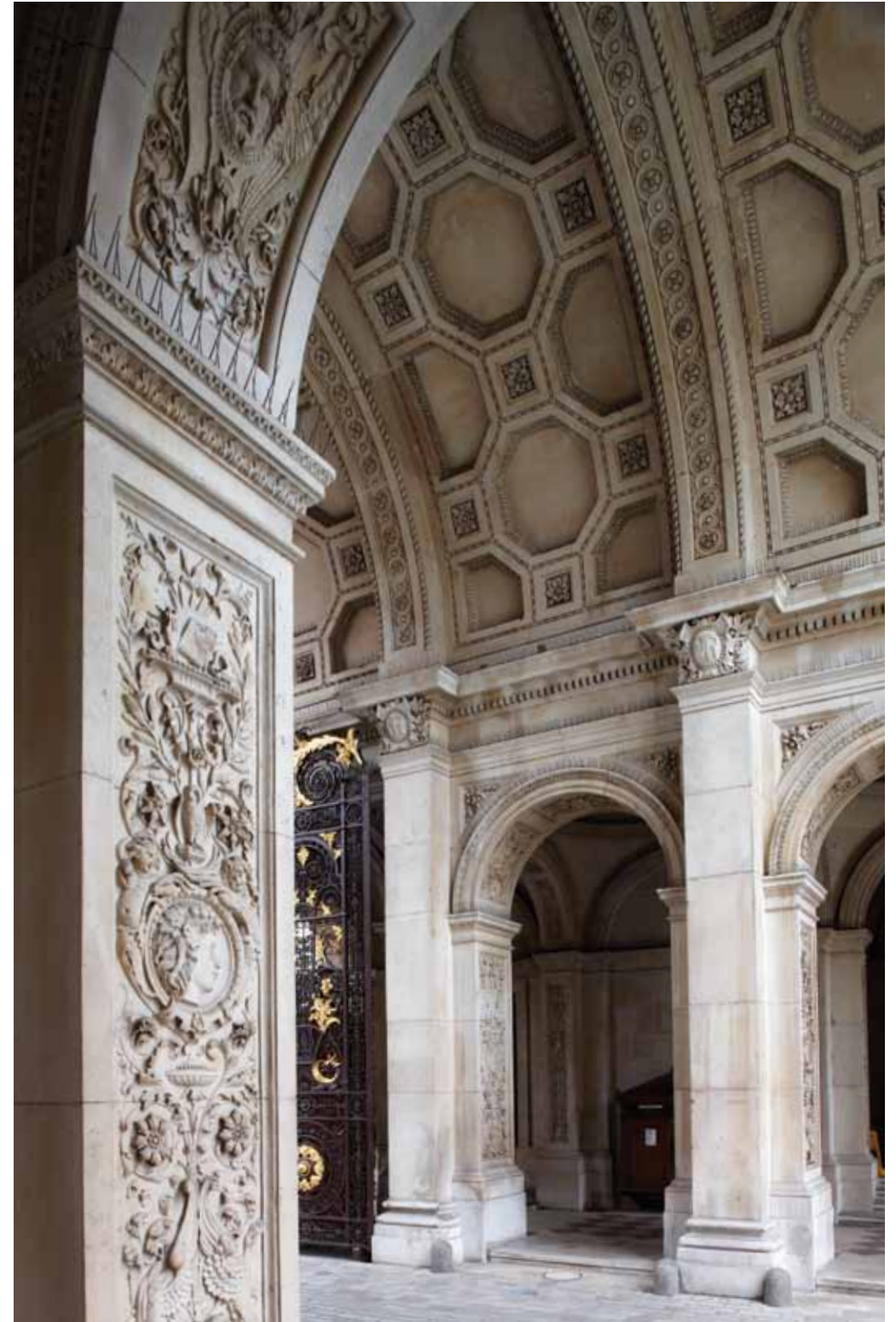
**Fig. 9**  
View of Reynolds Room  
looking north  
Royal Academy of Arts,  
London  
Photo © Francis Ware

## The arrival of the Learned Societies

In 1854 the government bought Burlington House, including its courtyard and garden, for £140,000. After contemplating various schemes, in 1867 the government finally decided to recast Burlington House as a powerhouse of education and scholarship, bringing together the principal scientific and antiquarian Learned Societies together with the Royal Academy of Arts in a great statement of national cultural strength.

The Royal Academy had been founded in 1768 by George III to promote the 'arts of design' by providing professional training for artists and through annual exhibitions of works by living artists. It had moved to Trafalgar Square in 1837, having already outgrown its first purpose-built accommodation in the Strand block of Somerset House, designed by the architect and its first Treasurer, Sir William Chambers (1723–1796). The Academy was a hundred years old when the government granted it the lease to Burlington House at an annual rent of £1 for 999 years and allowed it to develop half of the garden to the north.

To house the other Learned Societies the government set about reconfiguring the courtyard in 1868–73. Gibbs's colonnade and the courtyard



**Fig. 10**  
View of the underside  
of Burlington House  
Entrance Gate  
Photo © Royal Academy  
of Arts/Paul Highnam



buildings were demolished and the government bore the cost of building new premises around a front quadrangle for six societies: the Royal Society (now relocated to Carlton House Terrace), the Society of Antiquaries, the Royal Astronomical Society, the Linnean Society, the Geological Society, and the Royal Society of Chemistry. The architects Robert Banks (1813–1872) and Charles Barry Jr (1823–1900), produced grand Italianate elevations for the new courtyard and Piccadilly facades. They repeated the rusticated base and Ionic *piano nobile* of Campbell's early eighteenth-century facade but enhanced the scale by adding an attic storey in the Corinthian order to accommodate the societies' double-height libraries.

**Fig. 10** The Royal Academy demanded a suitably grand and imposing carriage entrance from Piccadilly and in place of Campbell's gate, Banks and Barry built a lavishly decorated archway: its coffered underside was peppered with 'VR' (*Victoria Regina*: Queen Victoria's monogram); its keystones were adorned with symbolic masks; its piers carved with Renaissance-inspired grotesquerie; a tower perched high above; and huge wrought-iron gates.

In contrast to the strict and austere classicism of Campbell's facade, Banks and Barry used a whole range of Renaissance-inspired ornamental elements, giving the buildings a civic grandeur deemed appropriate to their institutional functions. The *Illustrated London News* summed up the scheme: 'The design has no pretensions to originality, yet is handsome without being extravagant'.

**Fig. 11** As required by the government's lease, the Royal Academy added a grand attic storey onto Campbell's facade to designs by its Treasurer-architect, Sydney Smirke RA (1798–1877), to serve as the Diploma Galleries. The resultant tall facade was softened with a rusticated portico, with carved keystone-masks over the arches inspired by those adorning the Academy's previous home at Somerset House.

While Campbell's facade was entirely bereft of figurative ornament, sculpture was a key feature in Smirke's additions. In the attic storey, he created a series of niches set with life-size statues. Here, we see figures representing Ancient Greek classicism, British Gothic as well as several great Italian Renaissance artists alongside more recent British ones. Of the latter are the Royal Academy's first president, the painter Sir Joshua Reynolds PRA (1723–1792), the sculptor John Flaxman RA (1755–1826), and the architect Sir Christopher Wren. This carefully contrived iconographic scheme was intended to demonstrate the place of British art within the pantheon of great artists of the past – and, of course, the Academy's pivotal role in establishing and maintaining that position. Thus, a building whose exterior had once conveyed the cultural supremacy of one aristocrat amongst his peers was radically transformed to evoke the cultural power of the nation itself. This fitted perfectly with the

#### COFFER

A sunken square panel in a ceiling, dome or vault.

#### GROTESQUERIE

Decoration inspired by the extravagant decorative style of Ancient Roman with interlaced garlands and small fantastic figures or animals.

#### PORTICO

A porch or walkway with a roof supported by columns or arches, often leading to the entrance of a building.

**Fig. 11**  
Burlington House  
Facade

Photo © Country Life



aspirations of the Academy, which the author of a pro-academy pamphlet, published in the 1750s, summarised as 'promoting knowledge, and the disseminating of virtue among mankind'.

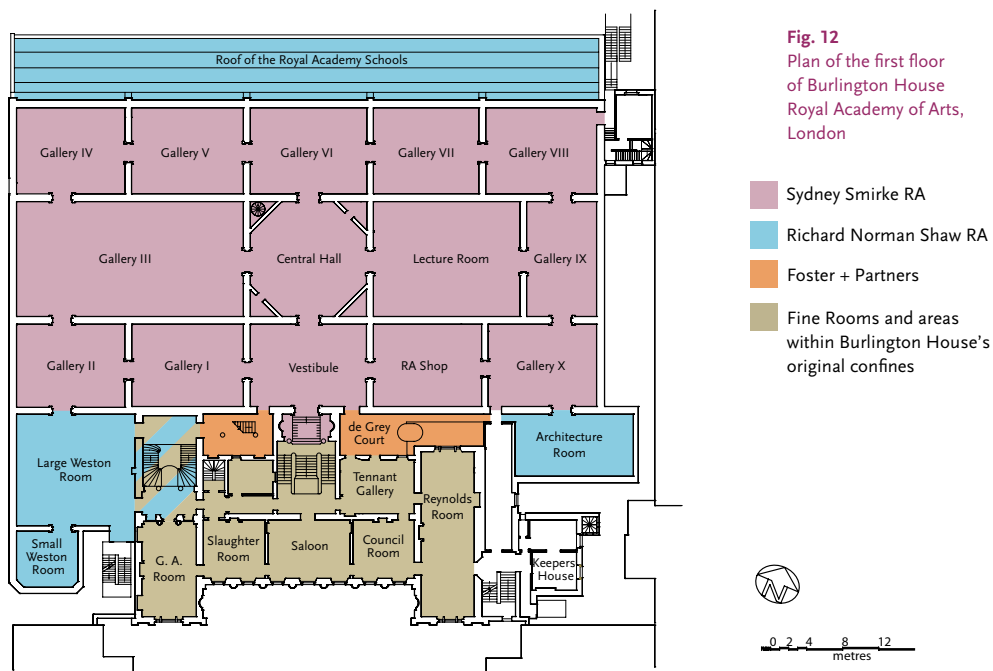
How would Banks and Barry's changes to the Piccadilly entrance and facade of Burlington House have made it clear that the function of the building had changed – having gone from home to public institution?

How was their decorative scheme in keeping with Victorian ideas about British cultural superiority and imperial strength? What role does public sculpture play in this?

## The Main Galleries

When the government acquired the site, Burlington House's gardens still lay to the north. Although already curtailed by the laying out of streets to the north, which had begun in the 1720s, enough land remained to build a headquarters for the University of London (now owned by the Royal Academy and known as 6 Burlington Gardens) to designs by Sir James Pennethorne (1801–1871) and for the Academy itself to construct grand new galleries in a separate building 4.25 metres to the north of the original Burlington House to accommodate its annual exhibitions. Like the contemporaneous Diploma Galleries, these were completed to the designs of Sydney Smirke, who also created studio space for the Royal Academy's Schools under the north end of the Main Galleries. The builders, Messrs Jackson and Shaw, had nearly completed the construction within a year and the Main Galleries were first used for the 100th Summer Exhibition in 1869.





**Fig. 12** Smirke's planning followed the Beaux-Arts tradition – the neoclassical style popular in France at the time – being rational and symmetrical. The galleries' design resembles the French architect J. N. L. Durand's (1760–1834) influential modular diagram for museums in which the plan was built up from a series of discrete components or modules. Sydney Smirke's elder brother Robert Smirke RA (1781–1867) had designed the British Museum (1823–46) around a domed Pantheon-like space suggesting an awareness of Durand's modular approach. Sydney Smirke's own experience at the British Museum, where he used steel girders to span the Reading Room, would have made him an ideal candidate to pioneer their use in designing the Royal Academy's Main Galleries.

**Fig. 13** Following these examples, Smirke placed the octagonal Central Hall at the heart of his symmetrical grid of galleries. The Hall's design was inspired by the Museo Pio-Clementino, constructed in the Vatican in Rome in 1780. As with its exemplar, the Hall originally had niches with alternating polychrome-marble arched openings for displaying figurative sculpture, but these have been walled over since 1906.

The interconnecting north range of Smirke's modular layout (Galleries IV–VIII) gives a sense of the axial linkage of spaces. Each gallery interior is classically designed with deep-coved ceilings articulated by plaster ribs in the form of garlands and finished with gold leaf. These garlands are all different and convey classical allusions: leaves of laurel, oak, ivy, myrtle and grape, medieval roses and tropical fruit from ocean voyages. Each gallery is flooded

with daylight from the rooflight, leaving the walls free for hanging pictures. During hot summers the galleries were ventilated by opening side flaps in the rooflights, using mechanical handles on the walls, while Roman blinds were pulled across under the rooflights to lessen the heat. Today the Main Galleries are air-conditioned.

To the east of the Central Hall Smirke placed the Lecture Room. Originally for the Schools' lectures, it is now used as a gallery. Balancing the Lecture Room on the west side of the Central Hall is Gallery III, the largest and grandest of Smirke's galleries. It has always been the setting for the Annual Dinner, a London social event, marking the opening of the Summer Exhibition, with socialites thronging the Main Galleries to see paintings hung like wallpaper up to the picture rail. As the Academy's pre-eminent showroom, Gallery III has always been where, to quote from the Instrument of Foundation, the artists 'may offer their performances to public inspection and acquire that degree of reputation and encouragement which they shall be deemed to deserve'.

Due to the popularity of the Annual Exhibitions, enlargements to Smirke's Main Galleries were soon undertaken. Between 1883 and 1885, while also enlarging the RA Schools (see below), Richard Norman Shaw RA (1831–1912) filled in the vacant area to the west of Burlington House with a three-tier extension composing basement kitchens, with a Refreshment Room (now the Restaurant) above, which was linked by a sweeping staircase up to a top-lit Watercolour Gallery. This room, together with the smaller one attached for works in black and white, are both now known as the Weston Rooms. A remarkable feature of these two galleries was Shaw's ingenious (and still-used) ventilation system partly incorporated into its elaborate ceiling decoration.

To bridge the 4.25 metre gap between the original Burlington House and his Main Galleries, Smirke had extended Ware's staircase up to the Vestibule. But due to the crush of visitors to exhibitions, the Academy's subsequent Treasurer-architect, E. M. Barry RA (1830–1880), widened and extended Ware's staircase under green-veined marble columns. The Entrance Hall, whose ceiling was inset with paintings which had originally decorated the Academy's meeting room at Somerset House, was in turn enlarged in 1900 by T. G. Jackson RA (1835–1924).

With these dramatic additions and interventions, what had formerly been a private residence was converted both functionally and, importantly, symbolically for its new institutional use. In addition to his emblematic use of figurative sculpture on the building's exterior, Smirke decorated the Main Galleries' Central Hall with eight gilded roundels set with portrait busts of pre-eminent Italian and British artists. Thus, for the visitor, the idea of British cultural supremacy was conveyed throughout.

**What do you think are the advantages of the Main Galleries' modular plan designed around a central space?**

**Fig. 13 (overleaf)** Central Hall, with works from the 2010 Summer Exhibition  
Royal Academy of Arts, London  
Photo © Royal Academy of Arts/Paul Highnam





## The Cast Corridor and Royal Academy Schools

At the back of Burlington House, behind Ware's central staircase, steps lead down from the ground floor into the utilitarian Main Vaults – the 'engine room' of Smirke's block and not open to the public. At the rear of Smirke's block, the north–south axis of the Main Vault meets the east–west cross-axis of the elegant Cast Corridor of the Royal Academy Schools.

The professional training of artists is enshrined in the Academy's Instrument of Foundation and remains central to its activities. An integral part of an artist's training in the Royal Academy Schools was drawing from the life model, as well as extensive copying from old masters. Students also often drew from the Academy's collection of casts taken from the finest sculptural fragments of Ancient Greece and Rome as well as from great Renaissance sculpture. It was, Sir Joshua Reynolds suggested, only 'by studying these authentick models, that ideas of excellence which is the result of the accumulated experience of past ages may be acquired'.

**Fig. 14** It is, therefore, no surprise that Smirke designed a Cast Corridor to run the full length of the schools, sitting under Galleries IV–VIII. Designed as a series of groin-vaulted bays, each defined by pilasters and arched openings, it contains the Academy's impressive collection of plaster casts. A contributor to the 1888 edition of the *Magazine of Art* described how students 'may be seen exchanging confidences ... or more practically eating sandwiches under cover of the "Dancing Faun" during the eleven o'clock "long rest"'.

The Cast Corridor also provided access to the various 'Schools' – each concerned with a particular aspect of artistic training – coming off it to the north. Smirke designed these to be high-ceilinged with rooflights to admit floods of light from the north. Long years of training took place in the Life School (drawing from nude models), Architectural School and the Antique School, which housed further casts for 'Modelling' (Sculpture). The Painting School was situated in the southeast corner under Gallery X.

In addition to their practical studies, students were expected to attend lectures given by Professors of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture (for architectural students), Perspective, Anatomy and Chemistry (the latter established in 1871). Lectures were open to the public and held in the Lecture Room within the suite of Main Galleries. Originally, the room had stepped seating for 200 people and was laid out in a Greek-cross plan with four wooden columns in the corners to support vaults adorned with polychrome decorations. It is thought that students entered through corner lobbies which led via narrow stairs to the Schools below. The corner lobbies were lost in the fire of 1997, after which the ceiling was remodelled.

**GROIN VAULT**  
A means of spanning distances by the intersection at right angles of two barrel vaults.

**Fig. 14**  
Cast Corridor, Royal Academy Schools  
Royal Academy of Arts, London  
Photo © Royal Academy of Arts/Paul Highnam



**GAMBREL ROOF**  
A two-sided roof with a double slope on each side, the lower slope having the steeper pitch.

Under Lord Leighton's presidency (1878–96) the Schools had become so successful that from 1881–5 Norman Shaw was engaged to extend the Schools northwards. His detached brick structure, with a gambrel roof and rooflights, almost doubled the space and is today used as studio space for students. Looking at the back facade, Smirke's brick buttresses can be seen, supporting huge wrought-iron girders which carry the rear wall of the Main Galleries. His tall windows, which were designed to give side-lighting into Gallery VI, were bricked in by Shaw in 1885. Shaw also made extensions to the south-east. He added an Architecture Room to Smirke's Main Galleries with an Architecture School below, which was intended to house the Academy's collection of architectural castings. The Architecture School closed in 1957 but the space is still used by the Schools.

The Schools placement to the rear of the Main Galleries means that they are all but invisible to a visitor coming to an exhibition at the Royal Academy. Why do you think Smirke separated the spaces for the creation of art from the galleries for the display of works of art? Do you think that separation is still relevant today? Why or why not?

What factors need to be considered when designing studios for artists? Think about light, height, finishes and space, and also the medium the artists might be working in.

## The Sackler Wing of Galleries

In 1984 Royal Academy staff noticed that the showcases in the Reynolds Room shook as the viewing crowds passed. The floor installed over Burlington's chapel in 1774 by John Carr of York was decidedly wobbly. One night, Ware's screen of timber columns collapsed and a sizeable portion of plaster ceiling fell into the room below, the Royal Academy's Library (now the Sir Hugh Casson Room for Friends of the Royal Academy). The floor of the Reynolds Room was, of course, strengthened with steel and the ceiling put back, but this event was the impetus to move the Library for the third time.

**Fig. 15** The Academy's Library is the oldest fine arts library in Britain and has served the needs of students, Academicians and scholars for over 200 years. At Burlington House it was first housed in the Reynolds Room when Smirke lined the walls with bookcases in 1874. In 1927 it was relocated to the ground floor directly below in what is now the Friends' Room. Then in 1984 the Library was moved vertically upwards into what had been the John Gibson Sculpture Gallery, part of the suite of Diploma Galleries Smirke had added in 1872–4. It was beautifully converted by H. T. (Jim) Cadbury Brown RA (1913–2009), who added a gallery to reach the upper shelves lining the four walls. The new facility opened in 1986 and maintains the strange quirk of the Library always having been housed within the footprint of the east wing of Burlington House.

Seven years later, by annexing the eastern end of the remaining Diploma Galleries, the Library acquired a Print Room, also designed by Cadbury Brown. In 2003, a flat roof to the east of the Library was transformed into a state of the art Archive Room – the Jillian Sackler Archive Room – to designs by the Royal Academy's own architectural department.

**Fig. 16 and 17** With the Library installed in the Sculpture Gallery, plans were soon afoot for the overhaul of the other Diploma Galleries. This enterprise was entrusted to Norman Foster RA's (b. 1935) practice, Foster + Partners.

A key problem to address was the issue of circulation. Up to that point the Diploma Galleries on the top floor had been reached from the first floor by a



**Fig. 15**  
Royal Academy of Arts  
Library  
Royal Academy of Arts,  
London  
Photo © Martin Charles





**Fig. 16**  
The Sackler Wing of  
Galleries Landing  
Royal Academy of Arts,  
London

Photo © Royal Academy  
of Arts

**BARREL VAULT**  
A continuous semicircular  
vaulted roof.

staircase which rose through what is now the Tennant Gallery. A new stair and lift would have to be installed to meet modern-day building regulations, but space was tight and since Burlington House was a listed building any scheme would have to conform to the stringent proscriptions required by the statutory authorities.

To these various problems the Foster scheme came up with the ingenious and elegant solution of utilising the 4.25 metre gap between the old house and Smirke's Main Galleries, which had gradually been colonised over the years by various temporary lean-to structures. The space was cleared out and apparently effortlessly inserted in it were glass stairs and a lift. As well as providing the necessary circulation, this allowed these previously hidden facades to breathe and be appreciated as never before. By supporting the floor slabs on columns, like a waiter holding a tray with one hand, the solid floors were kept back so the eye could travel the full height of the facades uninterrupted. The finale at the top of the ascent was the bright light of the Jillian Sackler Sculpture Court, where Smirke's cornice of carved Portland stone became an elegant sculpture shelf. At the west end was created a chapel-like setting for the Academy's most prized work of art, Michelangelo's Taddei Tondo of 1504–5, *The Virgin and Child with the Infant St John* – the only Michelangelo marble sculpture in Britain.

An equal achievement was Foster + Partners' reconfiguring of the Diploma Galleries themselves. Natural light on the hanging walls had always been inadequate. Smirke had been unable to provide a cove to modulate the rooflight due to the restricted height. Here, Foster + Partners borrowed Louis Kahn's barrel-vaulted design for the Kimbell Art Museum, in Fort Worth, Texas (1967–1972), but opened up the slot at the barrel-vault apex to account for the angle of the sun. Adjustable louvre blinds were also installed to modulate the sunlight on the curved vault during the summer. The floor was raised 1.5 metres in order to align the floor level with the cornices of both the garden facade of Burlington House and the Main Galleries and to use the under-floor void as a return path for the air conditioning required in modern exhibition spaces.

The result of Foster + Partners' interventions was an elegant and economical solution to the merging of old and new – which won the Royal Institute of British Architects Building of the Year award in 1991.

What issues do you think need to be considered when making contemporary interventions in historic buildings?

Look carefully at the interaction between Foster + Partners' insertion of stairs and lift between the old Burlington House and the Main Galleries. How does the insertion navigate the space between the two buildings? Think in terms of architectural style and the choice of particular materials.

## Conclusion

In many ways it is remarkable that Burlington House, still a seventeenth-century town-palace at its core, has survived amidst all the changes that have taken place around it. Once situated in an airy suburb on the edge of town, it now stands at the very centre of a cosmopolitan twenty-first-century city. As this brief guide has explained, it has, however, been subject to alterations by almost all of its occupants, each of whom has responded and reacted to the marks left by their predecessors. If one was to describe Burlington House with one word it would be 'palimpsest'. A palimpsest literally means a manuscript page which has been written on more than once, with the earlier writing incompletely erased and still legible, ghosting through. With its original 1665 core lying underneath successive layers of fabric, it is similarly possible to track in Burlington House the material changes of the families whose lives were played out in it and the institutions who transformed it to their own needs.

Despite its Grade II\* listing, these palimpsestic processes have by no means ceased. It remains a 'working building' subject to and shaped by the evolving demands and requirements of a twenty-first-century art institution. Further grand and smaller transformations remain on the horizon. The Royal Academy now has ownership of two acres of the original site with the purchase of 6 Burlington Gardens and is currently developing a master plan for the entire site, while the Saloon, considered one of the finest early eighteenth-century interiors in England, awaits sponsorship to uncover and restore the lost ceiling decoration by William Kent. There is, perhaps, no better example of a building to illustrate Winston Churchill's famous remark: 'We shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us'.

## Further reading

Simon Bradley and Nikolaus Pevsner, *London 6:*

*Westminster (The Buildings of England)*, new edn., London, 2003

Colen Campbell, *Vitruvius Britannicus: The Classic of Eighteenth-Century British Architecture*, New York, 2007

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

Andrew Saint, *Richard Norman Shaw*, London, 2009

John Summerson, *Architecture in Britain, 1530–1830*, 9th edn., London, 1993

Giles Worsley, *Classical Architecture in Britain: The Heroic Age*, London, 1995

**Fig. 17** (back inside cover)  
Staircase to Sackler Wing  
of Galleries  
Royal Academy of Arts,  
London

Photo © Royal Academy  
of Arts/Paul Highnam

