

At The Queen's Gallery: Charles II: Art & Power

In our 21st century world, we shape our images online. Our social media are laden with carefully 'curated' pictures of our holiday destinations, our pets, our children and even our Sunday breakfasts. 'Look!' we cry, 'I am rich/cool/amazing!' In 17th century Britain, image was every bit as important – especially if you were a recently restored head of state. Charles the Second may not have had recourse to Facebook or Instagram, but, as a new exhibition, *Charles II: Art & Power*, at The Queen's Gallery shows, the king perfectly understood the role of the arts in the re-establishment of the Stuart monarchy.





In 1649 Charles I was beheaded at Whitehall. The country was fed up with his autocratic rule – and his Roman Catholic leanings; Oliver Cromwell’s Parliamentarian New Model Army had taken control of England, his ‘rump parliament’ had been purged of dissenting members, and those that were left convicted the king of high treason. Edward Bower’s *Charles I at his trial*, one of the first paintings in the exhibition, shows a calm, dignified, patrician man. Did Charles accept his fate or simply not believe that he – a believer in the Divine Right of Kings – could lose? Lose he did, and the painting hangs next to a graphic engraving of his execution; in front of a huge crowd, the executioner holds aloft the King’s severed head, while blood continues to spurt from his torso.



After Oliver Cromwell's death and his son Richard's resignation, most people had had enough of being miserable; Parliament invited Charles II (who had been proclaimed king, in Scotland at least, upon his father's death, but who had spent years in exile in Europe) back to England, and he was crowned at Westminster Abbey in 1661. Charles had promised to exercise leniency and religious tolerance, and most importantly of all, to reign in co-operation with Parliament.

Here was a man who, having spent his formative years in the courts of Europe, enjoyed a good time. Charles re-opened theatres, hosted balls and masques, and surrounded himself with beautiful women. Peter Lely's 'Windsor Beauties', portraits of the king's various glamorous mistresses, face each other across the first room of the gallery; Mary Bagot, resplendent in pale blue and white silk, appears confident and self-possessed, Anne Hyde, Duchess of York (who commissioned the paintings) looks slightly more relaxed in her equally luxuriant brown and white dress. Both wear pearls, their hair

curled in the fashionable ringlets of the day. Louise de Keroualle holds a ring of flowers; resplendent in her green and gold robes, she has the air of a woman who knows she's important.



Philippe Vignon: Louise de Keroualle

Dutch-born Lely was the king's official 'Limner and Picture Drawer'. An engraving of Catherine of Braganza, Charles' much-misused Portuguese wife, is far less jolly, her old-fashioned hairstyle with its strange round fringe framing a sombre face. A glass case also houses prints of some of the mistresses – Nell Gwynn, stark naked 'as Venus', complete with wings, or

reclining in a bower while her two sons, drawn as cherubs, fly above her – but the children's faces are of old men, their hair curled and coiffed.

The Commonwealth government had sold off much of Charles I's art collection. In the gallery's second room we see the Proclamation in which his son requested its return. Many noble families did hand works back – presumably to curry favour with the king, as no financial recompense was offered. The returns included Domenico Fetti's *David with the Head of Goliath*, a rather odd painting in which David, supposedly a shepherd boy, appears dressed in an opulent red and white outfit, complete with golden tassels and an impressive red head-dress. *The Misers* (by a follower of Marinus van Reymerswaele) shows two greedy tax collectors and could easily be a picture of the goblins at Gringotts Bank.



Sir Peter Lely: Catherine of Braganza

Charles II also amassed over one thousand 'old masters' himself – he had ordered a large collection from a dealer, William Frizell, just before returning from exile. Sir Anthony van Dyck's *The Infant Christ and St John the Baptist* is a charming picture of two gorgeously plump little boys with beautiful eyes and full heads of soft brown hair. The cares of the world might be about to descend upon him (as symbolised by the orb behind him) but here Christ is just a small child playing with his friend. Marco d'Oggiono's *The Infant Christ and St John Embracing* is similarly sweet but has less spontaneity, the babies here being plonked down beneath a

lonely cliff. Carlo Dolci's *Salome with the Head of John the Baptist* tells us the end of the prophet's story, as Salome – here a Restoration beauty clad in blue and white silk – holds the severed head on a tray. She could be bringing in the pudding at a smart dinner party. This rather gory painting was hung in Charles's own bedchamber.

George de la Tour's *Saint Jerome*, also acquired from Frizzell, is one of the highlights of the exhibition, a deceptively simple painting of a dignified old man. Surprisingly, *Saint Jerome* was one of Charles's cheapest acquisitions from Frizzell, yet it is a small masterpiece. The details of the famous scholar's gnarled hands, his lined forehead and almost bald pate are sensitively drawn; we can feel his concentration as he reads from the paper he holds.

In 1660 Charles was also presented with 'The Dutch Gift' – the States of Holland and West Friesland gave him 28 Renaissance paintings, 12 sculptures and various pieces of furniture in an attempt to strengthen ties with England and to stop Charles entering into any treaties with France, of which his cousin Louis XIV was king. The gift didn't really work – by 1665 England and Holland were at war – but it did make Charles the owner of some fabulous works of art, including Parmigianino's *Pallas Athene* – and even of a yacht *HMY Mary* (sadly not in this exhibition; it was wrecked just 15 years later.)





Charles was interested in all sorts of things; he was patron of the new Royal Society, which made him a fellow in 1665, and enjoyed carrying out his own experiments. He loved books too; in a glass case we see some items from his collection, including Robert Hook's *Micrographia*, the first book to illustrate insects and plants as seen through a microscope. The book – which Samuel Pepys found so interesting that he stayed up till 2am reading it – was dedicated to the king. It lies open at a drawing of a huge beetle, which apparently wouldn't keep still;

'This was a creature, more troublesome to be drawn, than all the rest.'

Even more impressive than his secular books is the *King's Holy Bible, containing the Bookes of the Old and New Testament*. Bound in velvet, this richly embellished tome is embroidered with silver and silver-gilt wire and coloured silks; even the fore edge is decorated. Charles favoured religious tolerance; at heart he was always a Catholic, finally converting to Roman Catholicism on his deathbed – but his Bible is as much a symbol of the return of colour and magnificence to the court as to the church.



**The Holy Bible containing the Bookes
of the Old & New Testament**

1660

Cambridge: printed by John Field for John Ogilby

Violet binding with embroidery attributed to
Edmond Harrison (1790-1867)

Cat. 29

Bound for Charles II's personal use soon after
his Restoration, this sumptuous Bible embroidered
with the royal coat of arms in silver and silver-gilt
wire and coloured silks is symbolic of the return
of magnificence and splendour to the church and
court.

Having lived in French palaces, Charles loved luxurious furniture – indeed some might call it bling – and filled the palaces of St James and Whitehall with his acquisitions. The silver table, mirror and candelabra shown here were probably made in England. Whereas Louis XIV's extravagant furniture was fashioned from solid silver, Charles could only afford wood

covered in embossed silver sheets; his furniture, however, survives while most of Louis' had to be melted down to pay his armies. The silversmith John Cooqus, to whom the table is tentatively attributed, also made an extravagant silver bed for Nell Gwyn.



Standing Cup and Cover by Michel Haussner

More subtle is a beautiful *Standing Cup and Cover* by Michel Haussner, its intricate silverwork topped with a delicate figure. It is believed that Charles gave the cup to Queen's College, Oxford as a thank you for supporting his father. In 1820 George IV bought it back.

After some interesting illustrations of contemporary London life – 'London after the Fire', a Frost Fair on the Thames, and an enormous painting of *The Lord Mayor's Water Procession on the Thames* – the very last case in this fascinating exhibition offers a touching return to the personal, to the people who lived their lives within the royal image machine. A small handwritten notebook *The Births, ages and deaths of Their Royall Highnesses Children* shows that many of James, Duke of York's children died in infancy. And inside the pages is coiled a tiny lock of Anne Hyde's hair. Anne died just seven weeks after the birth of her last child, Catherine.

Catherine herself survived only ten months, dying on 5 December 1671.

Charles II: Art & Power is at The Queen's Gallery, Palace of Holyroodhouse until 2 June 2019. For opening hours and ticket prices visit <https://www.rct.uk/visit/the-queens-gallery-palace-of-holyroodhouse>.

A lavishly illustrated book has been published to accompany the exhibition: *Charles II: Art & Power* by Rufus Bird and Michael Clayton is available from the Royal Collection Trust at the price of £29.95 + p & p.

With thanks to the Royal Collection Trust staff.