

Representations of fame: the National Portrait Gallery in post-war Britain

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'The success of the whole scheme depended on confining the gallery to men of real distinction';¹ Earl Stanhope, one of the founders of the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) in 1856, hoped it would provide both pleasure and instruction to the industrious classes through drawing attention to the heights which they could admire or aspire to. This notion determined the type of portraits the gallery acquired and displayed. There were portraits of soldiers, statesmen, literary men and scientists; all of high-ranking status. It was not until the second half of the 20th century that the Victorian objectives with which the gallery was founded were broadened and adapted.

For much of Britain the immediate post-war years were marked with recovery, development and change. But the NPG was notably unchanged in both its

'The Chandos Portrait'. William Shakespeare, attributed to John Taylor, circa 1610. This was the first portrait to be acquired by the gallery in 1856. It is currently touring the country as part of a 'Writers of Influence' exhibition. © National Portrait Gallery, London



governance and the portraits acquired or displayed. The gallery was under the directorship of Sir Henry Hake, who had been director since 1927, and the trustees held similar status, professions or interests to the original aristocratic board of trustees. They were not averse to change – historian and trustee G.M. Young did put forward a memorandum in 1950 that recognised the need to acknowledge the achievement of highly distinguished, but less well known or less enduring individuals, and the other trustees responded with broad agreement² – but there were few fundamental developments during this time. Aside from displays of recent acquisitions, special temporary exhibitions were infrequent until the late 1950s. There was, however, an exhibition in 1948 organised for a portrait of Jane Austen by her sister Cassandra. This was the only original portrait of Jane Austen and was purchased with help from the Friends of the National Libraries. Such developments and events were significant but modest. The focus of the director and trustees was on recovery and reopening. There was not any notable change or innovation that might situate the gallery more comfortably in the social and political environment of post-war Britain.

In 1951, the year Charles Kingsley Adams became director, the last of the war-damaged galleries were redecorated and reopened. This was also the year of the Festival of Britain, a national exhibition devised by the Labour government in the spirit of bringing the arts to everyone: 'the idea was to represent the history and potential of the British people – not just of distinguished individuals'.³



Jane Austen by Cassandra Austen, 1810. Acquired in 1948. Currently on display in room 18 of the gallery. © National Portrait Gallery, London

Although this might not have seemed in the natural remit of the NPG, the Festival also marked the centenary of the Great Exhibition in 1851 and the NPG participated with an exhibition entitled *Some Leading Characters of 1851*; some 150 portraits were exhibited including prints, drawings, sculpture and paintings. Most were from the gallery's own collection. The NPG's involvement in the Festival did not mark any change of approach or role for the gallery. Instead, it serves to emphasise how it remained, as described by the current Chair of trustees Sir David Cannadine in his brief history of the gallery, 'a quintessentially Victorian institution'.⁴

The 1960s were a turning point for the gallery. David Piper was director between 1964 and 1967, after holding the post of Assistant Keeper from 1946 upon returning from a Japanese

prisoner of war camp. There was an increase in the number of exhibitions during Piper's time at the gallery. He also instigated an education programme with regular public lectures. Their success encouraged a regular series of lunch-hour lectures and further programmes for school parties. He raised the profile of the gallery through broadcasts, lectures and publications, including the *Catalogue of Seventeenth Century Portraits* which was the first systematic study of any of the gallery's collection. Cannadine believes that Piper would be beneficial for the gallery, which despite his efforts was still considered a scholarly and conservative institution, but he felt that it was for someone else to reform, not him.⁵ Piper and Lord Kenyon, the then chair of trustees, changed the age requirements for applicants for the position of director from over 35 to over 30, which allowed 31 year old Roy Strong to succeed to the directorship in 1967.

Strong was unconventional and controversial. He was director until 1975 and in this time there were 35 temporary exhibitions. Of these, it was an exhibition of Cecil Beaton's photographic portraits in 1968 that marked a defining moment in the direction of the gallery. Beaton photographed not only members of the royal family but also other well-known figures such as actors and writers. He worked for both *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* and was known for his fashion photography. As such, he was an unusual, but popular choice for the NPG. About 32,000 people visited the exhibition in the first two weeks, a record for the gallery and its run was twice extended. This was the first exhibition dedicated to photography and its success encouraged Strong to set up a new department for film and photography.

In 1969 Strong persuaded the trustees to discard Stanhope's '10-year rule', which allowed the gallery only to acquire a portrait if the sitter had been deceased for at least 10 years. This ensured that only portraits of individuals of enduring significance were acquired. Strong's intervention was a significant turning point; an intrinsic rule that had been in place since the gallery's foundation and was vital in determining the portraits the gallery could acquire and display had been abandoned. It was, however, agreed that acquisitions of portraits of living sitters or those deceased less than 10 years should only be 'in exceptional circumstances'⁶ and, if three or more trustees did not agree to



Sir Roy Strong by Cecil Beaton, 1970s. Accepted by the government in 1991 in lieu of tax. © National Portrait Gallery, London

the acquisition, it was not to go ahead. In his published diary Strong describes how his relationship with the still rather conservative trustees was uneasy; they did not all approve of his distinctive appearance or his enthusiasm for change. He remarks that in 'the old days the Trustees chose the wallpapers. God protect us from that'.⁷ Strong initiated a programme of redecoration and re-hanging that was described by Lord Kenyon as a 'type of evocative storytelling'.⁸ He grouped portraits according to the period and background of the sitters rather than in compact rows and included objects loaned from other museums to help illustrate the historical context. His approach to display was in keeping with the trend for popular history and helped to revive the gallery's attractiveness to visitors. The popularity of Strong's exhibitions and displays encouraged the Treasury to increase the annual purchase grant from £8,000 to £40,000 in 1970.⁹ He soon became a well-known and in-demand personality in Sixties London, giving lectures, attending professional and social events and parties, actively fundraising for the gallery and making regular contributions to magazines and newspapers. He was well attuned to the spirit of the time and this was reflected in his innovations at the gallery. It was under his direction that the gallery began to reflect the cultural circumstances and tastes of the period in a way that had not been done since the gallery was established.

Strong's successor, art historian John Hayes, was director from 1975 to 1994. He continued Strong's innovative approach and established the Imperial Tobacco Portrait Award (now the BP Portrait Award). Although the trustees had always recognised that the quality of the art was important in acquiring a good likeness, the status of the sitter was considered more important than the status of the artist or the artwork.

But the Portrait Award encouraged and promoted portraiture as an art form and highlighted the gallery's recognition of the importance of the art and the style and form of the portraiture. There was significant rearrangement and reorganisation of the galleries during Hayes's directorship and, although Strong's display style did not survive into the 1980s, there was a continued awareness of changing fashions and tastes within museum display. The portraits were returned to greater prominence in the displays and there was 'a new respect for the gallery's building and original plan of its rooms'.¹⁰ By the 1980s acceptance or purchase of photographic portraits was normal and there were regular acquisitions of portraits of popular and well-known living sitters that perhaps were not always what Stanhope had hoped for when he had envisaged a gallery of 'men of real distinction'.

The second half of the 20th century was an exciting and important phase in the history of the NPG. Ultimately it modernised and adapted but remains a gallery dedicated to the representation of eminent individuals in British history. It was realised and accepted that eminence in post-war Britain was often different and diverse or attained and represented in different ways to the Victorian ideals pertaining when the gallery was established. There was an increasing awareness of the influence of changing political and cultural contexts on how the gallery and its collections were perceived. This continued recognition became important in maintaining the gallery's popularity and success.

¹ Hansard Parliamentary Debates Vol. 140, House of Lords, March 4 1856.

² Minutes of Trustees meetings, 22 June 1950.

³ Alan Sinfield, 'The Government, the People and the Festival' in Jim Fyrrth (ed.), *Labour's Promised Land? Culture and Society in Labour Britain 1945-1951* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1995), p. 184.

⁴ David Cannadine, *National Portrait Gallery: A Brief History* (London: National Portrait Gallery), p. 59.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Annual Report, 1967-1975.

⁷ Roy Strong, *The Roy Strong Diaries 1967-1987* (London: Phoenix, 1997, 1998), p. 45.

⁸ Peter Funnell, 'Display at the National Portrait Gallery, London, 1968-1975', in Deborah Cherry and Fintan Cullen (eds.), *Spectacle and Display* (Chichester: Blackwell, 2008), p. 134.

⁹ Annual Report, 1967-1975.

¹⁰ Funnell, 'Display at the National Portrait Gallery', p. 135.