Britain in the World: New Display of the Collections at the Yale Center for British Art

Opening May 11, 2016

NEW HAVEN—When the Yale Center for British Art reopens to the public on May 11, 2016, following an extensive sixteen-month building conservation project, visitors will experience not only a renewed masterpiece of modern architecture by Louis I. Kahn but also a freshly reimagined installation of the Center’s collections. More than five hundred works from the Center’s holdings, largely the gift of the institution’s founder, Paul Mellon (Yale College, Class of 1929), will be displayed in the newly renovated and reconfigured galleries on the second and fourth floors. Developed by a team of curators led by Scott Wilcox, Deputy Director for Collections, and Matthew Hargraves, Chief Curator of Art Collections and Head of Collections Information and Access, this new installation will present the complex story of the development of British art from the time of the Protestant Reformation to the present.

“Ours is one of the most outstanding institutions devoted to the art and culture of a single nation,” said Director Amy Meyers. “The challenge that we embrace enthusiastically is to understand, celebrate, interrogate, and critique that culture in a global context.”

Tracing the growth of a native British school of artists, the installation will reveal how frequently the story of art in Britain focuses on a narrative of international exchange. The new arrangement will address the impact of immigration and travel on British art and culture across the centuries and the role that the arts have played in the history of Britain’s imperial vision, exploring the ways in which the perception of the British Empire influenced how Britons saw themselves and others. Featured in the display will be the Netherlandish artists who provided the foundations of British art in the Tudor period; the seventeenth-century Flemish artists Peter Paul Rubens and Anthony van Dyck; and the eighteenth-century Italian artist Canaletto, German Johann Zoffany, and Americans John Singleton Copley and Benjamin West.

Many of the Center’s well-known treasures from the Paul Mellon Collection will
return to view in new and exciting juxtapositions, such as the works of George Stubbs, including his painting *Zebra* (1763); Joseph Wright of Derby’s *The Blacksmith’s Shop* (1771); J. M. W. Turner’s *Dort or Dordrecht: The Dort packet-boat from Rotterdam becalmed* (1818) and *Staffa, Fingal’s Cave* (1831–1832); and John Constable’s cloud studies (ca. 1821–1825) and *Hadleigh Castle* (1828–1829). Greeting visitors to the second floor will be one of the Center’s most significant works of twentieth-century art: Rachel Whiteread’s *Untitled (Ten Tables)* (1996). According to Scott Wilcox, “Our intention is to show the masterpieces of the collection to best advantage but within a richer, denser hang that will allow for more of the collection to be on view, and in an arrangement that will give a new variety and drama to the gallery spaces.”

The main galleries on the naturally sky-lit fourth floor will explore the story of British art through the mid-nineteenth century. The presentation will continue on the second floor with works spanning from the Victorian period to the present day, pairing other masterworks from the collection such as James McNeill Whistler’s *Nocturne in Blue and Silver* (1872–1878), with important long-term loans such as Jacob Epstein’s sculpture *Venus* (1914–1916), Lucian Freud’s *Girl in a Dark Dress* (1951), and Francis Bacon’s *Three Studies for Portraits: Isabel Rawsthorne, Lucian Freud and J. H.* (1966).

The reinstallation of the collection also will include a complete reconfiguration of the Long Gallery on the fourth floor, restoring the original conception of the space as a study gallery, as formulated by the Center’s founding director, Jules Prown, and as designed by Kahn. The space will comprise an elegant sweep of seven bays in which over two hundred paintings and sculptures will be mounted. The addition of this much-needed collections seminar room will allow faculty and students to request an up-close examination of paintings, sculptures, prints, and drawings that are not currently on display.

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