

# THE DECLINE OF ROYAL PATRONAGE

## FROM LELY TO KNELLER

After the execution of Charles I and the Commonwealth / Protectorate period, during which the fine arts enjoyed reduced patronage, painting in the Restoration and Revolution periods, from 1660 to about 1715, was dominated successively by two rather similar painters, **Sir Peter Lely** (1618-1680) and **Sir Godfrey Kneller** (1646-1723). Both were highly successful, specialized in portraiture and were official Court painters; yet their respective careers bear witness to the evolution that, through the late 17th century, gradually shifted the centre of English artistic life from Court to City, via the great Whig aristocracy that became the dominant class in England. This shift, especially after the 1688 Glorious Revolution, which secured the principles of Constitutional Monarchy and English Protestantism, and the great English victories against France (which marked the emergence of England as a potential world leader), encouraged a new, militant patriotism that would result in a rising demand for a genuinely English school of art. Meanwhile the growing commercialization of culture and the fine arts would lead, eventually, to a much more diverse range of genres and formats than had been the case in the portrait-dominated Tudor and Stuart periods.

### 1) Peter Lely

Born Peter van der Faes, Peter Lely settled in England during the Civil War, and his early style of portraiture (*King Charles I and the Duke of York*) shows his indebtedness towards Van Dyck and possibly Dobson, as well as his mostly Royalist connections. He nevertheless established himself as the foremost painter in England during the Commonwealth period, partly because of his readiness to flatter his subjects and adapt his native Dutch style to their requirements (*The Concert*, 1658). It was hardly a surprise that he should be made Principal Royal Painter in 1661, shortly after the Restoration. Indeed the court of the 'merry monarch' Charles II, where jade cynicism and unbridled hedonism had replaced the solemn decorum of Charles I's reign, was the ideal context for Lely, whose style of female portraiture especially nicely fitted the mood of the age. Lely brought several new features to the Van Dyke tradition : more varied and elaborate architectural decoration, lively cherubs or children, such as the exquisitely indolent *Young Man as a Shepherd*, (1659), an increased mobility in depiction as in his portrait of *Lady Elizabeth Wriothesley* (1665) and – last but not least – a sensuousness or languor that is particularly reflected in his portraits of the King's mistresses, notably the Duchess of Cleveland. Indeed, such near-blasphemous and erotic paintings as his portrait of the *Duchess of Cleveland with her Son* (1664) as a Raphael

Madonna and child, or the playful, lascivious nude *Portrait of a Young Woman and Child, as Venus and Cupid*, would not receive official sanction again before some time. Yet Lely is a significant figure for other reasons as well : partly through the business acumen or flair that turned his studio into a well-run portrait ‘factory’, and also through the series of portrait that seem to anticipate later trends in English art. Thus he not only painted *Windsor Beauties*, but also the *Lowestoft Flagmen* series (1666), a more patriotic set meant to commemorate a naval victory against the Dutch. These portraits, characterized by more subdued tones and a more severe delineation of character, may be seen as foreshadowing later trends in English portraiture ; the depiction of *Sir Jeremiah Smith* may be compared with the classical, French-influenced *Portrait of the Duke of York Lely* did during the same period. Indeed, Lely’s success and influence have relegated his rivals in comparative obscurity, despite their occasional thematic innovations, illustrated here by the Italian-trained John Michael’s Wright portrait of an Irish chief, *Sir Neill O’Neill* (1680) and John Riley’s half-parodic, half melancholy full-length of a royal servant : *Portrait of Bridget Holmes* (1686).

Yet the foremost artistic figure of the period is probably the architect **Christopher Wren**, first educated at Oxford amongst enlightened theologians and scientists. Significantly, and although Charles II sometimes thought of reviving his father’s architectural ambitions, setting Wren to work on royal palaces at Greenwich and Winchester, Wren’s main achievement lay in the City of London. Though he was unable to carry out his ambitious scheme for remodelling the capital on a Classical grid plan, he nevertheless rebuilt, from 1670 onward, the numerous churches destroyed in the 1666 London Great Fire, with an eye for harmony *and* diversity that earned him widespread admiration). Wren has remained a hero of British cultural history thanks to his subtle acclimatization of Baroque aesthetics to English conditions, a toning-down of Continental magnificence so radical that, as Ernst Gombrich pointed out, it is doubtful whether his own variety of the Baroque style is really baroque at all, as in the interiors of St. Mary-le-Bow and St. Clement Danes. And as Nikolaus Pevsner insisted, Wren’s pragmatism and eclecticism could move him to such original decisions as that to rebuild St. Mary Aldermary as a late Gothic church, complete with fan-vaults in the best 15th-century manner.

His greatest achievement, the new St. Paul’s Cathedral (1675-1710), balances various architectural elements, the traditional nave-and-aisles ground plan, the Baroque towers and various Renaissance motifs, etc into a single, massive yet quiet assertion of greatness : the first church dome built in England – as a Protestant reply to St. Peter’s in Rome – still partly defines the London skyline today.

## 2) Godfrey Kneller

After 1688, the foremost painter at court and elsewhere was the German-born Godfrey Kneller, whose facility of execution, at times bordering on carelessness, and huge success seem to reproduce Lely's career. Yet Kneller, although he did execute official, even half-mythological paintings such as *William III on Horseback*, was equally famous for his portraits not just of royals or even aristocrats, but also of eminent men such as artists and scientists. He thus appears to have been in tune with the more patriotic and 'liberal' mood of the post-1688 period, when the ascendancy of the Whig aristocrats relied partly on an emerging urban public sphere in which, to a limited extent, of course, noblemen, merchants, artists and men of letters could mix more freely than before. Indeed, Kneller's most famous work is perhaps the *Kit-Cat* series of portraits, commissioned by the eminent publisher Jacob Tonson to celebrate members of the Whig 'Kit-Cat club' where grandees such as the Earl of Dorset would converse with talented authors like John Vanbrugh. With their emphasis on personal expression and their rather intimate tone, even verging on the informal in the case of Tonson himself, dressed in a casual gown and turban, some of these portraits, at least, herald the subtle plainness of much 18th-century British portraiture.

A parallel trend of the period, however, was the aspiration, already manifest in Wren's St. Paul's, to grand artistic statements that would fully assert the nation's greatness. This led first to the importation of foreign artists trained in the grand Baroque manner, such as Antonio Verrio and Louis Laguerre, who would work in royal Palaces but also, significantly, in the country seats and houses of the Whig magnates, for instance at Chatsworth, the residence of the powerful Dukes of Devonshire, rebuilt by William Talman after 1688. This tentative introduction of Continental styles owed much to the patronage of aristocrats such as the Earl of Burlington, whose London house was decorated (1713-5) with mythological paintings by the Venetian Sebastiano Ricci's *Diana and the Nymphs*.

More significant still, the greatest English Baroque palace, that of Blenheim in Oxfordshire, was built from 1705 onwards by playwright-turned-architect John Vanbrugh for John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, after Parliament had decided to reward in spectacular fashion his decisive victories against Louis XIV's armies in the War of the Spanish Succession. The same patriotic ambition is obvious in the complex, even crowded Baroque ceiling that James Thornhill painted between 1707 and 1727 for the Hall ceiling at the Greenwich Royal Hospital now the Royal Naval College, a building that had been started as a palace for Charles II but which, from 1692, was completed as a charitable institution for the retired or wounded seamen.

The only enduring legacy, however, of this short-lived, un-absolutist English Baroque would be the recurrent desire for Grand style that emerges time and again in artists as widely different as Hogarth, Reynolds or Blake. Meanwhile, new genres and formats had begun, timidly at first, to be practiced on English ground.

Among these, landscape painting may be seen to emerge slowly from the tradition of 'topographical' representations of aristocratic country houses, as may be seen by comparing the Fleming Jan Siberechts's 1675 view of *Longleat House* with his 1695 *View of Nottingham from the East*. Earlier still, the rather eccentric Francis Barlow had won recognition in the 1650s and later as a talented painter of animals, although his crowded canvases betray a certain lack of compositional skills (*Landscape with Birds and Fishes*, 1667), while the humorous, satirical genre scenes of the Dutch-born Egbert van Heemskerck (*Oxford Election*, 1687) might be said to anticipate Hogarth in their joyous confusion. Lack of funds, however, was again crucial in thwarting monarchical ambitions : in 1666, for instance, it could be said that the King's musicians were almost starving owing to delays in the payment of their wages. In the end, Lely lost every royal and court credibility when Charles II had him paint his mistress the Duchess of Cleveland in a parody of Raphael's Madonna and child. Brewer : "He compromised the part of king by also playing court jester".