

Upper Gallery Tour





to the Victoria Art Gallery

Downstairs, we show special exhibitions of local and national importance. Here, in our Victorian Upper Gallery, we display works from our permanent collection. The Victoria Art Gallery takes care of the Council's collection of paintings, sculpture and decorative arts.

The oil paintings range from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries. Among them are works by painters who lived and worked in the Bath area, including Gainsborough, Sickert and Thomas Barker of Bath.

Our varied decorative arts and sculpture collection includes delicate eighteenth century wine glasses, and a wonderful array of over a hundred and fifty Staffordshire figures of dogs.

Like most museums, we can only display a small percentage of the collection at any one time. You can find more of our paintings in the Pump Room, the Assembly Rooms and the Guildhall.

The following pages provide information about some of the paintings on display here in the gallery.



Ladymead House

This painting has an unusual history. In 1977, an architect was conducting a survey of the buildings of Walcot Street, in Bath. In the course of his work, he discovered this painting in the attic of Ladymead House. He realised that the building in the painting appeared to match the layout of the earliest parts of the house.

Images of Bath from this time are rare. This picture gives an idea of how the city looked before it was built up in the mid-Georgian period. It was painted around 1730, about the same time that the great Bath architect, John Wood, was beginning his building plan for the city. And if you look at the background to the painting you can see how small Bath was in the early eighteenth century. Within seventy years of this picture being painted, the area behind the house was completely built up.



Francis Bird

Bust of Sir Cloudesley Shovel (1650-1707)

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, this bust stood in Victoria Park, here in Bath. Years of exposure to all weathers have caused the curls of the wig to become worn. To save it from further damage, the former owner gave the bust a safe home here at the Victoria Art Gallery. The sculpture is the work of Francis Bird, one of the leading sculptors of the early eighteenth century.

The subject of the bust was also an eminent man of his day: Admiral Sir Cloudesley Shovel. Despite many successes, Shovel is remembered mainly for a piece of bad navigation that led to the wrecking of his flagship on the rocks of the Scilly Isles in the dark. His crew of six hundred and fifty men were lost, together with more than one thousand men from the other ships following the flagship.



Johann Zoffany

Sophia Dumergue

Despite the elegant headdress and long kid gloves, the girl in this portrait is only twelve years old. Her name was *Sophia Dumergue*, and her rich clothes are a sign of her status: her father, Charles, was the royal dentist. You can see his portrait hanging above this one of Sophia. Charles and Sophia Dumergue were French, but came to London when Sophia was two or three.

The artist, Johann Zoffany, also worked for the royal family. Zoffany was particularly skilled at painting children, and made charming, informal portraits of the royal princes.

This portrait, painted around 1780, shows Zoffany's characteristic eye for detail; the slightly crossed eyes of the kitten, even the pink fingertips, which suggest that Sophia bites her nails. It's a touching portrait of a girl just on the brink of adulthood, but clinging on to her childhood expressed by the artist through the inclusion of a kitten.



Thomas Gainsborough

Thomas Rumbold and his Son

This portrait is by one of the best loved of all British painters, Thomas Gainsborough. Painted in Bath around 1770, it shows Thomas Rumbold, a successful merchant with the East India Company, with his eldest son.

Worthy of note is the absence of hands on Thomas Rumbold's figure. We see the boy's hands, but his father's are entirely hidden. The simple explanation for this exclusion is that Gainsborough hated painting hands.

Despite this peculiarity, Gainsborough had a wonderful talent for creating sympathetic and often romantic images of his sitters that made him immensely popular. And it was in Bath that he made his name. Bath was always full of the rich and famous, who came to take the waters and enjoy the social life. He worked very quickly; and he was a wonderfully witty conversationalist. So his sitters were never in any danger of becoming bored.



Thomas Jones Barker

The Bride in Death

The Bride of Death tells a sad story. A young woman lies dead on the eve of her wedding, mourned by the man she was to marry.

Many of the objects in the picture have symbolic meaning. The hourglass on the bedside table shows the passing of time and the shortness of life. The violets in the woman's left hand mean sadness. Her white clothes, and the pearls at her throat and on her right wrist, emphasise her purity. And to the right of the picture, the dog symbolises loyalty and devotion.

The artist, Thomas Jones Barker, came from a family of artists working in Bath in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the best known being his father, Thomas Barker. This is his most famous picture, and was painted in 1839 for the daughter of King Louis Philippe of France.



Henry Herbert La Thangue

The Watersplash

The Watersplash is probably the most popular painting in the Victoria Art Gallery. A gooseherd is driving his flock of geese towards us. They stretch backwards in a white column, following the line of the pathway and trees. The artist, Henry Herbert La Thangue has used clearly visible brushstrokes to create his effects of light and shade.

La Thangue, born in 1859, spent three years in France as part of his training. He was fascinated by plein-air, or outdoor, painting, and spent his summer holidays on sketching trips in Brittany.

When La Thangue returned to England, he chose to live in the country, first in Norfolk and later in Sussex. There he could paint the countryside and the farmyard scenes he loved. This particular work dates from around 1899, and was included in the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition of 1900. This was quite an achievement at a time when such down-to-earth subjects as this were regarded as dangerously modern.



John Charlton

Pilu, a Performing Dog

Pilu the performing dog was a celebrity, who made a fortune for his owner. He travelled about Europe, delighting audiences with his ability to answer mathematical questions. Apparently, he would indicate the correct numbers with his paw.

This portrait of the famous dog was painted in 1910 by the artist John Charlton. Charlton made his name as an animal painter during the Victorian era. He was particularly good at capturing animals' personalities.



John Nash

The Canal Bridge, Sydney Gardens, Bath

The Canal Bridge was painted in the 1920s, by the artist John Nash. Nash was primarily a landscape painter, but when he visited Bath in 1925 he was immensely struck by the area around the canal. This urban scene is set in Sydney Gardens, a beautiful and elegant park here in Bath created in the 1790s as commercial pleasure gardens. But the Industrial Revolution at the turn of the nineteenth century altered the gardens forever. The Kennet and Avon Canal dug a path right through the centre of the pleasure grounds, to allow the transport of goods between the River Avon and the Thames.

Although the canal changed the character of the gardens, Nash shows in this painting how it in fact adds to their picturesque beauty. Indeed, the whole atmosphere of the picture is quiet, subdued and understated. There is a sense of man and nature in harmony.



William Roberts

The Dressmakers

In *The Dressmakers* four women appear to be engaged in a ritual dance. With arms raised and feet forward, they seem to sway together. Two of them, holding scissors, are making snipping gestures towards their partners. The tangle of limbs is echoed, in the top right-hand corner, by the twisting stems of the yellow tulips.

The artist, William Roberts, was born in Hackney, east London, the son of a carpenter. Before the First World War he was involved with a group of artists known as the Vorticists. With their semi-abstract pictures, they declared they were producing new art for the new century.

Later, Roberts turned his back on abstract art, preferring scenes from everyday life, like *The Dressmakers*. This painting was first exhibited in 1931 and is a typical example of how he drew his inspiration from the lives of ordinary people in London, but interpreted them in his own particular style.

Edwin Whitney-Smith

Bust of William Harbutt

Unlikely as it seems, this bust is a monument to a children's modelling material. The subject, William Harbutt, is remembered today as the inventor of Plasticine. Born in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, he came to Bath in 1874 to work as headmaster at Bath School of Art. He invented Plasticine as a teaching aid, and did not initially regard it as a commercial product. He designed it for his students, as the clay then used for modelling was heavy and difficult to work with.

For some time it continued to be used by artists. Indeed, this bust, sculpted by Harbutt's pupil Edwin Whitney-Smith in about 1911, was originally modelled in Plasticine before being cast in solid bronze.



Kenneth Armitage

People in a Wind

This sculpture, *People in a Wind*, brought international recognition to its creator, Kenneth Armitage. It shows a group of four linked figures, leaning forwards, arms thrust out in playful disarray.

The work dates from 1950. At this time, Armitage was Head of Sculpture at the Bath Academy of Art, based in the village of Corsham. Working in a tin hut in a cottage garden, Armitage quite deliberately isolated himself from the London art world. There, he created a highly innovative series of sculptures. He began by making small studies. His studies for *People in a Wind* show his initial concept, which lacked the row of arms projecting forward. The finished work, cast in bronze, received widespread praise.

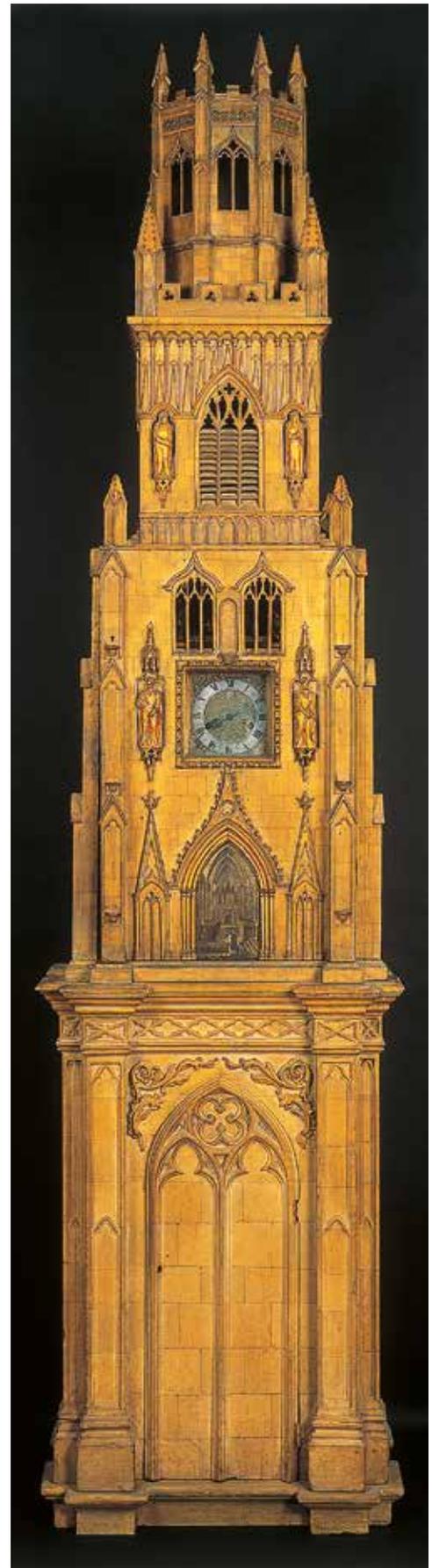


The Lichfield Clock

This musical clock dates from the mid-eighteenth century. For much of its history it had pride of place in the private museum of a Doctor Greene, who lived in Lichfield – hence the clock's name. Its outer case is designed to look like a church tower and is made of wood, painted to look like stone, with details highlighted in gold.

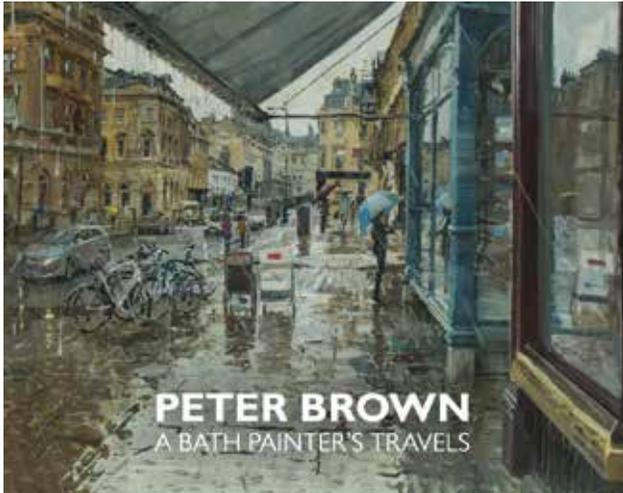
At the lowest stage of this open section there are four silvered brass panels, engraved in Latin with the Creed, the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer. Above is the clock face itself, positioned at the height it would have been in a real church tower. Two pedestals project over the clock face, with a pair of angels bearing trumpets. Directly above the clock face, is a pavilion, supported by pillars. The highest stage is in the form of a Gothic turret.

At the top stands a Statue of Fame, with wings expanded, holding a trumpet in each hand. The clock executes a variety of tunes, any one of which it plays several times.

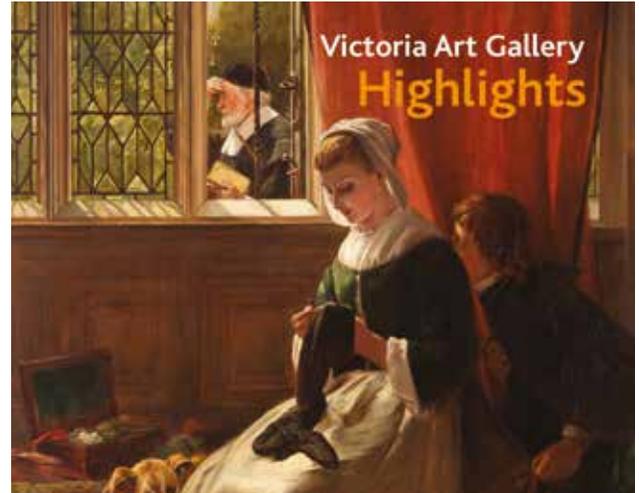


Shop

The Gallery shop is located on the ground floor and is free to visit. It sells a range of beautiful greetings cards, a great selection of art books, and artisan gifts from ceramics and jewellery to prints. A selection of our product range:



Peter Brown's new book



Victoria Art Gallery Highlights book



Annie Sherburne Sparkling Jewellery