

A Shift in the Gallery.

Ten o'clock, the gallery opens its doors to the public. I am ready for visitors, having made sure all the pictures are as they should be. One space with an apology card - '*Lady with Squirrel and Starling*. Removed for cleaning'. Solemn woman, determined to sit still, locked into an oblique stare. The picture's labelled 'could be Anne Lovell?' because her family's coat of arms has a squirrel. That's all I know about her, her face in a thick white bonnet, and her (possible) name. Locked in place through a few hours with Hans Holbein the Younger. He probably wouldn't have 'known' her either, and here she is, where she might least expect to be, gawped at by common folk (or not, as the case now is). If it had been by a less able painter, she wouldn't be here at all.

I take up my stand in Room 4, to oversee Rooms 2, 4 and 6. Sometimes I sit, sometimes I walk about. Sometimes I answer questions; Americans like to ask questions, to 'make contact'.

Until I came here, I knew nothing about pictures. I was unaware. I looked round on that first day; nothing. I didn't like their static nature - too much Harry Potter with the kids, too many video games, too much fantasy television. I took the job because there wasn't much else after I came out of the army. The person in the job centre thought this would suit me because I could stand for hours, on parade or at royal occasions. But I'd also known action. I wasn't sure I'd last a day indoors, just watching. I thought I'd go out of my mind - well, the bit I was still hanging onto, the bit that jangled and wouldn't let me sleep. At the end of that first week, I realised the gentle movement of people, their murmuring, the calm of the place, settled over me. I had to watch, but without fear. I had to be alert, but know the period of concentration would be without sudden surprise - no-one was at my back.

I was, though, petrified someone would ask me a question, so I spent hours on the Gallery's website mugging it up. Kev, one of the other attendants, told me it wasn't worth the bother. 'Now they've got those audio-sets, you only get asked "where's the Titian?" Or "where's the toilets?" You don't need to know anything.' So I stopped worrying. One or two visitors would glance at me nervously. I try not to look like a policeman, though I do stand up straight, hands behind my back. My job is to protect the pictures, notice suspicious behaviour, but I don't want people to be uneasy, I want to be helpful, allow them to enjoy the pictures. I don't have to communicate.

I started to make up stories about the visitors to pass the time. Where they came from, what they did, why they were here. After a while, I found this unsatisfactory, I was frustrated that visitors would move on before I got a good handle on their fictional life. I'd look up and they were gone, their 'story' fizzled out. I started to look, really look, at the pictures, and I went back to the website. I visited other galleries. I kept quiet about this, I didn't tell Kev that I was actually interested, which really surprised me, until he told me how much he loved the Impressionists. He would go in early just to look, before 'the hordes' came in, the Impressionists being the most popular with tourists.

Ten minutes past ten. A woman comes in and sits in front of Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, she takes out a sketchpad. A student, fine art or art history; grey-brown hair tied back, glasses, jeans and a plain jacket, which she takes off and sits on. A 'mature' student. She stares. She should by rights have stood in front, twisting this way and that to see the optical illusion - white grey splash of paint, or, if you stand in the right place, a skull. People exclaim to their companions when they see it. Americans are the loudest.

This woman obviously knows the painting, she went straight to it. She will know who the ambassadors are: Jean de Dinteville, aged 29, Georges de Selve, aged 25. Don't seem old enough to be Ambassadors, but that's judging them by today's standards. Then, they were all spies, with all the physical stuff included in that job description. Holbein - probably also a spy, but for which side? - makes them both look much older, solemn. Bored, if you ask me. No-one would know much about them if not for this picture - perhaps not be interested in the picture itself, but for the skull. Mortality. Death comes to us all. We prefer not to know that, it's better just to marvel at the artist's skill. Skull - skill - scull...and it's by Holbein, who then painted *the* picture of Henry VIII. The one everyone knows, if only as a reprint on a tee-shirt, or a logo for Historic England. The one that shouts POWER, ALPHA MALE, BOW DOWN YE MORTALS. The 'brand' of Kingship, not him at all - gout-ridden, halitosis probably, weak and old. But what do I know? Not him, certainly.

A few more people come in, a group with audio sets clamped to their heads. This means they will gaze at a picture, perhaps just jutting a head forward, oblivious, hogging the picture. Solitary, a recorded voice, no human contact for several minutes. There used to be guides, talking in different languages, noisy at times, but animated. Now it's silent technology, divorcing one person from another.

I prefer those like the couple coming in. They sit on a bench, talking about the pictures in front of them, gesticulating. Forties or fifties, female, one looking forward, chin on fingers, leaning towards the other. I wander past; the language sounds like Dutch. The one talking, pointing seems to be explaining, the listener nods from time to time. Then she speaks and they both laugh. I imagine them as oil portraits, caught in a moment of communication with each other, without technology.

What I do now, knowing the pictures so well, is fit the visitors to the pictures. Singly or in groups, I classify them. The young women might be Madonnas, Virgin Marys, occasionally (very occasionally), Venus. Not that I undress them with my eyes, you understand, but I do recognise a beauty that belongs to a time past, with a self-confident air. The Renaissance nudes all have that confidence, self-awareness. That woman in the white mac is a Monet, that one, a robust Rubens.

A couple of young men, a cleric, thin and pasty, unwashed hair enters with an Adonis, or a 'portrait of a young man'. There are quite a few of these nowadays, ones who go to the gym a lot. An older man, frowning, slightly bent, is a Joseph, a poor, long-suffering Renaissance Joseph. Background to Mary, a young pregnant woman married off for the sake of 'virtue'. No communication, after all, he isn't Jesus's Dad. Just talks to the animals, makes tea for the magi. Whether she was real or not, Mary's image is everywhere here: a young girl, a Queen of Heaven, staring out, disgruntled, disinterested in her nude baby (understandably, as they're usually quite ugly). Until you come to Raphael, my favourite, *The Madonna of the Pinks*, an ordinary girl delighted by her baby, really looking at him, not attending to anyone else. I don't know who the models were, prostitutes mostly, I suppose, or at least the painters' lovers. They have no names except those they represent; the real women are not those they represent. They have been given another history, another, frozen, life.

Although these rooms are less crowded than the Impressionists Room, there are quite a few today, Saturday. Roman senators, groups for battles, women for markets. A red-faced small man, smiling, is fit for a kitchen boy with plucked chickens and wine jugs. Actors for Caravaggio, stage set up for a supper with Christ. Folks out for a day on the Seine, unknown to Renoir - until he shared a drink with them?

Most of the pictures in the Gallery, certainly here, are of people. I can match the visitors to them. Lots of rich men, not all arrogant, some of them looking used and rough. And their ladies; they can be arrogant - more so than the men. If they are named, I can look them up on the internet, find out about them. I can look up the painters as well, I can find facts (or 'alternative facts'), I can read biographies, I can attend lectures. I can know birthdates, (disputed?) death dates, ages, I can know *about* them but I don't *know* them. I've been to the National Portrait Gallery several times. Hundreds of people I don't know, but some, some were people I'd like to have known. The artist has made me feel that, a glint in the eye, folds of skin. Something. Back here, in Room 6, I can think of one painting that scares the daylights out of me: the *Portrait of Pope Julius II* - Raphael again – old, querulous, the power here is in his hands on the arms of a chair. He isn't looking at me, his head is bowed, but I can feel a crackle in the atmosphere around the sitter. Every time. Some people call Raphael 'sweet', saccharine, but here he paints the absolute opposite. I'd like to have met him.

I've seen some live painters, at exhibitions, previews. Not here, the pictures here stop at the beginning of the twentieth century (although they do have contemporary artists talking about their favourite pictures. I go to these if I can.) But at other galleries, at exhibitions of their work, they'll gauge whether you're a buyer or not. I'm not, but sometimes I like to tell them if I like the work. They smile politely, recognise I'm not loaded, or a tourist, and look over my shoulder, muttering their thanks. I did once get into conversation with David Hockney about his huge paintings of trees. He told me where to stand, talked about the pictures. But I can't say I know him, and he'd never remember me if he saw me again. I tried the Turner Prize once. I couldn't get a handle on it. When I came back here I knew why: no people.

Now, here's a man, tall, slimmish, seventies or eighties with a nice suit and sparse hair, a model for a St Jerome, reading in his study, if ever I saw one! Is there a painter in the house? Not one that would even think of painting a St Jerome, not now.

My shift here is nearly over. Twenty minutes to go. I've made a good haul of picture-people today: very satisfying. The visitors have become more interesting, they have become something else, something definite. They have become paint, so now they belong in the gallery.

When Kev comes to take over, I'll walk through into the Sainsbury Wing to see 'my' Madonna. A young woman, I don't know who she was, but I know who she is. The look is the same. Love. My daughter, my first grandchild, as they were, as I saw them.

Before the bomb.

Here, they are safe, I am safe. With painted people, faraway artists. I like that.