

# THE QUEEN'S GALLERY BUCKINGHAM PALACE

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## TEACHER INFORMATION NOTES **George IV: exploring the spectacle** A Creative Writing Workshop



***Fine art is that in which the hand, the head and the heart go together.***

**John Ruskin**

And that goes for fine writing too. During this workshop session, the children will be encouraged and enabled to use all three: hand, heart and head. The exhibition of magnificent items from the Royal Collection associated with King George IV also evokes ways of using art as a basis for cross-curricular work in school, in this case particularly history, design and social studies.

George IV's tastes were eclectic and expensive, causing rifts about money between him and Parliament and making him unpopular in the country - but his taste was exquisite and his appreciation of the decorative arts and architecture extensive and informed. George and his forbears Charles I and Charles II were the monarchs mainly responsible for the accumulation of the treasures in the Royal Collection. The splendours of Buckingham Palace were the creation of George himself with his friend and architect, John Nash.

While Prince of Wales and later Prince Regent, George lived at Carlton House, a large mansion only a few yards along the Mall from Buckingham House where he had been brought up as a child. Carlton House became so crammed with his gorgeous possessions, that tents were erected to contain some of them on the back lawn. This was clearly not a palace fit for a king. As soon as he was crowned, George began the enlargement and redecoration of Buckingham House turning it into a Palace to rival those of the other royal families of Europe. On their visit, students will see some of the treasures that were transferred from house to Palace and some of the many that were purchased anew.

Students will take away a ‘Writer’s Notebook’ provided for them by the Gallery. In it they will write brief ideas and reminders of the two hours spent there, looking, talking and writing about George IV and the fascinating collection. Their ideas and the follow-up suggestions at the end of these notes can be developed into longer, finished pieces of writing or other creative projects. A selection of the following images in the Exhibition will be used:

## Discover images from our exhibition online

All of the images featured in your taught session can be sourced as digital versions for use on classroom whiteboards via [www.rct.uk](http://www.rct.uk) . Use the RCIN number (example highlighted in yellow below) typed in to the ‘Search the Collection’ feature on our *Explore the Collection* page ([www.rct.uk/collection/search](http://www.rct.uk/collection/search)) to simply locate the chosen image. Images can be downloaded as files to print.

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# EXPLORE THE COLLECTION

Explore the Royal Collection online, one of the largest and most important art collections in the world, and one of the last great European royal collections to remain intact.

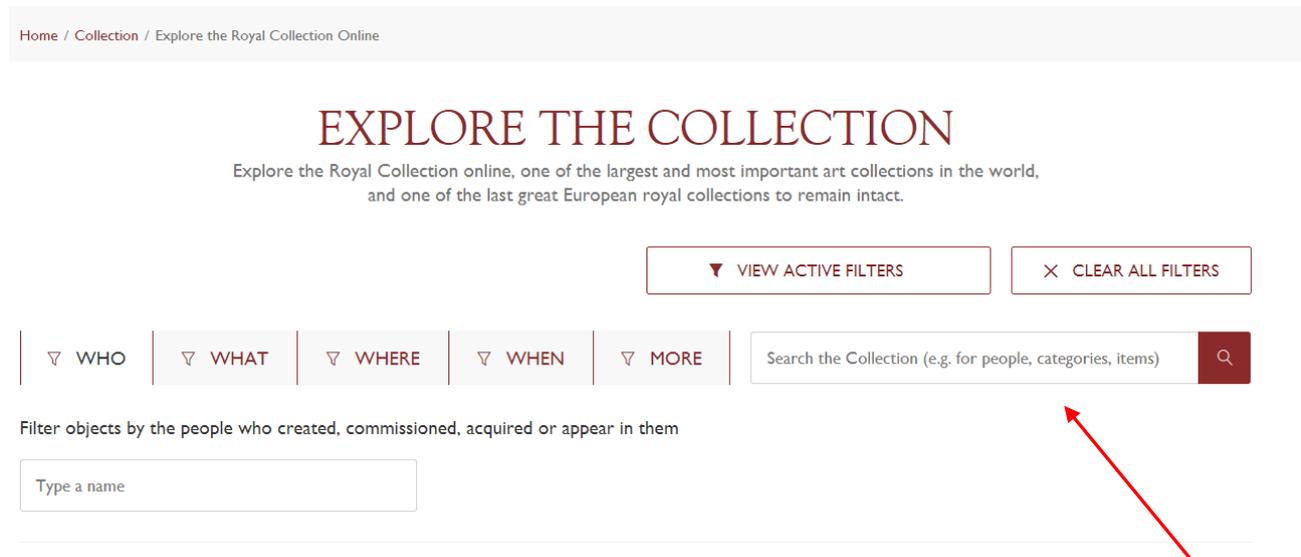
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Search the Collection (e.g. for people, categories, items)

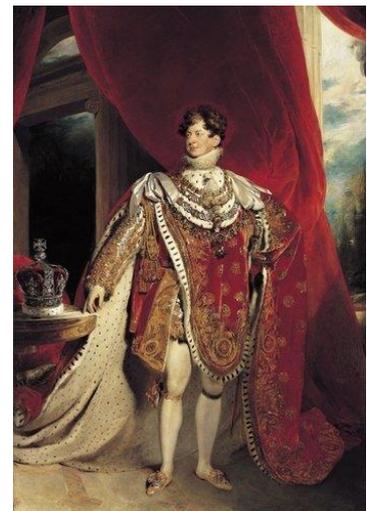
Filter objects by the people who created, commissioned, acquired or appear in them

Type a name



Sir Thomas Lawrence  
**Portrait of George IV**  
1821, Oil on canvas  
RCIN **405918**

Wearing the Coronation robes he designed himself, based on the coronation robes of the Emperor Napoleon. The portrait is intended to show George as powerful and wealthy - a king to be reckoned with. His finger is on the Table of the Generals, which had belonged to Napoleon. George was obsessed with the Emperor – a mixture of hatred and admiration - and the table was his favourite memento of him following his defeat at Waterloo only six years before.



The portrait is painted over a previous one painted only four years previously, showing the George as Prince of Wales. A large part of the current picture is mostly by Lawrence’s studio rather than by Lawrence himself. We don’t know why a brand new image wasn’t made of such an important occasion but at first sight it fulfils the objective of being imposing and impressive. Round his neck, George wears the chains and emblems of several of the British and European orders of chivalry including that of the Order of the Garter with its tiny image of St George hanging down on to his chest.

Sir Peter Paul Rubens  
**Landscape with St George and the Dragon**  
1630-35, Oil on Canvas  
RCIN 405356



There are several versions of the story of St George and the Dragon. Rubens, a devout Catholic, has chosen one with an overtly religious slant:

A dragon held the town of Silene in Libya at bay. It had eaten all the citizens' sheep and had started on the children and young people, drawn by lot each day from rich and poor alike. On the day that the lot fell on the king's daughter, St George was passing and found her in tears with her attendants behind her. He did battle with the dragon and disabled it, piercing it beneath its arm where there were fewer protective scales. He told the princess to tie a belt around its neck and lead it to the city, where he promised the citizens he would kill it if they all converted to Christianity. They agreed. Rubens shows the moment when the Princess takes the belt ready to tie it round the dragon's neck to lead it into Silene - where St George struck off its head.

Figures of women and children on the left mourn those already dead. On the right are two of St George's attendants, one leaning down to calm his frightened horse, the other holding his flag. Up in the trees are presumably some of the families released from the siege and awaiting conversion.

Rubens painted the picture 'in honour of England' while he was on a diplomatic mission at the court of Charles I. He was in the country from 1629-30 and sent the picture home to Flanders as a 'monument to his abode & employment here'. It was bought back a little later for Charles I by his ambassador to the Spanish Netherlands. The setting and characters were said to be 'typically English' and it has been agreed that the river is roughly-speaking the Thames – perhaps the view from York House where Rubens stayed. The figure of St George is a portrait of, or an allusion to, Charles I – there is a likeness. The Princess was said to have been a representation of Queen Henrietta Maria, but it's nothing like her and there's no evidence to support the idea.

David Teniers the Younger  
**Peasants dancing outside a Tavern**  
c.1641 Oil on canvas  
RCIN 406363



David Teniers was one of a line of Flemish artists whose pictures of peasant life seen in a comic light were hugely popular in his time – in his case making him wealthy and his work sought-after. He makes his peasants ugly, clumsy, often grotesque although in this painting he holds back a little on satire and concentrates on the fun.

Many of these pub scenes showed a saint's banner hanging somewhere in the courtyard, depicting a kermis or saint's day festival but here it's a much more spur-of-the-moment outbreak of jollity. The only thing hanging is the new moon on the pub sign with its symbolic jug above it.

Painted in his youth, Teniers introduces slice-of-life characters that he repeats over and over again throughout his career, many of them based on the outrageous antics of characters from the Commedia dell-Arte. These were troupes of Italian players travelling about Europe with slapstick, pantomime entertainments that satirised stupidity, pomposity, greed and lechery and made sure that quick-witted lovable rogues overcame all adversity and that love conquered all.

Teniers shows all this in little episodes across the picture – a pantomime entertainment of his own. To prove his skill in depicting texture, on the right he presents a still life of household objects, including a chamber pot – bodily functions were all part of the comedy as various figures demonstrate. He shows a young barmaid pushing away a lecherous old man, card-players at a table, a group in the shadows pointing out others' misdemeanours and couples dancing clumsily – a far cry from the elegance of the family of the prosperous merchant family on the left. But the main joke is the peasant in the red hat pressing one of the young women of the family to get up and dance with him – Teniers the story teller leaves you to make up your mind what will happen next in each of the little scenes being played out.

But the old man standing alone may represent Time, and 'gather ye rosebuds while ye may'. In other words, eat, drink and be merry and have a good time while you can, a sentiment that would have appealed to George IV when he bought the picture.

Adam Weisweiler

### **Cabinet**

1785-90 Oak & other woods, hardstones, tortoiseshell, gilt bronze, marble  
RCIN 2593



The cabinet is a superb example of seventeenth-century Florentine hardstone inlay work – *pietra dura* – 'works of beauty that would last forever'. Fruit shown are peaches, grapes and cherries and the birds are parrots, with a hoopoe and exotic pheasants on the central and side panels. The flowers are roses, pansies, lilac and the hyacinth, but most important are a tulip and a crown fritillary – the latter a symbol of power and majesty. These two panels are earlier than the rest of the cabinet, possibly surviving because of their subject matter – the importance of the monarchy, and in memory of 'tulip mania', the fascination and expense of the tulip in the seventeenth century. The cabinet was bought by George IV when Prince of Wales, so was at Carlton House and subsequently moved to Buckingham Palace.

### **The vestibule cabinet**

In the long display case on the right is a mixture of arms and armour. George IV loved to believe he was a great soldier although he never went into battle. Also shown are items of dress, artefacts and weaponry from distant countries that were part of the growing British Empire.

Birmingham

### **Parade Breastplate of George, Prince of Wales**

1806 Ferrous metal, velvet and silk  
RCIN 67162

This elaborate breastplate was probably made for George when Prince of Wales to wear at a masquerade or fête. The steel is incredibly thin, as the armour wasn't intended for practical defence. It's etched with a series of scallop-shells against a frosted ground. At the right side of the upper plate is the Prince of Wales's badge and motto, and at the left, the Star of the Order of the Garter. The lining is of soft white wool covered all over with dark blue silk. It's likely that the designer was George himself.



A century after the event, Guy Laking, Keeper of the King's Armoury at Windsor, is known to have supplied armours for wear at fashionable costume balls in London.

Rodgers and Sons (UK)

**Pocket Knife**

1821 Mother of pearl, steel

RCIN 2451

Made of mother of pearl and steel, the knife holds 46 steel implements including blades, saws, files and bradawls and corkscrews. It was presented to George IV in February 1821 by Rodgers & Sons, probably to promote royal patronage. Rodgers were the most prominent cutlers in Sheffield. The proprietor John Rodger was an astute businessman who also introduced the Bowey knife to North America.



Rundell Bridge & Rundell

**Dress Sword**

Mid-seventeenth century Ivory and Steel

RCIN 67142

The carved hilt of the sword depicts the rescue of Andromeda by Perseus, who descends on his winged horse, Pegasus, to destroy the fierce dragon tormenting his captive. Perseus and the chained Andromeda appear on the pommel and grip. The knuckle-guard is formed of the long neck and mouth of the dragon and the quillon-block and rear quillon, the dragon's back and tail. The tiny shells are carved with the dragon's wings and feet.



The wavy-edged blade was added after the hilt entered George IV's collection in 1820. It's etched on one side with the half-length figure of a woman in the fashionable dress of around 1700, with a similarly dressed bust of a man of the same period on the other side. The blade was waved during forging rather than by the more usual method of filing the edges of a conventional blade.

**Right display case:** An 'Ahu'ula – the yellow and red Hawaiian cape made of feathers on bark cloth (RCIN 69994) and a samurai sword (RCIN 72783).

**Left display case:** A First Nations coat made of caribou skin and leather (RCIN 72705), and a silver gilt tray from Peru (50823).

William Theed

**Thetis returning from Hephaestus with the arms of Achilles**

1805-12 Bronze

RCIN 71833

The sculpture depicts Thetis, mother of Achilles the great warrior, kneeling in a scallop shell. Thetis was a Nereid – a sea nymph - and therefore immortal. Achilles's father King Peleus was mortal and so, therefore, was Achilles. Thetis knew this meant that he could, and probably would, die in battle. He wouldn't go to Olympus to live with the gods and she would lose him forever.



At the start of the Trojan War, Thetis asked Hephaestus (the armourer/blacksmith god) to create armour for Achilles. Carried by a double-tailed triton rising out of the waves she carries the armour to her son on his ship as he lays siege to Troy. She is shown already mourning him, knowing he will be lost to her.

The Greek inscription on the base of the sculpture transcribes as 'Thetis returning from the god'. The armour consists of sword, helmet, cuirass (chest and back plate) and greaves (leg pieces).

### **The Grand Service**

Traditionally a buffet was intended as a means of impressing guests with the wealth and power of the monarch. In 1517 the Venetian Ambassador to the court of Henry VIII described seeing a 'buffet 30 feet in length, 20 feet high, with silver vases and vases of gold, worth vast treasure, none of which was touched'.

Today during State Banquets, the Ballroom at Buckingham Palace is decorated with two large buffets of silver gilt from the Grand Service. On display are huge dishes like this one decorated with biblical or mythological scenes, as well as monumental flasks, jewelled cups, ivory tankards, silver-gilt bowls and dishes.

Attributed to Augustus Pugin

#### **Wine Cooler**

c. 1828 Rosewood with gilt mounts

RCIN 29884

The wine cooler has a crenelated rim, a gilded wood shield with three lions, (the symbol of England) on one side, and a thistle (the Scottish emblem) on the other. The wine-cooler was made after George IV's highly publicised visit to Scotland - the first by a reigning monarch since Charles II in 1649/ 51.



John Bridge

#### **Tureens**

Hallmark 1826/7 Silver gilt

RCIN 50279

Each tureen is surmounted by a triton blowing a conch shell horn. The rippled cover has a handle in the form of a coiling eel with a lobster and naturalistic vegetables. The tureen is supported on three hippocampi (seahorses). A triform base is decorated with waves, and stands on three feet cast in the form of tortoises, shells and coral.



Philip Rundell  
**The Shield of Achilles**  
1821 -22 Silver gilt  
RCIN 51266

Many of the pieces in the Grand Service were not intended for dining but rather for decorative display as part of the buffet. The silver-gilt convex shield is one of these items. It has a central medallion cast in high relief with Apollo in a *quadriga* – a chariot with four horses abreast – and surrounded by stars and female figures representing the constellations. The broad border shows scenes of human life: a wedding and banquet, siege, ambush and engagement, harvest, judicial appeal, vintage, oxherds defending their beasts and a Cretan dance.



John Flaxman designed the Shield of Achilles from the description in the eighteenth book of the Iliad where Homer describes in vivid detail the shield that Thetis took to Achilles as part of the armour she had ordered from Hephaestus. It was said to have been a mirror of the world of gods and men, within the 'mighty Stream of Ocean'. Although Homer described its appearance, the precise relationship of the various elements was unclear.

George IV created extraordinarily lavish buffets using the Grand Service. Among the pieces he ordered was the Shield of Achilles – an enormous piece of silver gilt, 90cm in diameter. It was prominently displayed on the buffet at his coronation banquet in 1821, a tradition that was continued by later monarchs.

### Follow up activities at school or at home:

- Choose your favourite from the pieces of writing you did in the Gallery and bring it to a finished state. Get it ready for publication – edit it, design its lay-out. Illustrate it if you like.
- Write two or three reviews of George IV's coronation robes aimed at different audiences – for a fashion magazine perhaps, a newspaper column about the royals, a political or religious pamphlet, a satirical journal or any other you can think of.
- Design your own coronation robes for George. Research his height and dimensions in 1821 so your design shows him at his best. Or design coronation robes for someone acting the role of king or queen in a tv drama – decide on the period, is the drama serious or funny, what kind of character is your monarch.
- Link together the various pieces of dialogue written by your group in front of the painting of St George and the dragon. Turn them into a radio or tv drama– you will probably need more dialogue, some linking descriptive monologues, music and sound effects.
- Write and illustrate the story of St George but set in today's London. Make it into a flip book if you like.
- Make your own *pietra dura* picture using modelling clay and pebbles, broken crockery, glass (make sure it's not sharp) or old bits of costume jewellery
- Take the flowers, fruit and birds you listed in front of the cabinet and turn them into a poem or a song lyric.
- Everyone choose a flower and find out about its symbolism. Make a book or a display showing each flower, perhaps its various stages of development, and its symbolic meaning. There will be stories to tell here, too.
- Research and write a story about the owner of one of the objects you saw in the two outer vestibule cabinets – the feathered cloak perhaps, the coat of caribou skins, the samurai sword or the gold tray from Peru.

- Write a song lyric or a poem for Thetis to sing or speak on her way to deliver the armour to Achilles. She is sad, but she may be proud of her warrior son, Perhaps she prays that he may not be killed, or she may feel grief at his loss or even anger - that war is wrong and that his life will be wasted.
- Research and write your version the story of Achilles at the Trojan War. You will find it in the 18<sup>th</sup> book of Homer's Iliad, but retold in many other places.
- Go into the Royal Collection's website for George IV's Coronation banquet and see if you can find more details of what it was like: how much it cost, who was there, what they ate, how long it lasted, who and what was the King's Champion. With this information, write a menu for your own or for a class coronation banquet – who would you invite, how much would it cost, would there be entertainment and who would be your champion? (RCIN 404463 may help you!)
- George IV amassed a large part of the Royal Collection and brought Buckingham Palace into being as a royal residence fit for a king to receive guests and dignitaries from home and abroad for official occasions. But he was extravagant, even reckless, with money and constantly asking for more from Parliament. Organise a debate – was the amount he spent worth it because of the heritage he left or should he have been prevented from such extravagance in spite of the splendour we, and official and diplomatic visitors, can enjoy?

## Vocabulary

Armourer/blacksmith

Banquet

Buffet

Convex

Coronation

Cuirass

Diplomat

Gilding

Greave

Grief/mourning

Hoopoe

Hippocampus/hippocampi

Ermine

First Nation

Monarch

Nereid

Order of the Garter

Pietra dura

Quadrig

Quillon

Rosette

Scallop shell

Triton

Tureen

