Room guide audio tour highlights

Room 1: Self-Portraits

Self-Portrait

Narrator: Reynolds painted this supremely confident self-portrait when he was 24. He'd left his artist's apprenticeship early and was establishing himself in London as an independent artist.

Artist Tom Phillips:

TP: 'This is a brilliant young man's show-off picture. A self-portrait but saying he's a virtuoso – a kind of announcement of how good he's got at this portrait business. Sort of out-Caravaggio-ing Caravaggio, with this strange shadow across the eyes. It's a difficult pose to ask anyone else to hold but you only have to do it momentarily for yourself – of course all these hands are busy at other enterprises when you're actually painting and if you examine it very very closely – and think what's wrong with this picture rather than what's right with it – that arm that's supporting the hand that's casting the shadow, is a bit of a cursory stab at an arm, and obviously that was the most difficult bit to do.

Painting self-portraits is an odd thing to do, especially in a careerist artist 'cos you're not painting them for much of a market. But of course you're learning to do it via yourself. And the artist is a fantastic model for himself, in that he always turns up – I mean there's no question he's going to be late! – and he hangs around as long as you need him, and he puts his hand where you ask him to put it, because he's the best model you can possibly have. Because you haven't got much time when the sitter turns up, and they're a very grand sort of person, and they've got to go almost as soon as they've arrived. But you are going to stick there.'

Room 2: Heroes

Marquis of Granby

Narrator: This is the Marquis of Granby, commander in chief of British forces during the Seven Years War against France.

Military historian Richard Holmes:

RH: 'This is one of my very favourite military pictures. It's a picture of the Marquis of Granby at the very height of his powers. He's just been instrumental in winning the Battle of Vellingshausen against his French opponents. And we can see him here really in the way he'd like to be remembered.

First of all he's wearing a little bit of armour under his coat. Now, in practice I doubt he'd have worn a cuirass at this point in history but that's just a way of saying 'I'm a gentleman who once would have worn armour', so it's a reflection to a knightly past.

He's also interestingly, very much a fighting soldier and you can see he's got a great basket-hilted broadsword hanging there at his hip with a big swordknot that would have secured the sword to his hand in battle.

That point is underlined actually quite subtly by the fact that he's not wearing a hat or a wig. He'd really set the seal on his military reputation and on popular fame by charging at a battle called Varburg not long before this, and during the charge his hat and his wig blew away. Hence the expression of 'going at it bald-headed'! So when Granby wanted to be remembered he wanted to be remembered as the bald-headed general who really went at it and fought hard among private soldiers.

Finally in this picture he's dismounted from his house, he's come down to the same level as his defeated opponent. And he's taken the glove off his right hand, so there's a hand-shake ready there.

And I like this picture really cos it sums up this brave, frank, straight, honest, open man who was a real hero to his soldiers. Not for nothing are there an awful lot of pubs called the Marquis of Granby.'

Room 3: Print Room

Banastre Tarleton

Narrator: This is Banastre Tarleton, depicted in the heat of battle, in an heroic pose taken from a classical Roman statue.

Tarleton was notorious, both as a merciless soldier and a serial womaniser. As Horace Walpole said of him: '[he] boasts of having butchered more men and lain with more women than anybody else in the army.'

Military historian Richard Holmes:

RH: 'Banastre Tarleton was one of those men who briefly left a very deep mark on military history. He was the son of a Lord Mayor of Liverpool, went to Oxford, got bought a commission in the army, and was then sent off to north America. Arriving there as a junior infantry officer he got made a temporary lieutenant colonel and then commanded a force called the British Legion. This was a force of pro-British Americans.

And he was an extraordinary successful light cavalry leader but he did, if you take the American account at face value, he did carry out massacres and atrocities. In the southern states of America he's still remembered as 'bloody Ban'. I happen to think that they're over-rated.

But here you see Tarleton the way he wanted to be remembered. He's wearing a type of helmet that he designed and which became known as a Tarleton helmet. With a big fur comb over the top, a plume at the side made of metal and leather. It was the classic British light cavalry helmet for the early part of the Napoleonic wars.

And you can see if you look hard at his hands that he's actually lost fingers off one hand, in battle. And when a much older man he often used to shout – he was a member of parliament – he often used to shout: 'King and country, King and country!' and wave his mutilated hand.'

Room 4: Streatham Worthies

Samuel Johnson

Narrator: Dr Samuel Johnson was the most famous writer and conversationalist of his day. HE and Reynolds were friends and both men were key figures on the London arts scene.

Johnson also had a compelling personality. Actor and writer John Sessions has twice played the part of Johnson's friend and biographer James Boswell.

JS: 'I think Reynolds who of course knew Johnson extremely well, knew that the most important thing about Johnson was his conversation. So if you were going to paint Johnson you had to paint him talking, or about to say something, and that's what he's done here. And I think you do get a sense of what it would be like to sit in a chair opposite Johnson which I think would be quite scary.

He also had many physical mannerisms: as he spoke he would rock backwards and forwards and rub his right knee obsessively, he'd move his head from side to side and his face would be a mass of twitches. All of which was very alarming except to those who knew him very well.

He was known not to suffer fools gladly and there's that famous description of him in argument. That he was like a man with a pistol that if he missed you with his shot he would batten you with the butt!

You know being a bit abrupt. His table manners were apparently terrible as well. When he sat down to dinner he would stuff his face and his eyes would be riveted to his plate, as Boswell says, and he would stuff himself and sweat and nobody could say anything to him till he'd eaten. Once he'd eaten he'd start holding forth. One of his funniest remarks about food I think was about cucumbers. He said 'cucumber is a dish which should be sliced, carefully, covered with oil and pepper and salt and then thrown against the wall!' I just love him for that remark. I think if you came out with cracks like that Sam, you're my man.'

Room 5: The Temple of Fame

James Boswell

Narrator: James Boswell is famous as the author of The Life of Samuel Johnson - the most celebrated biography in the English language, which he dedicated to his friend Reynolds.

He was a lawyer but spent most of his time in the relentless pursuit of famous people - and debaucher. He was only 45 when this picture was painted but his hard drinking had aged him prematurely.

Actor and writer John Sessions has twice played Boswell:

JS: 'This is a very conventional portrait, really very much in the 18th-century tradition - with the swagged curtain in the background and the view beyond. Which I find quite funny really because it paints Boswell in the image of the upstanding squire and he was anything but. He was a gossipy, chatty, womanising, drinking star-hunter.

Very early on in their meeting - it might even have been at their very first meeting in May 1773 at Mr Davies's bookshop - where Boswell, absolutely gaga to meet Johnson, had at last met him. And he said, in the way one says silly things when one

meets famous people to cover one's nerves and excitement, and he said: 'I am from Scotland sir, but I cannot help it!' To which Johnson responded: 'That sir, is what I find a great many of your countrymen cannot help!' You know so crushed and distraught in the face of this!

That's meant to be a Staffordshire accent by the way, people from Staffordshire I do apologise.

And then of course there's the other famous line where Boswell's talking about Scotland having many noble prospects and Johnson says, 'It is my experience' or words to that effect 'that the greatest prospect a Scotsman ever saw is the road that led him to England'! You know, Johnson was being a bit bigoted quite frankly. And also being a bit of a devil as well. I think he enjoyed winding Bozzy up.

I think it's unfair to say that he simply rode in on Johnson's coat-tails. He had to have something, more than the fact that he was recording Johnson's life, to make him stay with him. Johnson liked Boswell and I suspect it was his resilience.'

Room 6: Aristocrats

The Ladies Waldegrave

Narrator: These are the three sisters of the Waldegrave family: Lady Charlotte Maria, Lady Elizabeth Laura and Lady Anna Horatia. They were aged 18, 19 and 20 when Reynolds painted their portrait.

It’s a polite and demure picture: the women are wearing very formal clothes and sitting around an elegant table working at embroidery.

Historian Stella Tillyard:

ST: ‘What strikes you when you look at this picture is how white it is. The white breasts, the white necks, fluorescent white silk fo their dresses, the white powder in their hair. I think it signals to us that it’s a painting about their availability for marriage. It’s about virginity.

In fact they’re quite old for none of them to be married – it’s something their mother is very worried about. The painting was commissioned however by her uncle, Horace Walpole - the famous letter-writer and antiquarian - to hang in his house in Strawberry Hill to the west of London.

I think it’s also a painting which shows in a sense their aloneness: their father’s long dead, their mother who was married to George III’s brother was often abroad. And he’s proudly displaying to the world that he has had them in his care. And he wants his circle of acquaintance to know it and he wants a memorial to his own avuncular tenderness towards them.’

Room 7: Painted Women

Kitty Fisher as Cleopatra Dissolving the Pearl

Narrator: This is Kitty Fisher, a working-class woman who, through her beauty, wit and talent for publicity, had become one of the most famous women in London – with

her dress and behaviour scrutinised and copied across the city. She worked as an extremely high-class prostitute with some of the most powerful men in Britain as her clients.

Reynolds painted this portrait of her – as Cleopatra - at the height of her career and celebrity.

Historian Stella Tillyard:

ST: 'She had really burst on the scene a couple of years before, as a very young woman, after she staged an accident in Hyde Park where she tumbled off her horse in front of the assembled crowd, and exposed her pretty legs to the watching public. And used that as a kind of pretext for launching a publicity blitz about herself in the London press. Using the occasion of her enormously increased notoriety and fame to up the anti with her clients and earn a lot more money.

I think it's important to remember too that at this time that Britain is in the middle of the 7 years war and she's very careful to make sure that her clients are military heroes. So she adds fashionableness to them when they come on leave in London and they add glory to her.

In a way we all know Kitty Fisher because almost all of us as children know the nursery rhyme, the first verse of which goes: 'Lucy Locket lost her pocket, Kitty Fisher found it, there was not a penny in it, only ribbon round it.' Which is a sad rhyme, replete with sexual innuendo, but contains the message that in the end the money runs out and all you're left with are the velvet trappings of your fame – and that you'll be succeeded by someone else, as well.'

Room 8: The Theatre of Life

Colonel Acland and Lord Sydney – *The Archers*

MP: 'Well this is an extraordinary portrait that Reynolds exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1770.'

Narrator: Curator of the show, Martin Postle:

MP: 'It shows two young men, who were good friends, apparently they'd been on the grand tour together. And they're shown in a forest, hunting, so they're very much young lords who are noblemen and huntsmen.

It's a very dynamic composition. It's a very exciting composition. And one of the things I love about it is the way in which the men's poses echo what they're actually doing. So, Lord Sydney, in green, pulls his bow back, he moves backwards as if he's stretching. While Colonel Acland lunges forward, his arrow is about to shoot forward so you get the feeling that these men are actually moving through the landscape, it's not at all static. It's like a kind of action painting, like a history painting.

What they're wearing is obviously not contemporary costume. They're in a kind of masquerade gear – often people would turn up as huntsmen for a masquerade.

And you can see by their feet there's this huge pile of dead game – there's a deer, a heron, a partridge. So it's the sort of thing that people would still shoot in the 18th

century, but in fact, that pile of game is actually taken from a painting by Franz Sneiders who was a Flemish painter. And that was something that Reynolds enjoyed doing: looking at Old Master paintings, borrowing poses or even the whole feel of a painting. So, it's a picture that's very much about Reynolds engaging in a dialogue with the art of the past as well as showing two young gentlemen very much of the present.'