

RESEARCHING THE SUMMER EXHIBITION



The Summer Exhibition has been held every year since 1769. Catalogues of all past exhibitions are held in the library. Illustrated Catalogues were produced from 1888 in addition to the full catalogue, but only approximately 10% of works in each exhibition are reproduced. No Illustrated Catalogues were produced between 1941 and 1946 due to paper rationing.

Selection Committee, 1938., 1938. 153 X 206 mm. Unidentified photographer.

Dictionaries of past exhibitors at the Summer Exhibition cover the period 1769 to 1989 and are arranged by artists' surname. Like the original catalogues, they give the titles of work(s) displayed, original catalogue number and the address the artist gave at the time of exhibition, but little or no additional information. These publications are held in the library, and can also be found in most other good art libraries.



Works displayed at past Summer Exhibitions were often for sale. If unsold, they were returned to the artists. They do not enter the Permanent Collections of the Royal Academy, and we do not hold information on the whereabouts of works of art after the end of each exhibition.

A complete record of what was sold during the exhibition was not made until 1945 and these records are confidential.

Installation view of Gallery VI, Summer Exhibition 2011. Photo: John Bodkin/DawkinsColour

ON THE LINE

A wooden beading was erected every year 8 feet from the ground at the commencement of arranging paintings for the Summer Exhibition. This beading provided a visual point of reference against which the paintings could be arranged creating a pleasing symmetry. Generally the largest and most important paintings (normally history paintings and royal portraits) were placed on this line with all other painting being arranged around them. As a

result, over time, being placed on the line was seen as confirmation that The Academy considered your painting as amongst the most important in the exhibition. The nearer you were to the line, the better your painting could be seen. The line became more important when the Academy refused Gainsborough's request to hang one of his Royal Portraits in a position that would actually break this line. Gainsborough stopped showing with the Academy as a result.

Whilst located at Somerset House a wooden armature was erected in the gallery space around the line to hang all paintings on. This armature was covered in green baize for the exhibition. (Somerset house days). The layout of exhibitions is very poorly documented. There are a few 18th century plans we have plans for the 1851-1854 exhibitions in Trafalgar Square.

As a concept, "on the line" continued to operate through into the 20th century. It is last mentioned in Sidney Hutchison's A History of the Royal Academy in 1908.