



KEYSTONE OF BRITISH CULTURAL HISTORY REVEALED FOR FIRST TIME IN 100 YEARS

The Charter for the Society of Artists of Great Britain and its associated Roll of Obligation have been rediscovered at the Royal Academy of Arts 250 years after the Society's foundation in 1765. Thought to be missing, these documents are central to the story of British cultural history signifying the formalisation of artists as a professional group in Britain in the late eighteenth century. The Society was crucial to the foundation of the Royal Academy of Arts in 1768, when a cabal of artists broke away from the Society and formed the Academy instead.

Documents uncovered during a continuing audit of the RA Collections include the Charter, consisting of three pages of vellum with a portrait of a young King George III and the Roll of Obligation listing 112 names of the Society's members. The Charter had not been seen since 1918. Other highlights of the rediscovery:

- The Roll of Obligation features crossed out names of artists 'expelled' from the Society, including Joshua Reynolds and Johann Zoffany
- The rediscovery was made on the 250th anniversary of the formal foundation of the Society in 1765 when it was granted a Royal Charter by George III
- Photographs of these documents will be revealed to the public and scholars for the first time
- The RA Collection also holds artists' resignation letters from the Society including those from Joshua Reynolds, Benjamin West, William Chambers, Francis Hayman, all key founding members of the Royal Academy, as well as letters from Thomas Gainsborough and Francis Cotes

These documents are part of the RA's historic Collections of over 46,000 objects, many of which will be showcased in the new exhibition spaces being created across the Royal Academy as part of its transformative redevelopment. Construction work at the RA recently began and will be completed in time for its 250th anniversary in 2018.

Charles Saumarez Smith CBE, Secretary and Chief Executive said: 'Like everyone at the Royal Academy, I was absolutely delighted by news of the rediscovery of the Charter and Roll of Obligation of the Society of Artists with the names of all the principal founding members of the Royal Academy, including Joshua Reynolds and William Chambers, scratched out. It is a vivid reminder of the feuds and controversies which led to the founding of the Royal Academy and of how impressive it is that the Royal Academy has so far flourished for nearly 250 years.'

Mark Pomeroy, Archivist at the Royal Academy of Arts said: 'These documents mark the culmination of London's first enduring effort to promote fine art and their rediscovery sheds new light on events

surrounding the subsequent creation of the Royal Academy of Arts. I am delighted that we are able to celebrate them in their 250th anniversary, as the RA prepares for its own in 2018.'

Notes to Editors:

History and Archive of the Society of Artists of Great Britain

The Society was established for contemporary artists to mount exhibitions and to formally recognise artists and architects as a professional group within society. It was endorsed by King George III, a great supporter of the arts, who granted them a Royal Charter in 1765 making it a legally binding and professional organisation. Members included Joshua Reynolds, Benjamin West, Francis Milner Newton, William Chambers, Francis Hayman and Nathaniel Hone, and the Roll of Obligation for the Society features their signatures. In 1768, diverse opinions led to disagreements and subsequently a number of resignations and expulsions, depending which side the artists were on. These artists went on to found the Royal Academy of Arts, a new exhibiting professional institution and art school, also under the patronage of George III. The surviving members of the Society scratched and crossed out the names of those who had left on the Roll, including the RA's first President, Joshua Reynolds, and the Society gradually went into decline.

In 1836 the last living member of the Society bequeathed its archive, including the Charter and the Roll, to the RA Collections. 1918 is the last documented reference to the Charter. In 2015 during an ongoing Collections audit, stimulated by the RA's redevelopment, the Charter and Roll were rediscovered well packaged in a special protective case with the Charter wrapped around the Roll, 250 years after the Society was established. It appears that for their conservation they had been carefully wrapped in acid free tissue and packed, but then misplaced in secure storage. The artists' letters of resignation have always been a well-known part of the Society's archive in the RA Collections.

Rediscovering these momentous and important documents serves to symbolise the start of the building works of the transformative redevelopment of the Royal Academy. The designs will open up the RA, including sharing its historic treasures from the RA Collections, the work of its Academicians and the RA Schools, alongside its world-class exhibitions programme. As part of the redevelopment, there will be new exhibition spaces across the site to showcase objects in the RA Collections. Apart from one room, the Tennant Gallery, there has been no regularly open public space to reveal the depth and richness of the Collections in the Royal Academy since 1939.

Collection, Library and Archive

Written into the founding document of the Royal Academy of Arts is the commitment to build a collection of works of art to show the talent of British artists and provide inspiration for new generations. A requirement of all artists elected Royal Academicians is that they donate a work of art to the RA Collections (to be known as their Diploma Work). Now numbering over 46,000 items, the Collection is a treasure trove: a cross-section of the history of the Academy spanning five centuries of art and architecture, and the evolution of a distinctive British School of artists from the eighteenth century to the present day.

The Royal Academy of Arts Library is the oldest institutional fine arts library in the United Kingdom. The Archive forms one of the world's most significant resources for the historical study of British art

since 1760. In addition to the official archive it includes the personal papers of deceased artists and the institutional archives of other organisations such as the Society of Artists.

About the Royal Academy of Arts

The Royal Academy of Arts was founded by King George III in 1768. It has a unique position in being an independent, privately funded institution led by eminent artists and architects whose purpose is to be a clear, strong voice for art and artists. Its public programme promotes the creation, enjoyment and appreciation of the visual arts through exhibitions, education and debate. The RA moved to its permanent home at Burlington House, a Grade II-listed building begun in the seventeenth century, in 1869. Burlington Gardens was designed by Sir James Pennethorne (1801-1871) and opened by Queen Victoria in 1870 as the Senate House of the University of London. The RA acquired Burlington Gardens in 2001.

The RA has unveiled plans for a transformative redevelopment which will be completed in time for its 250th anniversary in 2018. Burlington House on Piccadilly and Burlington Gardens will be united through designs by internationally-acclaimed architect Sir David Chipperfield RA. The redevelopment will reveal the elements that make the RA unique, sharing with the public the historic treasures in its Collection, the work of its Academicians and the RA Schools, alongside its world-class exhibitions programme. The designs will link Burlington House and Burlington Gardens for the first time, uniting and revitalising the two-acre site. The project is supported by a grant of £12.7 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).

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