

## Looking at paintings at The National Gallery

**Source: Anra Kennedy**

The National Gallery holds Britain's collection of western European paintings dating from 1250 to 1900 – approximately 2300 pictures. Its grand façade, lofty ceilings and ornate interiors lend the gallery an air of reverential gravitas. The collection is breathtaking in its scale and quality. Everywhere you look there are masterpieces – in the true sense of the word.

Where to begin? I wanted to see how the gallery's education staff make the collection accessible to schoolchildren, how they overcome the somewhat daunting scale and majesty of the space (not to mention the hordes of tourists) to give pupils an engaging and educational experience.

I tagged along on a visit made by a year ten class with their teacher Rebecca Merrell. Rebecca had booked a tour with a classics theme. The group was greeted by Aliko, one of the education team's regular freelance lecturers, who whisked them straight into the galleries at a cracking pace.

Over the next hour Aliko showed the group four paintings - two Titians, a Rubens and one by Pierre Mignard. All four depicted mythological scenes or characters. The pupils would sit on the floor in front of the painting, forming a semi-circle that quickly drew a crowd of curious tourists at each picture. With a deft politeness that made clear the pupils were her focus, but others were welcome to listen quietly, Aliko talked the group through the paintings.

School talks are offered free of charge at The National Gallery and can be related to a wide range of themes. The theory behind their education programme is simple. The children are put in front of a painting and encouraged to look, think, talk about and appreciate all aspects of the work.

There are no practical art sessions – no mask-making or finger-painting. As Karen Hosack, Head of Schools puts it: 'People come here to see pictures, that's what we're here for. If they want to go back to school and follow up with practical activities, that's fantastic, but when they're here they look at paintings.'

Talks focus on between three and five paintings, with the aim of giving children a memorable and in-depth experience of those paintings, rather than a hurried gloss over more. Central to these visits, and indeed any visit to an art gallery or museum, is the authenticity of the experience.

This was gallery education in its purest form, giving the children the chance to really look at the paintings, to explore their influences, style, context, messages and beauty through the expertise of a gallery educator.

Details of National Gallery Education Resources can be found at [www.nationalgallery.org.uk](http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk). Details of talks, tours and workshops at other galleries around the UK can be found at [www.24hourmuseum.org.uk](http://www.24hourmuseum.org.uk).