

The Daily Telegraph

INSIDE

Move over, Adele. Here comes *YEBBA* p.8
Marina *LITVINENKO* on avenging her
husband's poisoning – through opera p.10
James *ELLROY*'s return to form p.17

plus

Victoria *COREN MITCHELL*: 'No sporting
event looks finer on TV than Wimbledon' p.7

Review

Look closer

Treasures of the National Gallery, seen through
the eyes of Prince *CHARLES*, Antony *GORMLEY*,
Gugu *MBATHA-RAW*, Michael *MORPURGO* and more



Cover story

If I could have one painting...

From Prince Charles's lifelong love of Leonardo, to Gugu Mbatha-Raw's rainy-day Renoir – famous figures on their art obsessions

dailystelegaph#london@ropac.net

dailystelegaph#london@



HRH THE PRINCE
OF WALES ON

The Burlington House Cartoon
(c1499-1500)

by *Leonardo da Vinci*

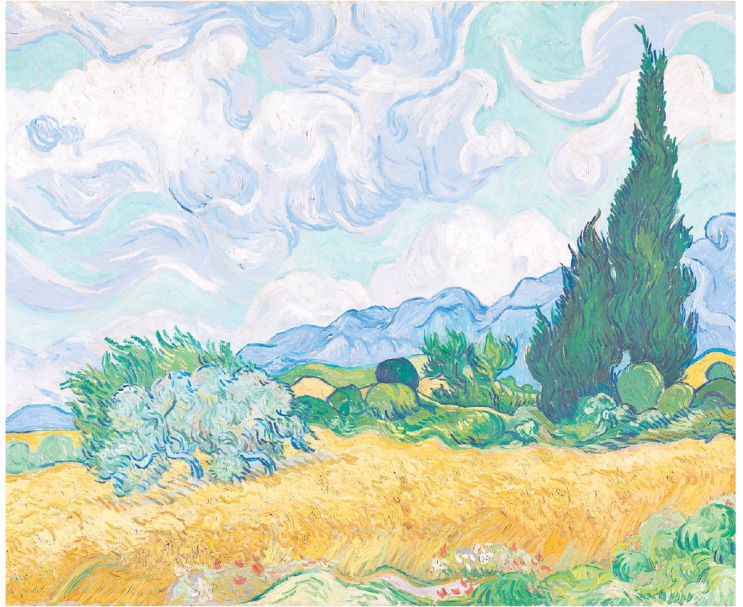
I am delighted that the National Gallery has opened its doors again. How we all missed being able to visit the nation's museums and galleries that hold so many of our cultural treasures. To choose a "favourite" picture from such an array is virtually impossible, but I must say that Leonardo da Vinci's *Burlington House Cartoon* holds a particularly special place in my heart.

It may seem strange to choose what is essentially a drawing, from a collection of remarkable paint-

ings, but I suspect it goes back to my childhood when I used to marvel at the Leonardo drawings in the Royal Library at Windsor. They have always been part of my life and I love his obvious fascination with nature, science and the human condition.

The *Cartoon* is a mysterious and wonderful thing, linking Leonardo's interest in his native Italian landscape and the monumental figures, both grand and fragile, united in their love of the Christ Child and shrouded in the charcoal dust from which they are made. There is also something wonderful about working on wood. It has always seemed to me beautifully simple that you could make an image using such natural materials that will hopefully last in perpetuity.

As Patron, I look forward to the opportunity of visiting the National Gallery again soon and to it being enjoyed once more by everybody, including, in the not-too-distant future, all our visitors from abroad whom we miss so much.



MICHAEL MORPURGO ON
A Wheatfield, with Cypresses
(1889)

by *Vincent van Gogh*

We're standing on the edge of a wheat field, in a wild place. There's not an abundance of poppies and wild flowers, but there are some. The wheat has grown to ripeness, to goldness, and it is leaning in the wind. You can imagine the farmer, I think, hoping that the wind is not going to become any stronger, because if the wheat breaks he's in trouble. Your eye is drawn to the cypress trees: mama cypress and baby cypress standing side by side. I wonder if anyone ever noticed cypress trees before Van Gogh painted them.

Everything in the painting is leaning the way the wind is blowing. You can see wind in the clouds

coming up from behind the mountains. You feel the wind coming out of the painting, blowing at you. You can see rain in the clouds too, but it's not quite raining yet. And a rather lovely light blue Provencal sky. The colours glow – the whole thing glows at you. I can just see Van Gogh painting, feel him standing there, the speed at which it was done.

It's something to do with his own immersion in the landscape, and his connection with everything in it. You feel that he is part of it, he is the witness. I love the honesty of it, the integrity of it. You get the feeling that no one has taught him perspective, or whatever it is you study for years and years in college. It's wonderful to come across a painter who seems to be completely instinctive.

My son is a painter, and I go to galleries a lot with my wife, Clare. I often revisit particular paintings. I like to target things. I stand – or sit if I can, there are never enough seats – and watch and watch and drown myself in the painting and its story. A story and a picture are not that far apart, it's just the manner of telling that differs.

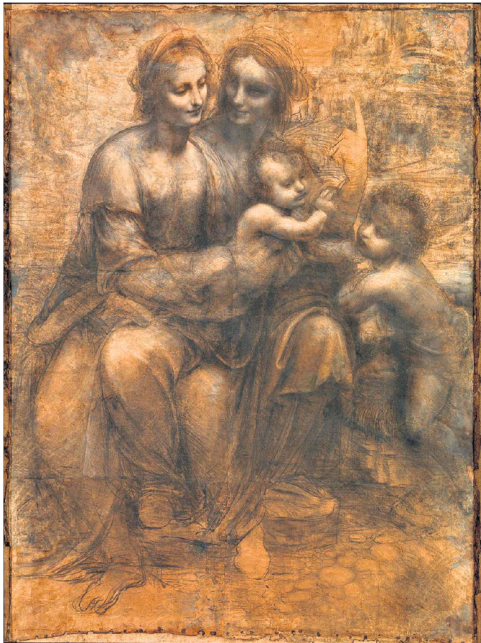


GUGU MBATHA-RAW ON
The Umbrellas (c1881-86)

by *Pierre-Auguste Renoir*

I grew up making art, and even considered becoming an artist instead of an actor. When I was starting out, in between jobs or auditions I would often go to the National Gallery. Having a place to experience images and stories from other generations was important to me. I found it calming and inspiring.

Renoir's painting, of a woman walking through a sea of people with umbrellas, has a cinematic energy to it; all around her there's this bustling sense of movement. I love the mood it evokes, all that light and colour – it doesn't even feel like it's raining. It feels quite emotional. The woman's expression is mysterious, slightly sad. With her head on one side she looks





THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON

thoughtful. And because she's looking out at us, there's this wonderful moment of connection in an otherwise very frantic scene.

It's not often that you have a female figure in a painting staring

out at you like that. There's an arresting power in that gaze. I thought about that a lot when I was preparing for the film *Belle*, because my character, the mixed-race heiress Dido Elizabeth Belle,

was specifically inspired by a painting in which Dido connects directly with the viewer; so rare for a woman of colour in art of the time.

I recently started painting again, which I hadn't done since I was 18

years old. It's like acting, in that it's a method of expression, and when you focus on it, when you get into the flow, it's joyous.

Continued on page 6

POEM OF THE WEEK

Sean O'Brien

"This is by far and away the toughest period in the history of the music industry, full stop," Blur's Dave Rowntree told *The Telegraph* last week. The Britpop drummer's comments came in a report that painted a bleak picture of our post-pandemic music scene. Some of the happiest nights of my life have been spent in tiny, sticky-floored rock venues now shuttered because of social distancing. If and when they reopen, will there still be bands to fill them?

Stadium-fillers like Blur will be fine, but not the smaller artists who are already struggling – which is most of them. "Ninety per cent of the industry are living hand to mouth," said Rowntree. Starved by tight-fisted streaming companies and hamstrung by red tape that makes international touring unaffordable, "all of these musicians who haven't worked for a year... they're going to find that they don't have a career to go back to."

"Compleatists" from Sean O'Brien's 2018 collection *Europa*, is a poem for the 90-percenters, slogging away not in pursuit of fame or riches or even happiness, but out of devotion to their craft.

It's a very Larkinesque poem, particularly in the sudden leap of its final stanza. Having set out in a vein of grotty, ironic and quintessentially English miserabilism, O'Brien arrives at a breathtaking final line that deserves comparison with Larkin's "what will survive of us is love", for their shared quality of bet-hedging hesitation. In "An Arundel Tomb", Larkin's maxim is "almost true"; O'Brien's is only beyond dispute "for an hour", until the music stops. But for that hour, it's all that matters. *Tristram Fane Saunders*

COMPLEATISTS

for RL

Somebody has to remember the OK

band
With five good songs and two LPs.
By accident we saw them live one
night

On a "short autumn tour" of seaside
toilets.
Somebody had to, and that would be
us.

They were outside afterwards,
smoking a joint
In the lee of the van. We approached
for a word.

The balding lead guitarist didn't
want to share
And the drummer delivered a
harrowing talk
On the high cost of touring. He's
dead now.

They were good, though. Good for
thirty people,
For opening with new material we
sensed

Would never be recorded. We know
their name,
How they never sold out, how the
walls of the dump
Fell away, and for an hour it was
beyond dispute
That art is all there is and might not
be enough.

From Europa (Picador, £9.99)

Cover story

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Continued from page 5



JESSIE BURTON ON
Combing the Hair (c1896)
by Edgar Degas

This is a composition of two women, and a moment of peace.

One of the women is combing the hair of the other. I think the older-looking woman is the seated woman's maid, but I didn't think of it in those terms when I first saw it; rather, as one woman administering a service to another. It looks like the maid is really concentrating, and that she is very deft.

Some people hate having their hair brushed but, for most, it's a lovely thing to have someone do that for you. It's tactile, a fine balance between pleasure and pain, and quite sensuous. The seated girl seems so lost in the experience, in her own world. The standing woman is, too, so what you have is an intimate moment into which we've been invited.

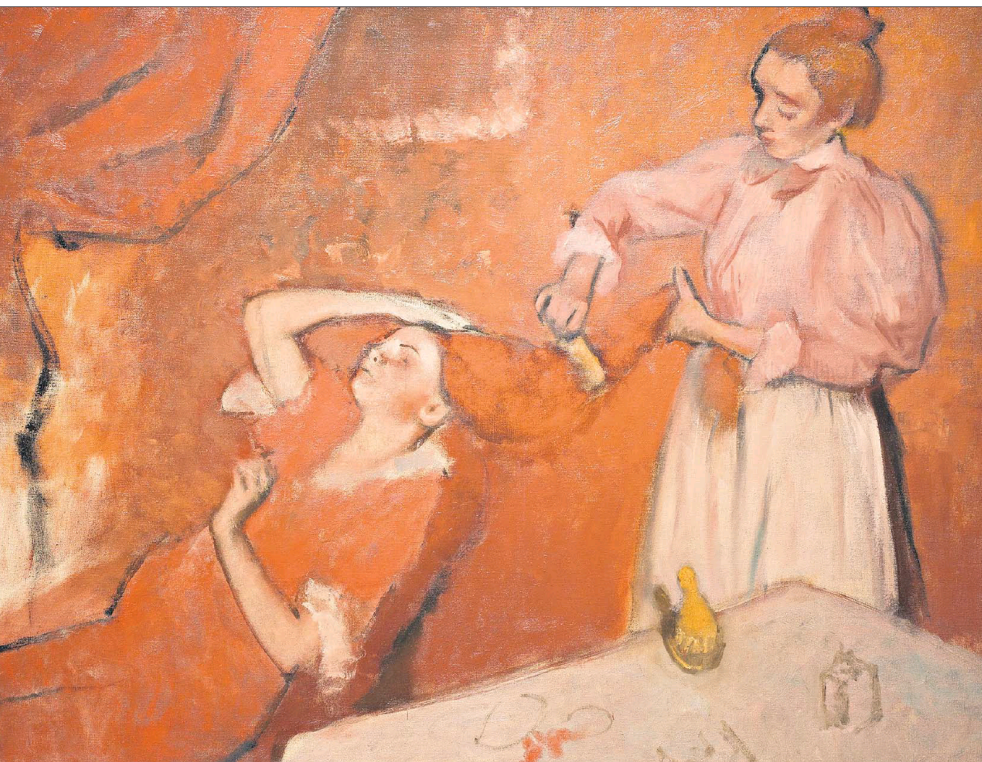
Degas has used very warm, alluring shades: russet, peach, yellow. And there's something, especially after the year we've endured, in the women's physical closeness. The craving for that.

Because I can't paint, I find paintings so enticing. *The Miniaturist* was inspired by 17th-century Dutch interiors, and in *The Muse* I write about the life of a painter. With reading, and writing, the story comes to you over time. But with a painting, it comes all at once. Nothing compares to the effect of that.



FIONA SHAW ON
The Execution of Maximilian
(c1867-8)
by Edouard Manet

In 1864, Napoleon III sent an Austrian archduke, Maximilian of Habsburg, to Mexico, to run the Second Mexican Empire. Of course, he shouldn't have been there; and



NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON; UNIVERSAL IMAGES/GETTY



MARY MCCARTNEY ON
The Ambassadors (1533)
by Hans Holbein

I was lucky that when we were growing up, my mum and dad would often take us to art museums. My mum was a New Yorker, and we particularly loved going to MoMA. When I'm looking for creative inspiration for my photographs now, I often go to a museum. Roaming around, you can learn so much. I'm somebody who likes to wander about and just happen on something that arrests my attention.

The Ambassadors is a painting that did just that. The large scale of it is initially striking but it also has so many layers to it. It is quite a formal double portrait of two ambas-

sadors standing side by side. They make eye contact with the viewer in a way that is very engaging.

The painting is full of questions and symbols – a globe, musical instruments, mathematical instruments, star-gazing apparatus – the most recent discoveries of that time. These are Renaissance men in an image that captures the English Renaissance, the age of humanism and Shakespeare.

Holbein was the English court painter at that time and there is a great weightiness to his work, those opulent textiles and rich colours. The green curtain intrigues me – what's behind it?

I saw this picture several times before I noticed the strange splodge in the middle, between the men. If you look at it from the right angle, it looks like a skull. It's like an angel hovering in the painting, designed to remind us of our own mortality. Uncanny, unsettling and just out of reach, it reveals itself almost at the last furtive glance over the shoulder as you leave the room.

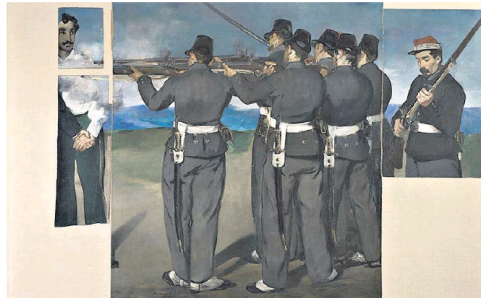
once Napoleon withdrew his troops, leaving this poor man behind, Maximilian was executed by a firing squad. It had nothing to do with his virtue. He was the victim of imperial politics.

You don't actually need to know the story for this painting to be riveting. Partly that's because it's a mystery. Because you're standing behind these men as a witness to the execution, but at first you don't know why.

The man on the right, wielding a gun, has a casual carelessness; he's very used to the violence that is happening next to him. We don't actually see Maximilian, except for his hand, holding the hand of his

second in command, General Miramón. The dark sky behind makes it feel a bit like a dream you might have.

Manet was captivated by this story and he worked terribly hard to get the painting to the place he wanted it to be. This is only one of several versions he made. It's a patchwork of four panels because after he died it was cut up and sold in bits. Manet never saw it in its cut-up form – he'd probably ban it – but actually, it's brilliant, like a strange collage, or the way some modern TV series are cut: you don't need a whole narrative laid out in front of you. You just need the pieces and you fill in the gaps yourself.





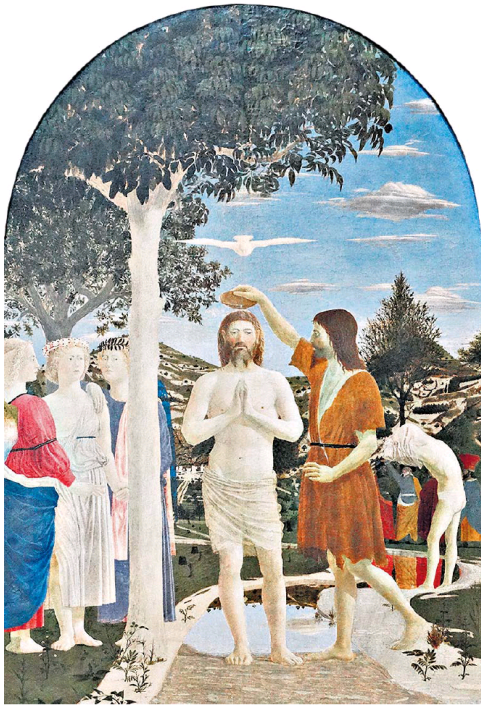
Victoria Coren Mitchell

How I See It

Nothing evokes childhood summers like the sound of Wimbledon on the telly

dailystelegaph#london@ropac.net

dailystelegaph#london@



ANTONY GORMLEY ON
The Baptism of Christ (1446)
by Piero della Francesca

Everything in the painting seems to be holding its breath. We, the angel, and the rest of the world are waiting for the drop of water, balancing on the point of the cockle shell held in John the Baptist's hand, to fall. So much is at stake here. The world is about to change.

The clouds in this pale blue sky and the dove above Christ's head hover like spaceships in the sky. The river Jordan is a puddle in which the hill, the sky and the distant town of Borgo Santo Sepolcro

are all perfectly mirrored. There are three men in large, coloured hats on the right-hand side of the painting. They are talking together. They seem to be deciding something. Between them and us is a man who leans forward, taking off his shirt. He's naked except for a pair of white underpants that look curiously like Calvin Kleins. He, like the angels, Christ, and St John the Baptist, is almost translucent, a kind of spectre of light.

Looking at the painting, we are held in its stillness. While being of this world, and in this world, it suggests the possibility of another: a world outside pain, struggle and confusion. For me, this painting is a touchstone. It evokes the possibility that art is beyond time and the contingencies of daily life.

The National Gallery, London WC2 is open daily. Book your free visit at nationalgallery.org.uk

I've been thinking about David Attenborough's green balls. I don't know how much thought you give them. Or, indeed, if you consider them to be green? Many would say they're yellow. I think I'm right in saying they are *officially* yellow. But they've always looked green to me.

In case you don't know much about tennis history: the balls always used to be white. But in 1967, when David Attenborough was controller of BBC Two, he persuaded the Government after a great war of attrition to allow the introduction of colour television. Famously, this caused a revolution in the popularity of snooker. *Pot Black* was commissioned in 1969 to showcase the ground-breaking change; if a child ever struggles to imagine what entertainment was like in Grandpa's childhood, invite him to think about what it must have been like to watch snooker in black and white.

Less famously, the decision also changed tennis. Once matches were in colour, viewers complained that the white balls were hard to spot as they sailed across a player's white shirt, or even a white line. So, in 1972, the International Tennis Federation approved the new shade known as "optic yellow". And that is how history shows that pale balls changed colour in David

Attenborough's assiduous hands. But the change didn't happen universally. The eye-catching balls were seized gratefully at every tournament on television, except one. Can you guess which?

Well, of course. The All-England Lawn Tennis Championships, Wimbledon, held out for an impressive 14 years. Year in, year out, their balls remained stubbornly white. That tournament has never chased after fashion.

In the case of the white balls, they were wrong. It didn't do to resist change too blindly, nor cling too obstinately to the past. Green balls made for better viewing, just as it was an obvious improvement when they got that roof.

Nevertheless, as this year's Wimbledon kicked off on BBC One (having not happened last year for reasons I can't quite remember), I was struck by the beauty that still comes from its conservative, unchanging aesthetic. The all-white clothes. The discreet advertising slogans in tiny, simple font on boards of racing green. The sponsorship tie-in with Robinsons Barley Water, a drink one only thinks about during Wimbledon



▲ Spot the ball: Boris Becker on his way to the Wimbledon title in 1985

for night or a performance of *The Perfect Nanny* from *Mary Poppins*. An advert for Robinsons might as well be a tennis racquet for all that it jars with the overall aesthetic. The words "Robinsons Barley Water" might as well be "tennis tennis water".

And this beauty comes from the same obstinacy that resisted the ball change. The received wisdom is that one should move with the times (which one broadly should; it's a reasonable principle) but Wimbledon's refusal to do so has preserved the classiest brand in sport.

It looks so green and fresh, it tricks you into thinking you're not slumped on the sofa

The irony is, its determined adherence to the old-fashioned makes it the best creator of that modern art form, the TV programme. It looks finer on TV than any other sporting event. Everything else looks brash and shouty. Wimbledon looks like a garden. It's so green and fresh, it tricks you into thinking that you're not slumped in front of the telly but, in some truly meaningful way, *taking part in the summer*.

And make no mistake: a TV programme is what it is. I've been

to Wimbledon; it was a lovely day out and I hope to go again one day, but it's better to see it on TV. Sometimes it's enough just to have it on TV, without even watching, as its fresh, old-fashioned, exciting, gentle noise burbles joyfully through the house.

It makes me think of childhood summers, picking home-grown raspberries to the delighted cries of "Oh I say!" from Dan Maskell. That's a tangled memory, of course: I couldn't have been indoors and outside at once, and I'm not sure the raspberries were ever out this early. But you know how it goes. In the memory we're all happy, too, and nobody's arguing.

Summer memories can be like that.

Dan Maskell is sadly missed and I wish they'd find someone with a beautiful voice like his to join the commentary team. I can see why it makes more sense to have Boris Becker in the booth than Samuel West, but still. It's a bit of missing music. Never mind; four more years of computer technology and I reckon they can have Dan Maskell commentating again.

Nothing against Herr Becker, of course. I'm very pleased he remains central to the proceedings. I'm a big fan of Boris Becker. We used to play poker together, and I have fond memories of sitting outside a casino with him in Monte Carlo as he enjoyed a doughnut and a cigarette simultaneously. That's my kind of sportsman. A smoking, drinking card sharp, trapped in the body of one of the world's finest athletes. And I always found him friendly, approachable, unstarry and fun to be around.

More importantly, his first Wimbledon victory was a legendary one. He was 17, only a year older than my big brother. 1985. The last year of the white balls. I don't mean my brother. Nobody who watched that match will ever forget their affection for that champion. I don't know how his labyrinthine court cases are coming on, but he hasn't lost the crowd yet.

Wimbledon fans are a loyal bunch. We don't want anything to change. And this year more than ever we are grateful to see it returning with all its traditional trappings, just as it always is, having not been on last year for reasons I can't quite remember: wrapping its familiarity around us again, like a blanket.