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Meet Jennifer Scott: the high-flying gallery chief who foiled a Rembrandt theft

Dulwich Picture Gallery is in lockdown, but its tenacious boss Jennifer Scott has big plans for the future

By Alastair Sooke, CHIEF ART CRITIC

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It's like running a marathon, but somebody keeps moving the finish line," says Jennifer Scott, the director of the Dulwich Picture Gallery, referring to today's lockdown. "But we'll keep getting ready, so that, as soon as restrictions are lifted, we can go."

Aged 40, Scott is still relatively young to oversee the world's oldest purpose-built public art gallery, an institution that boasts paintings by Gainsborough and Rembrandt in its world-class collection. Yet, over the past 12 months, she has faced more turbulence than most directors in an entire career.

First, there was the attempted theft of two Rembrandts last November. “The investigation is still ongoing,” Scott tells me, tight-lipped. “But we responded within six minutes. The paintings were secured on site and the thieves fled.”



Attempted theft: Philemon and Baucis was one of two Rembrandts targeted last year | CREDIT: National Gallery of Art

Then, smiting us all, came the hammer blow of the pandemic. The south London gallery shut on March 17, and Scott – a peppy, jovial personality, who always tries to see the sunny side – felt terrified it might not survive. “The word ‘lockdown’ is so extreme,” she says. “To begin with, I didn’t know what it would mean.” And, now, just as she was preparing to welcome back her staff (95 per cent of whom have been on furlough since the scheme started), the Government is enforcing a second national lockdown. Following Boris Johnson’s statement on Saturday, Scott spent the evening scrambling “to cancel the training for everybody that was due to start at nine o’clock on Monday”. Until further notice, Scott will carry on, as she puts it, “on a thread”, with only a skeleton staff in support.

She sounds relatively chipper – but won’t the delay blow a fatal hole in the gallery’s already shot-to-pieces finances? “Well, thank goodness, we got the grant,” she says, referring to last month’s announcement that Dulwich would receive £1.36 million from the Government’s Culture Recovery Fund. This should, she tells me, “See us through to the end of the financial year – so, it’s a massive relief, because it means survival. It gets us back on our feet.”

Still, there were moments last spring, Scott concedes, when things appeared touch and go. “I tried not to show any fear,” she says, “but I felt it. Our whole business model just crashed; it was really, really stressful.” Indeed, she describes the experience of coping with the crisis as a “trauma”. “It’s important we acknowledge that,” she adds. “Everybody felt fear, even if they didn’t project it.”

How, though, could Dulwich end up in such dire straits when in March 2019 its endowment was valued at £26 million? Scott explains that, under charity law, the capital cannot be touched. It is professionally invested, which guarantees some income, she says, but, typically, this amounts to less than one fifth of the gallery's annual operating budget of around £4.6 million. The rest comes from ticket sales, fundraising, and commercial enterprises, including the café and shop – all of which, during lockdown, suddenly ground to a halt.

Moreover, Dulwich doesn't receive regular funding from the taxpayer. Comparable institutions, such as, say, the Wallace Collection or Sir John Soane's Museum (which preserves the gloriously eccentric home of Dulwich's architect), are on the Government's payroll. Not Dulwich. This is, Scott says, "one of those accidents of history". So, when the first lockdown loomed, it was a "worst-case scenario".

Even the endowment was at risk, thanks to market volatility. "I've never seen our investments hit so hard," says Scott. "We were losing millions of pounds. I stopped looking."

Taking a temporary 20 per cent pay cut, she battened down the hatches – ceasing automated payments, scrutinising weekly outgoings, and initiating a round of voluntary redundancies that has reduced her workforce by just under a quarter. She also attended urgently to Soane's gallery: "The building is," she says, "as much an artwork in our care as the paintings", and, like an old master in need of conservation, it required repair. Since the costs of reopening over the summer seemed prohibitive, given the anticipated fall in visitor numbers, Scott and the gallery's trustees decided instead to extend Dulwich's closure, and bring forward "essential" maintenance originally planned for 2021.



'The building is as much an artwork in our care as the paintings': Dulwich Picture Gallery | CREDIT: Agnese Sanvito

To fund the works, which include a new lighting system and upgrading the plant that controls the building's temperature and humidity, the gallery is applying for a loan of £250,000, using the endowment as collateral. The total cost of around £1 million will, Scott claims, "be recouped by 2023", thanks to savings on bills. When I visited recently, contractors were still on the roof, while, inside Soane's theatrical enfilade, an electrician popped up from beneath the floor.

All the paintings have been “decanted” (“Welcome to Dulwich Picture-less Gallery,” Scott jokes), so cables can be rewired, floorboards sanded, walls painted and the new plant installed.

Even the welcome area will have a “new look”, Scott tells me: a “bright, uplifting” mural by Sinta Tantra, the British-Balinese artist. When visitors return, they can expect a complete rehang of the collection, too. Nothing that might frighten the horses, Scott says, but, for the first time, a room will celebrate British portraiture, from the so-called “Jude Memorial” of circa 1560 to a portrait of Princess Victoria wearing a fox fur tippet, aged four.

“And every single painting,” Scott adds, “will have a new label”. “New” how? “Bigger font,” she replies. “Easier to read from a distance.”

That may not sound like much, but it typifies her approach. Scott, who was born in Sunderland, is no snooty connoisseur: at one point, she refers to the 18th-century Linley sisters – whose double portrait by Gainsborough is among the collection’s most cherished works – as “the Kardashians of their day”. Art, for Scott, is “one of the essentials of life: the thing that expresses our humanity”. Her big concern, as the pandemic continues, is that this could get ignored: “The longer this goes on,” she says, “the more we need the escape and comfort that come from culture and creativity.”

Unsurprisingly, she believes that galleries must attract a broad audience – which is now, she says, a “guiding principle” at Dulwich. A laudable ambition – but is it being implemented? Scott concedes that the gallery could do more: it is still, she says, “falling short” of self-imposed targets, by failing properly to “serve” a deprived “local community”, beyond the prosperous residents of Dulwich, in Lambeth, Lewisham, and Southwark.

For now, though, she says, “survival” is her top priority. Things will be “austere” and “really lean” for the foreseeable future: when the gallery reopens with *Unearthed: Photography’s Roots*, its first major photography show, the exhibition will run for six months, not three. Her prognosis is gloomy for museums and galleries in general: “It’s going to feel very bleak for everybody,” she says. “We need to think hard about how we can reach audiences.” She talks in meetings of “delivering sparkle on a shoestring”.

Such language may not be to everyone’s taste: her “jolly” weekly emails to furloughed staff, she tells me, “probably annoy everybody”. Behind her Pollyannaish demeanour, though, it’s clear that she is resilient, tenacious and commercially savvy. Though “grateful” for the grant, she has no intention of going back to the Government cap in hand. “It’s better for us to remain independent.” Despite everything, she still believes that the gallery has a “good business model”. Pause. “Normally.”

What if “normality” never returns? Scott blinks. “I always think back to artists,” she says. “Gainsborough was a great businessman – and he is my inspiration. Britain’s cultural sector is really innovative. Every time a door slams, we’ve got to think of a way round it.”

Information: dulwichpicturegallery.org.uk