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The Queen's House at Greenwich reopens after £3m restoration
The first purely classical English house now features gold leaf work by the Turner prize winner Richard Wright

Maev Kennedy



Artist Richard Wright was commissioned to create a gold leaf fresco in the Great Hall as part of the restoration. Photograph: Facundo Arrizabalaga/EPA

For true authenticity, Anne of Denmark's beautiful white house in Greenwich, which reopens after a £3m restoration, should really have a stream of traffic running through it.

When, 400 years ago the queen commissioned a brilliant young architect called Inigo Jones to build her the first purely classical house in England, a shockingly modern creation instead of the warren of red brick buildings of the Tudor palace down by the riverside, the only minor inconvenience was that the main road, now a colonnaded walkway, ran right through it.

Jones's solution was to build the house as the grandest bridge in England over the road, which was enclosed in 10ft walls to protect the royal privacy.

The house, now part of the Royal Museums Greenwich complex, reopens with a dazzling art collection including many pictures that originally hung there returning on loan, among them a huge painting by Orazio Gentileschi from the Royal Collection, which Henrietta Maria and Charles I commissioned for the house in the 17th century.

The new hang also includes hundreds of paintings from the Greenwich collection, including works by Canaletto, Hogarth, Romney and Stubbs, and the magnificent Armada portrait of

Elizabeth I, once owned by Sir Francis Drake, which the museum acquired this summer through a public appeal.

Pride of place, however, in the centre of the grandest room, the double-height Great Hall, has gone to a newly created work, the largest to date by the Turner prize winner Richard Wright, which looks as if a cloud of golden moths has settled all over the ceiling and upper walls. It took nine weeks for Wright and a team of assistants to apply the 23-carat gold scrolls and flourishes, inspired by Inigo Jones designs for court masques and the beautiful metalwork of his spiral staircase in the house, directly on to the walls.

“For many years, displays in this house have concentrated on its connection with the maritime museum,” its curator Christine Riding said.

“We wanted to do something that had nothing to do with the sea, but recreated some of the princely splendour originally associated with the house.”

The house, inspired by the Italian villas of Andrea Palladio, who in turn was inspired by the ancient Roman architect Vitruvius, has been described by Jane Sidell of Historic England as “arguably the most important building in the entire canon of British architectural history”.

Riding said the style was also politically significant. “Anne was trying to create a sophisticated, educated, European-minded court here, a rival to that of James I. It is a question where she could ever have seen such buildings before, but she certainly saw the drawings and books Jones brought back from Italy.”

If Anne walked back into the house today, she would recognise many of the features she planned with the architect, but she never saw it in life. Work stopped for several years after she became ill in 1618, and she died in 1619. Her house wasn’t completed until 1638, for another immigrant queen, the French Henrietta Maria, wife of Charles I – and with his execution it would be stripped by the Commonwealth of many of its royal fittings, leaving only the beautiful shell of the most modern house in England.

The Queen’s House at Greenwich reopens to the public from 11 October, admission free.