

Nushin Elahi's

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London's two blockbusters are both at the British Museum: the sleeper of Ice Age art and the major Pompeii exhibition (reviewed here next month). Sometimes, though, the smaller exhibitions offer unexpected gems, and London is currently full of small gems.

The Courtauld exhibition entitled **Becoming Picasso** (until 27 May) focuses on a single year in the life of the young Spanish artist, when he burst onto the Parisian art scene as a prodigious talent in 1901. Working with a manic energy, he was producing up to three paintings a day. Looking at them with the knowledge of his great career, one can see how he immediately bowled over the critics with his self-confidence, despite the fact that he was borrowing styles from different artists. There are shades of Goya's religious imagery in a scene of his friend's funeral, of Degas in the faces of dejected absinthe drinkers, and particularly Toulouse Lautrec in the gaiety and rustling skirts of dancers and the bright colours of Parisian night-life. Picasso was finding his own voice, but already it is obvious that this is a voice of immense power and resonance. In two bold self-portraits the young man stares back at the viewer with startling confidence.

The year 1901 included an exhibition with the dealer Vollard, whose Picasso etchings were shown in London last year, as well as the suicide of a close friend and poet, which according to the artist himself sparked the restrained colours of his Blue Period, with its emaciated figures on the fringes of society.

This is a tiny show, but worth visiting not only for the bristling swagger of the Yo Picasso, but also because it may be the last time to see the famous Child with Dove, which has been sold, so rumour has it, to Qatar. On loan to the National Gallery since the Sixties, it is now bound for the desert. And perhaps it is twee to our modern eyes, but isn't that more to do with the millions of posters of the image that adorn homes around the world, rather than the delicate outlines of the child itself?



Another little gem is at the **Royal Academy**, with **George Bellows (1882 – 1925) Modern American Life** (until 9 June). Best known for his energetic images of the boxing ring, with bloodied contestants and their frenzied supporters, the most interesting works here are of an early Manhattan. This is a working city, with the giant quarry that became Penn Station central to more than one painting. Dock labourers gather on the banks of a frozen river, a ship billows steam onto a white snowy landscape, smartly dressed people enjoy winter sunshine in a park, the midsummer night reflects on trees along the Hudson River. It is a time capsule of urban life in which the seeds of Manhattan today are visible – the bustle of New York 1911 has all the pace of today's Time Square.



Although he never saw active service, Bellows also created a harrowing series of war images. The final section is devoted to portraits: loving images of his delicate wife, three generations of women, or his family on an outing. Bellows was more famous in America when he died at 42 than his friend Edward Hopper, whose desolate street scenes contrast sharply with these gritty raucous urban portraits of the city. Devotional art is not my favourite, so the prospect of an unknown Renaissance artist at the **National Gallery** with **Barocci: Brilliance and Grace** (until 19 May) did not excite. Endless religious scenes of Madonna and child leave me edging for the modern section in an art museum, but I have to admit that the luminous colours and radiant faces of Barocci's holy family are truly inspirational.

First off, his cherubs and infants look adorable. His Mary is a delicate young thing with full cheeks and heavy-lidded eyes.

The reason Federico Barocci is so little known is undoubtedly because the artist spent his life in rural isolation in Urbino, where the local lord became his patron. The show is filled with huge, often complex altarpieces of familiar scenes, glowing with rich colour and many beautiful small studies of heads, done in oil and pastel, which have a vibrancy often lacking in the stilted outlines of religious images and prefigure by half a century the Baroque. The reason is in the drawings, where we see the artist doing repeated nude studies of figures to get the angles right. So a male assistant will model the pose for Mary twisting upward, and although the final product only has her billowing robes, that accuracy makes these pieces come alive. Who cares if the Holy Family always seems to have the ducal palace of Urbino in the background? Whether it is John teasing a cat as a baby or straining as he carries the inert body of Christ, these figures pulsate with life. The final portraits, including a stunning one of his patron, give a glimpse of what the artist might have done in another era.

More devotional art, though this time Baroque. The **Dulwich Picture Gallery** houses an extensive collection of the Spanish artist **Murillo**, as much loved for his sentimental portraits of beggar boys as his religious figures. The gallery, the oldest public art gallery in Britain, has transformed itself into a Sevillian church (until 19 May) to house Murillos in the settings for which they were intended. Curated jointly with Madrid's Prado, the newly restored work glows in the dim interior, making it easy to understand why he is still so popular.

Kurt Schwitters and collage go together like eggs and bacon. A German artist who was interned here during the war and lived out his life in the Lake District, he is associated with the Dada movement. **Tate Britain** examines his late work in **Schwitters in Britain** (until 12 May), with collages of found objects and figure studies, as well as a dreadful section of modern art from the Lakes showing his legacy. While the collages are often more interesting in real life than in reproduction, they have a limited appeal, and sadly, although there is



a flavour of the outrageousness of Dadaism in his Ursonate, the collages become boring and the later portraits are uninspiring. Perhaps Schwitters did influence British artists such as Richard Hamilton and Eduardo Paolozzi, but this shows a career that splutters to an end in a foreign country.

Captions:

Self-Portrait (Yo - Picasso), 1901. Oil on canvas, 73.5 x 60.5 cm, Private collection / Seated Harlequin, 1901. Oil on canvas, 83.2 x 61.3 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, © The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource/Scala, Florence / Child with a Dove, 1901. Oil on canvas, 73 x 54 cm Private collection



George Bellows, New York, 1911, oil on canvas, 106.7 x 152.4 cm National Gallery of Art, Washington, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon. Image courtesy of the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington / Stag at Sharkey's, 1909, oil on canvas, 92 x 112.6 cm The Cleveland Museum of Art, Hinman B. Hurlbut Collection © The Cleveland Museum of Art

Federico Barocci (1535-1612) The Madonna and Child with Saint Joseph and the Infant Baptist ('La Madonna del Gatto'), probably about 1575, Oil on canvas, 112.7 x 92.7 cm. The National Gallery, London, © The National Gallery, London / Head study for Saint John the Evangelist Oil on paper lined with linen, 42 x 31.7 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1979 / Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, The Immaculate conception of the Venerables Sacerdotes, 1660-65, oil on canvas, 274 x 190 cm, Photographic Archive. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

Kurt Schwitters En Mon 1947. Centre Georges Pompidou

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