



# A SHORT GUIDE

*The finest dining hall in Europe*



**PAINTED HALL**  
OLD ROYAL NAVAL COLLEGE





**THE PAINTED HALL** is often described as ‘the finest dining hall in Europe’. Designed by Sir Christopher Wren and Nicholas Hawksmoor in 1698, it was originally intended as an eating space for the naval veterans, known as Greenwich Pensioners, who lived here at the Royal Hospital for Seamen. On completion, it was found to be far too grand for everyday use, and quickly became one of London’s first tourist attractions. Respectable visitors were admitted for 3d (about £1.80) and often hired Pensioners to give them guided tours. Between 1824 and 1936 the Painted Hall was also known as the National Gallery of Naval Art, with 300 naval-themed paintings on display, which formed the basis of the National Maritime Museum’s art collection.



## The artist

James Thornhill, who also painted the interior of the dome in St Paul’s Cathedral, began his commission to decorate the Painted Hall in 1708. He was instructed to include as many references as possible to the importance of the navy in Britain’s fortunes. He shows his remarkable skill in the use of trompe l’oeil painting throughout, and makes full use of perspective. He painted directly on to dry plaster, working on what must have been rather precarious scaffolding. For his ‘great and laborious undertaking’, Thornhill was paid just £3 per square yard (approximately one square metre) for the ceiling and £1 per square yard for the walls. The result, after 19 years of labour, is the finest painted architectural interior by an English artist, and Thornhill was knighted in 1720.



## The vestibule

If you look up into the cupola you will see a personification of the four winds, and lower down the monograms of the members of the royal family most involved with the building of the Royal Hospital for Seamen; William and Mary, Anne and George. Plaques show donations made by benefactors towards the cost of the buildings.



## The lower hall

In the main central oval, Thornhill concentrates on showing the triumph of Peace and Liberty over the forces of Tyranny. He creates a complex mix of contemporary and classical history, ancient Greek mythology, Christian allegory and traditional symbolism. Enthroned in heaven are King William and Queen Mary. Above, the sun god Apollo sheds his light, while Peace, with her doves and lambs, hands an olive branch to William. He in turn hands the red cap of liberty to the kneeling figure of Europe. Below William's foot, clutching a broken sword, is the defeated French ruler, Louis XIV. To the left, the Spirit of Architecture holds Wren's design for this building, while Time bears up the naked figure of Truth. At the bottom of the oval, the goddess Minerva/Athena and Hercules/Heraclēs hurl the Vices out of this vision of heaven. Signs of the zodiac and the four seasons are positioned around the edge of the oval, signifying the passing of time.



## Signs and symbols

There are ships at either end of the lower hall, with a captured Spanish galleon, full of booty, at the east, while to the west the Blenheim, a British man of war, has gun ports open ready for action. A recurring motif is one of astronomy and its importance to navigation. At the east end of the hall are famous astronomers: Sir John Flamsteed (the first Astronomer Royal) and his assistant, Thomas Weston, Copernicus and Tycho Brahe, while at the west end figures from the ancient world, including Archimedes, represent navigation and geography.

## The upper hall

The upper hall is reached through the arch carrying Hawksmoor's beautifully designed Royal Arms and gilded signs of the Zodiac. Thornhill's paintings here reflect Britain's triumph as a maritime power. The central ceiling panel shows Victory saluting Queen Anne and her husband George of Denmark. The four corners of the world (Australasia had yet to be encountered by Europeans) look inwards.



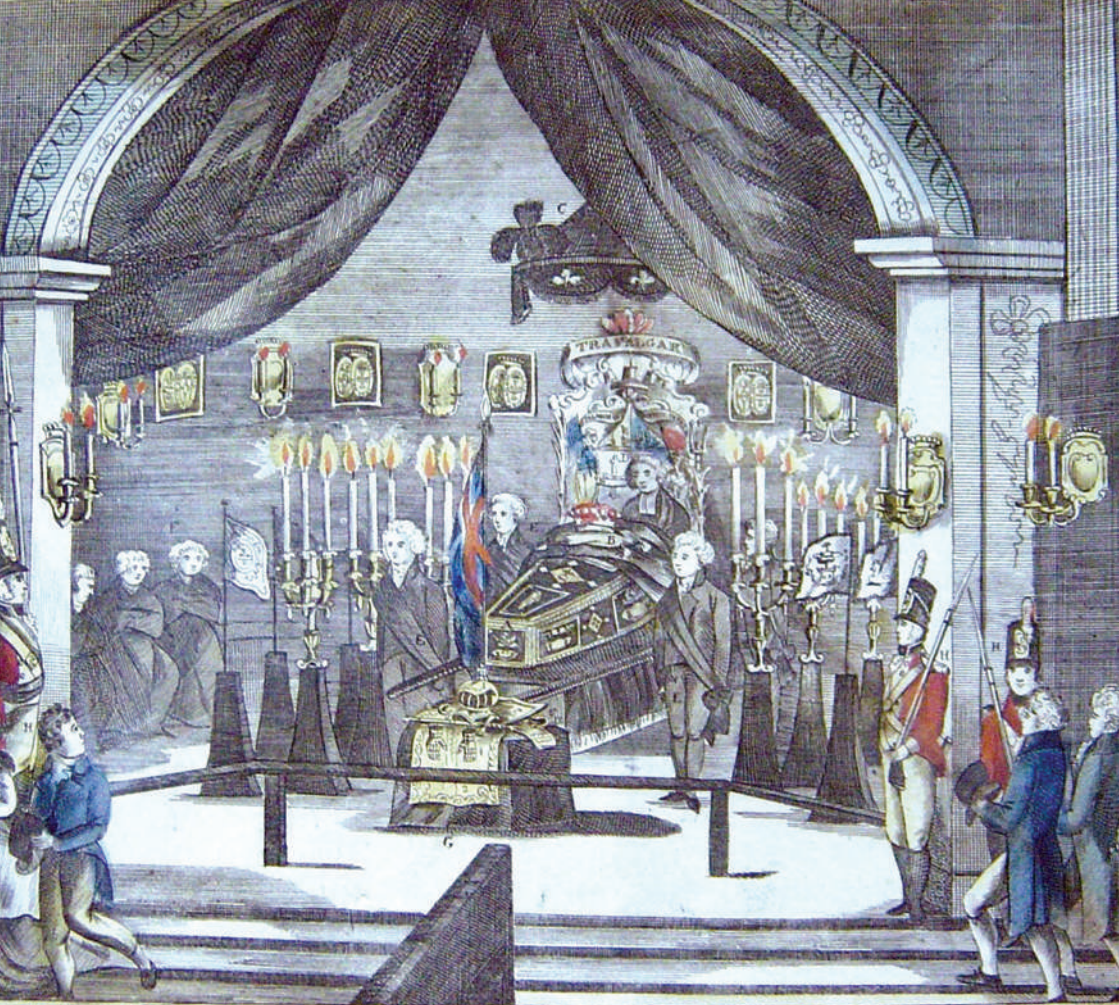
## The west wall

Here Thornhill shows Britain's new royal family from Hanover in Germany. George I is surrounded by his children and grandchildren. The distinctive dome of Wren's St Paul's Cathedral looms large in the background. Thornhill himself appears in the bottom righthand corner with his paintbrushes and palette. Although the composition of this wall was certainly by Thornhill, it was probably painted by his highly skilled assistant Dietrich André.

## South and north walls

The south wall to your left shows William of Orange arriving in Torbay in 1688, to take the position of joint monarch with his wife Mary. On the north wall, we see George I arriving at Greenwich to claim the throne in 1714.





**A VIEW OF THE LAYING IN STATE OF THE REMAINS OF**  
**our illustrious HERO LORD NELSON in the Painted Hall at Greenwich Hospital.**

*Engraved and Published by G. Thompson, 17, Long Lane, West, Smithfield.*

*G. A. 1793. General view  
of the Remains of  
the late Admiral  
of the Red, Lord  
Nelson, in the  
Painted Hall at  
Greenwich Hospital.  
[?] The Engraver's*

## Nelson and the Painted Hall

Three months after the battle of Trafalgar, 21 October 1805, Nelson's body was brought back to Greenwich and taken to the Painted Hall to lie in state. During three days in January, over 30,000 members of the public came to pay their respects to the great naval hero. On 8 January, his body was then taken by river to the Admiralty for the state funeral at St Paul's Cathedral. A plaque marks the spot where his body lay. The Nelson Room, to the left of the upper hall, contains a short exhibition about Nelson and his connection to Greenwich which includes a life-size replica of the statue on top of Nelson's column in Trafalgar Square.

[www.ornc.org](http://www.ornc.org) [info@ornc.org](mailto:info@ornc.org) T: 020 8269 4799

[www.twitter.com/orncgreenwich](https://www.twitter.com/orncgreenwich) [www.facebook.com/oldroyalnavalcollege](https://www.facebook.com/oldroyalnavalcollege)

Photography: thedpc.com, Peter Smith of Newberry Smith Photography, James Brittain Photography Design: www.fitcreative.ltd.uk