

visual art

Marooned masterpieces: the art stuck in the dark

As global lockdown brings the art world to a halt, **Norman Miller** asks what happens next

In Lucas Cranach the Elder's ravishing *Venus and Cupid* the lustrous goddess of love nakedly eyeballs viewers in a painterly come-on. Not surprisingly, the goddess and her impish associate were the poster stars of the exhibition *Cranach: Artist and Innovator* at Compton Verney in Warwickshire. The gallery notes on the artwork suggest that the painting's small scale hints at something made for "private viewing" — which sadly is all it is receiving from the occasional passing conservator or security guard.

The centrepiece of an exhibition widely hailed as one of the year's highlights, *Venus* is locked out of sight. "After seven days, this outstanding exhibition went dark," Julie Finch, the gallery's director, says. *Venus* is stranded in the Midlands and denied her adoring fans.

The Cranach show involved a three-year process of negotiation and organisation to unite works of art from across the UK and Europe. Yet in an instant the coronavirus lockdown sent Compton Verney's time and resources up in smoke, a fate suffered by hundreds of other galleries across the world. The result of the lockdown, which was implemented in different countries at different times, is that paintings such as *Venus* are marooned in dark exhibitions, held in storage pending transport to a gallery that was to have hosted them or stranded far from home on unforeseen extended loan. Meet the new stuckists, if you will.

At least the Cranach show briefly saw the light of day. The long-awaited UK debut of the 17th century's most famous female artist — Artemisia Gentileschi at the National Gallery in London — didn't even get out of the traps. "More than half of the loans were coming from Italy, so it was impossible to get them here," a gallery spokesman says. Ditto the exhibition's cover star, *Self Portrait as a Lute Player*,

which is still strumming in its home gallery in Hartford, Connecticut.

An array of Britain's most glittering art treasures are also in lockdown far away, and no one has any idea when they will get back. The most famous is probably Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, forming a very expensive yellow square in a darkened Tokyo gallery; part of a touring show, *Masterpieces from the National Gallery, London*, it has been cast into an arty Zen state of being and unbeing.

Galleries ride a seemingly unceasing global art carousel, their exhibitions like funfairs packed up regularly to head to the next town, with Rembrandts and Picassos replacing dodgems and waltzers. "The international art exhibition scene is fiendishly complex," says Carolyn Marsden-Smith, the associate exhibitions director at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles.

"Major exhibitions have multiple constituents: organising partners, lenders, venues, fine art shippers and supporters, to name a few."

One solution for all the exhibitions assembled in empty galleries could be extending runs once quarantine ends. From a conservation perspective at least, that isn't an issue. "The period of light exposure needs to be limited to conserve artwork," says Samantha Lackey, the head of collections and exhibitions at the Whitworth Gallery in Manchester. "But as many loaned works have been removed to stores, or are in galleries that are literally dark, loan periods can in theory be extended."

Security is an issue, though. While most galleries are able to continue their usual protocols — at British galleries security staff are staying on site — the recent theft of a £5million Van Gogh, *Parsonage Garden at Nuenen in Spring*, from a locked-down gallery in Laren in the Netherlands caused alarm. "We have increased security across the site," Finch says. "Our grounds staff work across the week as essential workers maintaining the site. We have top-



UNSEEN PLEASURES *Venus and Cupid* (1529) by Lucas Cranach the Elder and, left, *Sunflowers* (1888) by Van Gogh



Art online

Supper at Emmaus (1601) by Caravaggio
Having wounded a police officer in a fight, the Italian baroque master fled from Milan to Rome in 1592. He was an outlaw when he painted *Supper at Emmaus*, as shared by the National Gallery in its #MuseumFromHome Twitter thread.

Lady Caroline Lamb (1811) by Eliza H Trotter
In this portrait of the novelist and wife of future prime minister William Lamb, the little terrier she caresses is evidence of her first extramarital affair, explains the National Portrait Gallery in its #portraitoftheday series

quality CCTV and are checking all areas very regularly."

Whether or when these misplaced artworks can be sent home or to their next touring stop is far from clear. Even something as basic as moving an artwork is complicated by many specialist handlers being in isolation, furloughed or fired. Not that they would be any use if they can't get closer than two metres to each other.

"A situation like this has never occurred before, so this is totally uncharted territory," the National Gallery spokesman says. "There is no norm to apply." Andrew Bonacina, chief curator at the Hepworth Wakefield, agrees: "Every single artist or institution we are working with is negotiating exactly the same issues. There is a domino effect on the various ways the lockdown is impacting on how exhibitions are made."

Other problems pop up like art-world whack-a-mole. "Changing logistics in terms of transport and couriers is far more complicated if exhibitions were already scheduled," Boris de Munnick at the Mauritshuis gallery in the Hague says. "Extending an exhibition or changing dates also has repercussions for marketing campaigns and budgeting."

On a more creative note, another tack is to see the pandemic as a zeitgeist-shifting

moment in which to collect new material. The V&A is looking at pandemic items that will resonate in years to come — with some provisos. One is to avoid collecting anything — such as homemade masks — that may have a more urgent present use. The other is not to risk spreading infection by bringing in contaminated objects.

Huge uncertainty remains over how galleries will fare even when lockdown ends. "There will be a 'before' and an 'after' this crisis. It will be a paradigm shift," Manuel Borja-Ville, the director of the Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid, recently told artnet.com. "Eventually, museums will reopen, but will people be afraid of being close to one another? Maybe blockbuster exhibitions are over."

Others remain upbeat. "Many might think just staying at home wasn't celebrating life, just ensuring survival," says Steven Parissien, the chief executive of the National Heritage Centre for Horseracing & Sporting Art in Newmarket. "I think everyone will forget about distancing once shows reopen. The lockdown will make us more appreciative of the power of culture and the quality of life."

Especially when we get Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* back from Japan, and you can once again have an up close and personal with Cranach's flirty *Venus*.