

# THE GREAT HALL CEILING

THE  
QUEEN'S  
HOUSE



A Key Stage 3-5 teachers' resource for Art and Design at the Queen's House



Teachers can use this resource to prepare for a self-guided class visit to the Great Hall to investigate the artwork and develop students' analytical understanding through questioning, research and re-interpretation activities.

**Please feel free to change, adapt or use the text, images and activities to suit your needs.**

## Background information

### Richard Wright

Richard Wright is widely considered to be one of the central figures in the generation of artists that began to emerge from Glasgow in the 1990s. Born in 1960 in London, he graduated from Edinburgh College of Art in 1982. He was awarded the Scottish Arts Council's Amsterdam Studio Residency in 1986 and an Exchange Residency at CalArts, Los Angeles in 1994. He received a postgraduate degree at the Glasgow School of Art in 1995. In 2009, Wright was awarded the Turner Prize.

Wright's artistic practice focuses on the intimate relationship between the artwork and the interior it was specifically designed to occupy. As the artist himself has observed,

*'In the end the position of the work could be half of the work for me. In the first instance the work has the possibility to effect or change the way you are drawn through the space. It therefore has the potential to reveal the space in a new aspect.'*

In creating his artworks, Wright employs handmade printing practices, ink drawings, gilding and watercolour, and he has more recently branched out into creating works in leaded glass. Immersed in the history of art, Wright often refers to traditional ornamentation from a variety of periods, such as the Renaissance or the Baroque, but he never replicates it. Equally, he does not repeat a design from one project to the next. His wall- or ceiling-based artworks are thus always unique and site specific, sometimes using monochrome or polychrome patterns, or precious materials; whatever is chosen by the artists, from the pattern to the medium, it is ultimately a decision made according to what he feels is appropriate and sympathetic to the specific project.

For his most ambitious and complex artworks, Wright employs the painstaking techniques of Renaissance and Baroque fresco-makers. This involves drawing a cartoon on paper and then transferring it to the surface by pouncing – piercing the cartoon with holes and rubbing chalk through it – to create, as he describes it,

'the ghost of a work' on the wall or ceiling. The image is then painted with size (adhesive) and covered with materials such as gold or silver leaf. In the manner of traditional studio practice, Wright employs a team of skilled craftsmen to work with him on the installation.

## Great Hall Ceiling artwork

Wright's commission for Royal Museums Greenwich is focussed on the compartmented ceiling of the Great Hall of the Queen's House and populates the nine blank panels of the ceiling. These panel spaces had originally accommodated canvas paintings by the Florentine artist Orazio Gentileschi (1563-1639). Rather than being confined by the rigid ceiling structure, Wright's artwork continues down the walls of the Hall, above the balcony level. As a result, the ornamental details appear to break free from any architectural restrictions. The gold leaf is highly suggestive of the princely magnificence of the Queen's House as envisaged by the architect Indigo Jones (1573-1652) for his royal patrons, including painted, carved and gilded ceilings throughout. Some of these ceilings survive to this day, the most spectacular being those within the King's and Queen's Presence Chambers, which adjoin the Great Hall on the first floor of the House.

However it is not the historic ceilings that have been the starting point for Wright's design but the ornament incorporated into the balustrade of the now iconic Tulip Stair, with its leaves, scrolls and lilies. The airy playfulness of the ornament also chimes with the stage and costume designs created by Inigo Jones for theatre, masques and other court entertainments. This aspect of Jones' work for the Stuart court certainly interested Wright during his research for the project. He has also drawn inspiration from the work of the neo-classical architect and designer Robert Adam (1728-1792) – examples of the latter's ceiling designs, characterised by delicate ornamentation within geometric forms, were included in Wright's proposal.



'no title' by Richard Wright  
Assistants: Bill Wright, David Ersler, Nick Harrington,  
Judith Johnson, William Bock

## Practical and critical exploration

↗ Stand inside this perfect cube.

❓ Is the Great Hall a frame or an artwork in itself?

The Great Hall is a 12 m (40 ft.) cube, and the design of its marble floor matches the composition of squares and circles on its ceiling.

Notice the lines of symmetry echoing the house's Palladian architecture. Imagine what this room would look like in the candlelight of the 1600s.

❓ Are you surprised this is an artwork?

❓ Where does Richard Wright's work begin?

❓ How did he structure the making of this work?

❓ How did he conceive a 2D Artwork on a 3D canvas?

🖌 Sketch the leaves, scrolls and lilies incorporated into the design.

Using traditional techniques, Richard Wright worked with a team of five assistants to create the ceiling work. Just as fresco artists used assistants in the Baroque and Renaissance periods, the 'world's wealthiest living artist' Damien Hirst uses assistants to produce his paintings today.

❓ How important is it that artists produce their own artworks?

Richard and his team had to lie on their backs on scaffold beds over 9 weeks to complete the ceiling.

❓ How much should artists invest in their work?

## Re-interpretation task

Imagine you are commissioned to create an artwork for the Great hall. Reveal the space by designing a new artwork, thinking carefully about positioning and how the room frames the artwork.

## Further research

- [www.gagosian.com/artists/richard-wright](http://www.gagosian.com/artists/richard-wright)
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Na6JUd\\_pHTk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Na6JUd_pHTk)

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