

## Knights of Fancy



Sir Joshua Reynolds,  
*Self-Portrait as a Deaf Man*,  
ca. 1775.

Portrait painter **Joshua Reynolds** became the first president of Britain's Royal Academy of Arts in December 1768 and reportedly threatened to resign after just two months. He had to be bribed to stay, with offers of a knighthood and a commission to paint the king, according to a recently released book by the Academy's secretary and chief executive, **Charles Saumarez Smith**.

*The Company of Artists: The Origins of the Royal Academy of Arts in London*, published by Modern Art Press and Bloomsbury, details the intrigues and rivalries surrounding the Academy's foundation, the motivations of key players, and the glutinous repasts they enjoyed in Soho taverns.

"You can reconstruct to a remarkable extent who was involved day by day, and because of that you can work out what they thought and felt much more than I had anticipated," says Saumarez Smith, who headed the National Portrait Gallery, and National Gallery and wrote histories of both before taking up his current post in 2007.

While the Academy is most famous as an exclusive artists' club and a venue for blue-chip shows, a core element since its founding has been its school, which today counts **Tracey Emin** and **Fiona Rae** among its professors. Alumni from previous centuries include **John Constable**, **William Blake**, and **Anthony Caro**.

The book also examines prevailing myths around the Academy. These range from the plausible, such as the notion that writer **Samuel Johnson** (a close friend of Reynolds) helped form its laws, to the farfetched, like the idea that the Founding Fathers of the United States looked to the institution's complex regulatory framework when drafting the Constitution.

Nearly 250 years later, the Academy's central functions of promoting art, training artists, and staging exhibitions remain largely the same. But whereas **King George III** was crucial to the organization's establishment, today the monarch's involvement is minimal. Nevertheless, it retains an aura of conservatism.

Sculptor **Cornelia Parker**, who became an Academician in 2009, says she'd refused invitations to join for ten years, wary of belonging to such a mainstream institution. "It's a weird animal. I'm not sure yet if the cap fits me," she

says, noting that she is encouraged by efforts to modernize the Academy by bringing in younger members like **Grayson Perry**, **Gillian Wearing**, and **Gary Hume**. "Hopefully, it signals that there's a sea change. I think we're all trying to give it a chance, because otherwise it will always be this marbled thing," Parker adds.

Today's 80 Academicians and 40 Senior Academicians are still governed by an elected president and a rotating council, under similar laws to those that existed in the 18th century. And the Academy continues to hold

its annual "Summer Exhibition," in which the positioning of artworks is as fiercely contested as ever.

Now as then, a hierarchy of roles such as "the shrewd elder statesman, the older malcontent, and the young Turks" produces internal friction within the Academy, says Saumarez Smith—a point he underscores in the book by evoking **William Golding's** savage tale *Lord of the Flies*. "It can be brutal," he writes. "But at least its brutality is sanctioned by the traditions and values of the Enlightenment."

—Elizabeth Fullerton



*The Portraits of the Academicians of the Royal Academy, 1771-72*, by Johan Zoffany.



The Royal Academy of Arts during last year's "Summer Exhibition," an annual open-call show started in 1769.