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Lonely Lady of Dulwich

England's oldest public art gallery approaches its bicentenary.

There has been no more distinctive and original British architect than Sir John Soane, whose art was shaped by his travels in Italy and his admiration for ancient Greek forms. As architect to the Bank of England, he created a magnificent structure of classical courtyards and vaulted chambers. Yet extraordinarily this work was replaced (not superseded) in the 1920s.

Something of the creativity that is no longer visible at a great public institution survives, however, in an unlikely corner of South London. Dulwich Picture Gallery will celebrate its 200th anniversary in 2011. Its planes of brickwork, chambers and arches are a statement of elegance for a purpose. It was built to Soane's designs. The permanent collection includes works by Rembrandt, Rubens, Van Dyck, Poussin and Gainsborough. And these will be supplemented next year, for the bicentenary, with the display of a single masterpiece, one each month, lent by some of the world's great galleries.

This is a highly imaginative display by Dulwich, and a generous gesture by the galleries from which it is borrowing paintings. The works that will be lent attract visitors from all over the world when shown in the institutions that are their homes. Dulwich Picture Gallery's size and suburban location make it no direct counterpart offered to these galleries. But it has a noble and pioneering place in English artistic and architectural history.

For this surprisingly modest but beautiful building is England's oldest public art gallery. Despite wartime bombing and with sensitive reconstruction, it testifies to the importance of making aesthetic excellence available to public view.