

# The way forward

Strategy 2023–2028

# Background

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The Royal Academy of Arts (RA) is a pioneering champion of artists and art-making in the UK. Founded in 1768 by a group of artists led by Sir Joshua Reynolds PRA, and under the patronage of King George III, the RA was established with deliberate intentions: to raise the professional status of artists beyond that of artisans; to provide formal artistic training; and, to open art to a wider public through exhibitions.

Today the RA is, as it began, a living academy for artists, art-making and art lovers. The strength and quality of our activities, and their combination under one roof, give the RA a unique distinction in the world.

Our dynamic membership of eminent practising artists and architects promotes outstanding achievement across their respective disciplines. Elected for life by their peers, the Royal Academicians span a unique continuum of conversations and creativity.

As an artist-led and practice-centred academy, we have played a pivotal role in advancing contemporary artistic practice since 1768. Our founders set out to formalise the education of young artists and architects by creating the first fine-art school in the UK. Today, the RA Schools are among the foremost art schools in the country, providing a highly individualised, postgraduate diploma programme free of tuition fees. The education of young artists (albeit no longer architects) remains squarely at the heart of the RA.

Our founders were also pioneers in opening art up to a wide public. In 1769 they established and staged the Annual Exhibition and, in doing so, they threw open their doors for a wider public to appreciate and enjoy art and provided a means for Royal Academicians and students of the RA Schools to show and sell their works. Importantly, the income generated by the Annual Exhibition in turn funded the RA Schools. To this day, the Annual Exhibition (now known as the Summer Exhibition) continues to be the largest open-submission art show in the world.

In 1867, when the British Institution for Promoting the Fine Arts in the United Kingdom closed its doors and the RA took over its programme of Old Master loan exhibitions, we further reinforced our mission to grow the public's appreciation for the fine arts. This marked the beginning of the much more ambitious and wide-ranging exhibitions programme for which the RA has become world-renowned.

Our founding Royal Academicians also initiated the creation of an institutional collection of art and architectural works designed both to showcase the talents of the British School and to inspire succeeding generations of British artists. Royal Academicians have, since 1768, submitted a 'Diploma Work' upon election. Today, the RA's Collections provide a living record of our Royal Academicians, reflect a continuum of British art from 1768, and chart the evolution of artistic teaching over time.

Our landmark estate, in the beating heart of London, further distinguishes the RA and is central to our identity. In 1868, when the RA moved into Burlington House, we became custodians of a historically important property, to which we had added some of the most exceptional exhibition galleries in the world. When we later acquired and redeveloped 6 Burlington Gardens, we significantly expanded our campus and brought the more private aspects of our mission into the public arena. For the first time since our foundation the RA Schools became visible to the public; our collections were given public prominence in a dedicated Collection Gallery; our role as a place for discourse was reinforced with the new Benjamin West Lecture Theatre; and, the expanded footprint of our learning spaces enabled a deeper public engagement in art appreciation and art-making.

Perhaps most exceptionally, since 1768 we have delivered our mission as an independent and self-funded institution. We have never received public funding. This means we are not governed by public policy and we can use our voice to be a strong advocate for the visual arts. Our independence is both a critical enabler of our mission, and a central tenet of our identity.

## The current context

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**There is no other art organisation in the world quite like the Royal Academy of Arts, which is simultaneously a dynamic body of eminent practising artists and architects; a leading academy of practitioners, teachers and students; a world-renowned curator of ground-breaking exhibitions; and the custodian of a unique collection of art and architectural works.**

**We are an intriguing juxtaposition of old and new. We are proud of our legacy but forward-thinking. We are deeply respectful of our heritage but constantly working to confront, challenge and create anew. We are committed to our founding mission but perpetually evolving.**

**We are a living academy.**

The Covid pandemic, months of closure, the erosion of demand (and with it the main sources of the RA's income) and the recent significant increase in its cost base have put the RA under considerable financial strain. Looking ahead, Covid, Brexit, the war in Ukraine and the resulting economic context all make the road to recovery both longer and more challenging than we might have expected.

The Covid pandemic also clearly revealed the human need for connection, community and reflection. Through periods of protracted lockdown – with social interaction prohibited, and physical and mental perspectives on the world retracted – the importance of creative stimulation and collective experiences became ever more pronounced. Those trying times called for great art, and, despite the challenges mentioned above, the pandemic highlighted the fact that the RA's core mission is still as valid today as it was in 1768.

Our five-year strategy respects these challenges while honouring our founding mission and legacy and affirming our readiness to adapt and evolve.

# Our purpose

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Our five-year strategy underlines why we matter, where we are headed and what we value. Our purpose originates from 1768, and remains relevant today:

- to promote outstanding achievement in art and architecture;
- to contribute to advancing contemporary practice; and
- to expand the public's appreciation, enjoyment and understanding of the visual arts.

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## 1

### **Our mission**

*Why we matter*

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In 1768 the Instrument of Foundation stated that the RA would:

'Promote the arts of design and educate the public in the creation, enjoyment and understanding of the arts through exhibitions, education and debate.'

For this Strategic Plan 2023–2028, the RA's mission statement has been updated to bring its language into line with current terminology:

'We promote creativity and the practices of art and architecture; and engage the widest possible public with the creation, enjoyment and understanding of the arts through exhibitions, learning and the exchange of ideas.'

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## 2

### **Our vision**

*Where we are headed*

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- We believe that art has the power to enrich and change lives.
- We are an active, artist-led academy of art and architecture. We place artists and artistic practice at the centre of everything we do, and we promote outstanding achievement in art and architecture.
- We aim to stimulate people's curiosity, wonder and sheer enjoyment of art and architecture and unlock the imagination and the creative potential of everyone who engages with us – from schoolchildren to adult art-enthusiasts, from aspiring students to practising professionals.
- We meet and challenge the ideas and interests of an increasingly diverse audience through a varied and inclusive programme that extends seamlessly from the unique experience of visiting our buildings to a distinct online offering.
- We advocate emphatically for the critical importance of continued art education in the UK.
- We create an inclusive, collegiate work environment, offering meaningful, professional careers.
- We proudly maintain our independence.

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## 3

### **Our values**

*Who we are*

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To support the execution of our mission and our vision, we adhere to a set of shared values that guide our decision-making and shape our ways of working.

#### **Forever Creative**

Ignited by artistic imagination and the creative process, new perspectives and critical thinking help us to understand the world around us. From our inception we were set up to inspire a wide participation in the creative process, an aspiration more vital today than ever.

#### **Fiercely Independent**

Independence is one of our founding principles, and one that we fiercely defend. Neither in receipt of public money nor governed by public policy, we can chart our own course and use our voice to advocate for the things that matter most to us: creativity, a plurality of voices and the value of art education.

#### **Unapologetically Excellent**

Excellence can only be achieved where there is the courage to take creative risks and push boundaries. Led by the Royal Academicians, the RA schools, our outstanding exhibitions and public programmes, and our unique collections and archives embody this continuum of excellence.

#### **Belonging to All**

Everyone who makes art, loves art or wants to support art belongs to the RA's unique community. It is our responsibility to open up new ways into art and to develop programmes that reflect the interests of the diverse society we serve.

#### **Ethically Grounded**

In everything we do and everyone we engage with, we are guided by a strong ethical compass. We take our responsibility towards the environment, social justice and proper governance very seriously. In our work we meet fundamental principles in the areas of human rights, labour, the environment and anti-corruption.

# Our priorities

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So that we can build on our founding mission and realise our vision our five-year strategy is focused on the following priorities:

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## 1

### **Reinforce the Academy**

*Reaffirm our commitment to an artist-led, practice-centred academy*

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The Academy exists to inspire and develop artistic practice at all levels. Over the next five years, we aim to reinforce our proposition and reputation as an academy through our body of engaged Royal Academicians and the RA Schools. We will renew our commitment to free postgraduate art education and a deepening of our learning programmes. Art education in British schools and the appreciation of the 'different intelligences' that contribute to growing creative innovation are currently under severe pressure. It is our responsibility to advocate for the vital importance of art education in this country.

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### **Here's how:**

- We will establish the RA as an influential advocate for art education in the UK.
- We will position the RA Schools as a leading and distinctive provider of fine art education.
- We will redevelop the RA Schools to deliver an exceptional facility for art students.
- We will reinforce our focus on artistic practice across Learning, Collections, Architecture and our wider public programmes.
- We will give increased prominence to the RA Collections and create more opportunity for engagement through an expanded, reimagined and redeveloped Collection Gallery in the northwest corner of 6 Burlington Gardens.
- We will champion outstanding achievement in art and architecture and engage with our Royal Academicians to harness their support for everything we do.
- We will develop resilient, creative cultural leaders.

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## 2

### **Deepen our connection**

*Extend an open and relevant welcome to a wide public*

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We believe that art is for everyone. We are committed to ensuring that the RA becomes more relevant and accessible to the broadest possible audience with a compelling, competitive offer. We recognise that we do not sufficiently reflect the diversity of the world around us and see it as our responsibility to extend a warm welcome to all who share our passion for the visual arts; to showcase excellence across an ever-more diverse spectrum of art and architecture; and to foster deeper connections between our audiences and the practice of art and living artists.

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#### **Here's how:**

- We will reinforce our investment in a world-class exhibitions programme that enriches, delights and stimulates our audiences.
- We will prioritise equity, diversity and inclusion across our programmes, audience, students, staff, Royal Academicians and wider stakeholders to ensure that our offer is inclusive and welcoming.
- We will develop a compelling proposition for younger audiences – defining the offer, the pricing models and the experience for a younger generation.
- We will invest in a distinctive digital offer to open up new ways into the Royal Academy and its programmes – broadening our reach and deepening our engagement.

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## 3

### **Strengthen our resilience**

*Rise to the social, economic and environmental challenges to deliver our mission*

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At its inception 255 years ago, the Royal Academy was founded on the principle that it would finance itself. Over the coming five years, in order both to preserve our independence and to further our ambitions, we must strengthen our resilience in the face of financial, social and environmental challenges. We need to rebuild a sustainable financial position by redoubling our efforts to grow our audiences, optimising our assets, and maximising the commercial opportunities surrounding our programmes. We must strengthen our resilience to the environmental challenges we face and reduce the carbon footprint of our activities. Last but not least, we must ensure that we attract the very best talent to deliver our ambitions.

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#### **Here's how:**

- We will grow our audience and maximise our commercial opportunities to stabilise our financial position.
- We will build an endowment for the RA Schools to keep their tuition free into perpetuity.
- We will optimise our estate to ensure that our buildings are designed and maintained to support our mission and commercial opportunities.
- We will improve our resilience to extreme weather.
- We will reduce our impact on the planet and develop a strategy to deliver a net-zero carbon footprint and an environmental certification.
- We will attract the very best talent and support our staff in building their careers to help us deliver our ambitions.

# Summary

**Our ambition over the next five years is to deliver a financially sound, culturally and educationally renowned and environmentally sustainable RA.**

Although the current context presents clear social, financial and environmental challenges, it also presents opportunities: the pandemic has reinforced the importance of connection, community and creative stimulation, the key factors in our mission; the financial pressures we face underline our commitment to independence and self-funded sustainability; and the scale of the environmental task ahead presents a powerful call to action.

Rising to these challenges, our strategy sets out a defined direction of travel and a bold ambition. It is a five-year plan, but we are already making inroads: construction has just begun on the RA Schools to bring them up to twenty-first-century standards; the initial work we have done to deliver a more diverse and inclusive RA is starting to show the green shoots of progress; our recent investment in digital gives us a platform from which to transform the ways our audiences connect; and we have started to reshape our proposition for younger audiences, introducing more accessible visiting hours and pricing options and new activities.

Notwithstanding this, our strategy points to some bigger questions. Over the coming months, our teams will collaborate to refine our approach and work to keep pace with the changing demographics of our society; to assess how our business model might need to evolve; to identify how we can position the RA as an influential advocate for art education; and to understand fully the task ahead in terms of environmental sustainability.

Our response to these questions will help us to define more clearly the work we need to do to realise our ambition.