

A photograph of the interior of the Painted Hall in Greenwich, London. The hall is a large, rectangular room with a high ceiling. The walls are dark wood, and the floor is polished. The ceiling is covered in a vast, intricate fresco depicting a celestial scene with numerous figures, including angels and deities, surrounding a central figure. The fresco is framed by a series of ornate, dark wood columns. In the foreground, a wide staircase with a dark wood balustrade leads up to a platform. The platform is also covered in the same fresco. The overall atmosphere is one of grandeur and historical significance.

The Painted Hall

Sir James Thornhill's Masterpiece at Greenwich

MERRELL

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Her Majesty's fixed intention for Magnificence

The Foundation, Design and Construction of Greenwich Hospital

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The year 1672 is an important one in the story of the Royal Hospital for sick and injured seamen at Greenwich. The idea of establishing such an institution was not yet even embryonic and the start of construction on its buildings was more than two decades off. Nevertheless, the year saw two unrelated developments that were highly significant for the Hospital's later realisation—from the laying of the first stone in 1696, to the decoration of its Great Hall between 1707 and 1726, and its final completion in 1751.

First, it was in 1672 that Charles II abandoned his ambitious vision to rebuild a royal palace at Greenwich to rival Louis XIV's Versailles: a ceremonial gateway to the Stuart kingdom for lavish ambassadorial welcomes. The Office of Works had demolished most of the red-brick Tudor palace buildings in 1662 to make way for this replacement three-range complex on classical lines, but only the shell of a single range designed by John Webb had been completed by the architect's death in October 1672. Precarious royal finances made continuation of the hugely costly new palace of stone impossible and building activity shifted to Windsor Castle for the rest of the reign. The sole product of Charles II's abortive scheme—the Portland stone 'King's House' (1664–69)—now stood marooned like a gleaming white question mark at this visually striking and strategically important bend on the River Thames (figs 1 and 2). Two decades later, Greenwich Hospital would provide the answer to the question the abandoned building posed—and indeed deliver aspects of Charles II's vision for an English Versailles. For now at least, the future use of this royal plot was in doubt.

The second significant occurrence in the year 1672 was the arrival in England of the decorative history painter Antonio Verrio (fig. 3). Born in Lecce in southern Italy, Verrio (1636–1707) had risen to prominence in Paris by way of commissions in Naples and Toulouse and was talent-spotted by the English ambassador in France, Ralph Montagu. It was chiefly Verrio who supplied the European glamour and French taste favoured in the art of the Restored court, and who did more than any artist to assist Charles II in his rivalries with his cousin Louis XIV. Most importantly for our purposes, it was this southern Italian who imported the style of unbounded allegorical mural painting that would be used to such extraordinary effect in the decoration of Greenwich Hospital's Great Hall. The so-called 'Painted Hall' is the masterpiece of a native painter,

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volupti onsequae porenim
iumquid qui iderupti nis
sanditio blam quaerunt
od et alitonsere vollam

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