

Case Study

Beyond Caravaggio: Living Paintings



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Author: Melissa Darby, Campaign Manager, The National Gallery



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The National Gallery sparked PR buzz and unprecedented visitor numbers with ‘living paintings’.

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Melissa Darby
The National Gallery

Cover image:

Quadri Plastici’s recreation of Caravaggio’s The Taking of Christ as part of their Living Paintings performance at the National Gallery for the Beyond Caravaggio exhibition.

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Living Paintings

bringing Caravaggio's paintings to life for new audiences

Beyond Caravaggio: Living Paintings

Beyond Caravaggio was one of The National Gallery's special ticketed exhibitions. It explored Caravaggio's influence on the art of his contemporaries and followers. Through his use of naturalism and dramatic lighting effects, he changed the course of European painting and remains a source of inspiration to this day.

To bring the exhibition to life and generate a spike in the campaign, we wanted to highlight Caravaggio's influence today with a spectacular performance on the night of the Gallery's Halloween Late*.

In the lead-up to opening, we researched Caravaggio's influence and discovered the Italian theatre group Quadri Plastici. They had recently found fame on [Italia's Got Talent](#). Further research revealed that Quadri Plastici (Plastic Paintings) is an Italian artform in which performers stage 'living' works of art. The tradition originated in the small town of Avigliano, Italy, more than 100 years ago and is still practiced today.

Inspired by the [Rijkmuseum's flashmob](#) recreation of Rembrandt's The Night Watch, we decided to bring Beyond Caravaggio to life with a performance by Quadri Plastici. It seemed the perfect opportunity to demonstrate the emotional impact and influence of Caravaggio's work, with a performance the public would remember and talk about.

*Lates at The National Gallery

The National Gallery opens its doors until 9pm on Fridays for talks, tours, live music, late exhibition openings and special events.

Halloween Late was a special themed event.

What we aimed to achieve

We wanted to:

- position the exhibition as a ‘must see’
- reinforce the exhibition’s key messages, including Caravaggio’s dramatic use of light and the power of his storytelling
- be innovative in the marketing campaign
- generate a PR and social buzz
- drive sales for the exhibition

The target audience

The exhibition’s audience groups were core National Gallery visitors and art lovers, cultural tourists and specialists.

The National Gallery’s Special Late events tend to attract a younger demographic looking for interactive events and activities in a relaxed environment. This event therefore enabled us to extend the reach of the campaign to:

- younger audiences interested in the Halloween Late
- Italian tourists and expatriates following Quadri Plastici’s popularity on the Italian TV talent show
- the Friday night foot traffic through Trafalgar Square

Making it happen

We began the project in May 2016, meeting representatives from the Council of Avigliano while they were in London. As the performance provided an opportunity to raise the profile of Quadri Plastici, they were keen to be involved.

We invited Quadri Plastici to recreate two of Caravaggio's masterpieces using models, lights, props, box frames and music. Lighting and music are important in the group's living recreations of Caravaggio's work so the performances were planned after 6pm when it started to get dark.

One of the paintings recreated for the event was The Taking of Christ. We felt this would maximise press and social media awareness of the exhibition as it was the lead image for the marketing campaign. It would also be a world premiere for the Italian troupe. The second recreation was Salome receives the Head of John the Baptist, which worked with the Halloween theme. Quadri Plastici had previously recreated this painting in Italy so they had the actors, props and costumes ready to go.

We initially thought of doing the performances as flash-mobs in busy locations such as train stations or shop windows but decided against that. Instead we chose to draw in crowds from Trafalgar Square. We thought social videos and press footage would look impressive outside the Gallery and would generate excitement associated with the exhibition environment.

As each 'reveal' was only 3 minutes long, capturing it on film was important to ensure the campaign would continue to generate excitement following Halloween Late.

Working closely with the Press team, we planned a photo call ahead of the three public performances. We commissioned Rex Features to take photos and a short film clip to be released initially to press and then via National Gallery social channels.

Cost

As the Council of Avigliano supported the project, costs were reduced significantly. This highlights the benefits of working collaboratively with arts organisations and communities. A flat fee was agreed with the Council of Avigliano for their travel and accommodation. The other main area of expenditure was film and photography for press and our own channels.



Quadri Plastici's recreation of Caravaggio's Salome receives the Head of John the Baptist as part of their Living Paintings performance at the National Gallery for the Beyond Caravaggio exhibition. Image courtesy of the National Gallery.

Results

- The Halloween Late was the most visited Special Late at the National Gallery to date. Many of the visitors we spoke to had never been to the Gallery before.
- All events at the Late sold out, so the performance outside offered entertainment for larger crowds.
- Revenue in the National Gallery shops was up by 60% compared to the previous Friday, as well as a significant increase in sales in our bar.
- Beyond Caravaggio exhibition ticket sales were higher on the 28 October than on any other day until that point in the run. Exhibition sales continued to be strong for weeks after the event, and overall the exhibition achieved over 160% of its original ticket target.
- The Living Paintings performances received UK press coverage in The Times, The Daily Telegraph and three minutes on BBC London News filmed from Trafalgar Square, featuring an interview with the Gallery's Director and footage of the performances. The performance also received Italian coverage on RAI TV, plus regional Italian papers including La Repubblica.
- The Halloween Late and Living Paintings performances were well received on social media. The Living Paintings Facebook post was the best performing story that week.
- Comments from the public were extremely positive and many visitors shared videos and photos during the Late.
- Visitors came from Italy specially to see the performance. The Italian Ambassador, the Italian Cultural Institute and Basilicata Tourism also attended the performance.

Successes and challenges

This was the first time the Gallery had held a live performance on the West Lawn in Trafalgar Square with actors, lights and music. There was therefore no set procedure but an opportunity to initiate new ways of working across teams. Working across the Gallery was one of the great successes of the project.

Working collaboratively with arts communities overseas also proved beneficial, although language barriers were challenging at times. Luckily we had some Italian speaking staff who were able to help.

The other challenges we faced were specific to the performance. There were delays with the set build and the classical music track selected by Quadri Plastici was under copyright with a large fee attached to any reproduction. This meant we had to select a new music track for our film and we were unable to live stream the performance on social media.

Top tips

- Overestimate your timeframe by at least four weeks - seeking relevant permissions can take a long time.
- Capture the performance on film. Ensure you have relevant permissions and contracts in place to film the performances, including live streaming on social media.
- Let the press lead on promotion. We released little information about the event in the lead-up. This helped maximise press and TV coverage before social media kicked in on the night of the Late.

The final word

The project offered a great opportunity for public engagement and audience development. It enabled us to highlight Caravaggio's influence beyond the exhibition, generate a buzz and ultimately drive awareness and ticket sales.

It was a challenge to implement as it involved a number of people and permissions but it was ultimately a huge success with audiences on the night, and for all those involved.

The event set a standard for National Gallery Late events in the future. It also enhanced the Gallery's reputation for collaborating with artists around the world to present special events for the public. We were able to help raise awareness of Quadri Plastici and the arts community in Avigliano; these 'living paintings' are a practice this small town is now becoming famous for.

As a result, the Gallery has initiated new ways of working to stage live experiential events and continue to work with creative partners on Special Late events in the future.

[Watch the National Gallery YouTube film](#)

[Watch the Quadri Plastici trailer](#)