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Royal Academy picks first painter in 20 years to be its president

Christopher Le Brun says he wants the institution to be a place of lively debate and seeks a role for younger artists

Mark Brown, arts correspondent
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The Royal Academy of Arts is a very 'human' institution, claims new president Christopher Le Brun.
Photograph: Oli Scarff/Getty Images

Christopher Le Brun, the new president of the Royal Academy of Arts, who follows in the illustrious footsteps of artists such as Joshua Reynolds and John Everett Millais, says he hopes his tenure will help foster an atmosphere of vigorous debate and intellectual risk.

Le Brun was elected on Thursday night as only the 26th president in the academy's 243-year history and, after two architects and a sculptor, is the first painter to take the role in 20 years. "I felt quite strongly that, for the wellbeing of the academy, it's right for there to be proper rotation between the categories," he said. "Dearly as I love the architects, who are tremendously efficient at this sort of thing, some painters can also do the job."

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He succeeds architect Nicholas Grimshaw at an important time for the academy, which has ambitious plans to expand its central London premises into the building at 6 Burlington Gardens, currently leased by the Haunch of Venison gallery.

Le Brun said he wanted the academy to be a place of lively debate and cited the recent Modern British sculpture show which provoked some disparaging reactions. "I thought we should have had more of an argument about it," he said. "I would have encouraged those academicians who hated it to speak up. We're not here for a party line; we're here to encourage the argument and I'd like us to be more associated with intellectual risk."

That may include a return to the sort of memorable exhibitions such as *New Spirit in Painting* (1981), *Sensation* (1997) and *Apocalypse* (2000). "I think the academy is very well placed to show major exhibitions of, say, painting or sculpture, which establish a new movement or put us in touch with what's going on. These exhibitions are very difficult to put on and they need serious research but I think it is the sort of thing the academy can do very well."

Le Brun's election by academicians followed the process established by a constitution that predates the American constitution. He beat Stephen Farthing, John Maine, Spencer de Grey and Ian Ritchie after four rounds of voting involving 84 academicians. When Le Brun finally won 50-33, the RA's secretary and chief executive Charles Saumarez Smith was obliged to call Buckingham Palace (no objections) and Le Brun then adorned the presidential medal before hosting dinner.

Some had hoped a woman might be elected at last. Le Brun said the number of women becoming academicians was going up – there are 19 now – and said: "It would be reasonable to say that there's a fair likelihood that the next president could well be a woman."

The RA is not the stuffy, set-in-its-ways place it once was. Le Brun, 59, who was first elected in 1996, called it a very "human" organisation: "We may make mistakes and you may see the hem showing, but I'd rather that than be too buttoned up," he said.

He wants to get younger artists and architects elected. "Something has definitely happened in my time here. It has become the sort of place that artists now don't think twice about wanting to be part of. When I was a young painter, the academy didn't really exist for me... the academy did not seem essential to my profession."

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