

Welcome to this audio description of Gaia, by Luke Jerram

Gaia is presented within the Painted Hall of the Royal Naval College. Completed in 1726, designed by Christopher Wren, the Painted Hall boasts one of the most spectacular Baroque interiors in Europe. Its ceiling and wall decorations were painted by British artist Sir James Thornhill, whose epic **scheme**, known as 'Britain's Sistine Chapel', took nineteen years to complete. The paintings depict Royal figures - with at least five English monarchs trampling Britain's enemies or receiving blessings from heaven - along with grand nautical scenes, all rendered in glorious colour.

In Greek Mythology Gaia is the personification of the Earth. Unlike the moon, which we have been gazing at for millennia, the first time humankind got to see the Earth as a blue marble floating in space was in 1968 with NASA's Apollo 8 mission. At this moment, our perception and understanding of our planet changed forever. Hanging in the black emptiness of space the Earth seems isolated, a precious and fragile island of life. From a distance, the Earth is just a pale blue dot.

Hanging suspended from the centre of the painted ceiling is a replica of our planet, providing a view of Earth as it might be seen from space, floating in three dimensions.

The large, inflated sphere, is 7 metres in diameter, meaning the artwork is 1.8 million times smaller than the real Earth, with each centimetre describing 18km of the Earth's surface. Using a printer (the size of a caravan!), detailed, high resolution NASA photographic imagery has been printed onto the nylon surface of the sphere, offering a detached and objective view of our home planet, the detail of which is illuminated from within the structure.

Looking up at *Gaia*, some have experienced the 'overview effect', a term that author Frank White coined to describe the cognitive shift experienced by astronauts when viewing Earth from space. Common features include a feeling

of awe for the planet, a profound understanding of the interconnection of all life, and a renewed sense of responsibility for taking care of the environment.

As the planet slowly rotates, it's revealed that the majority, that's 2-thirds, of the Earth's surface is covered by its oceans, here reflected in a shade of ultra-marine blue. Creating rippling patterns above the blue, are wisps of white cloud.

Just a third of the planet's surface is revealed as land mass, including the continents, appearing here as small, isolated islands within the vast oceans, the continents surrounded by even smaller specs of islands. The land masses are reflected in shades of green, brown and beige, some with more wisps of white cloud hovering above.

Standing below the Earth, looking up, the white ice of Antarctica stretches out in a near circle that reaches almost a metre in diameter. As the planet slowly rotates, Africa is revealed to be the largest land mass, stretching along the north/south axis, from the southern tip of Europe seemingly reaching the outer tips of the South Pole, with an apparent thin strip of ocean in between. As Africa and passes by, the Americas come into view, thinner than Africa, but again nearly stretching from pole to pole. The next land mass has Australia and New Zealand in the southern hemisphere, then Asia filling most of the southern hemisphere, with Europe filling the north.

The artwork also acts as a mirror to major events in society. A particularly striking observation is that, the noticeable scale of the green of the Amazon rainforest, is here revealed to have strips of beige ripped into it, a striking indication of the impact of the deforestation of the planet, as seen from space. Also, in light of the current COVID-19 pandemic, the artwork may provide the viewer with a new perspective of our place on the planet; a sense that societies of the Earth are all interconnected and that we have a responsibility toward one another. After the lockdown, there has been a renewed respect for nature.

Gaia is accompanied by a specially made surround sound composition by BAFTA award winning Composer Dan Jones.

