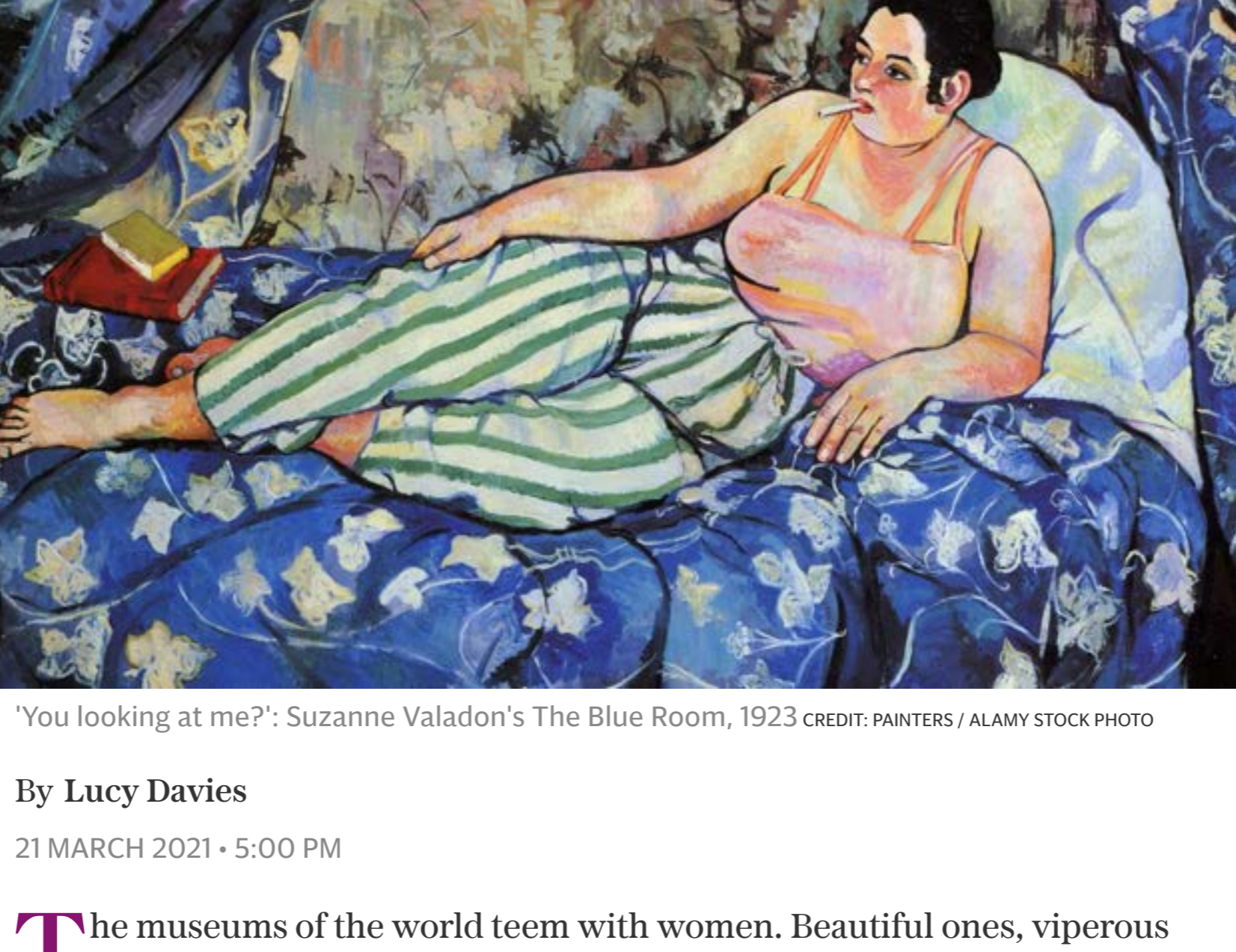


Women artists have always been there – as this joyous history of self-portraits shows

Jennifer Higgle's *The Mirror and The Palette* puts gals back into galleries with a revelatory study of female self-portraits over 500 years

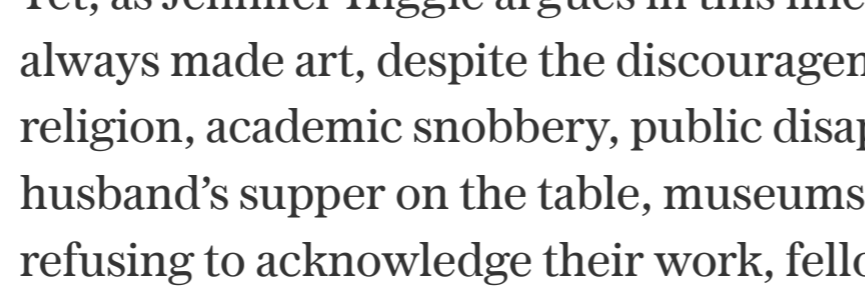


You looking at me?: Suzanne Valadon's *The Blue Room*, 1923. CREDIT: PANTERS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

By **Lucy Davies**
21 MARCH 2021 - 5:00 PM

The museums of the world teem with women. Beautiful ones, viperous ones, young and old (well, mostly young), seated and recumbent. But we're almost always in the frame, rather than on the labels.

Most people struggle to name more than one female artist before the 20th century. Artemisia Gentileschi (born in 1593) has entered the popular imagination, but only by virtue of the [National Gallery exhibition last year](#) – and that was her first ever show in Britain, and the first National Gallery blockbuster devoted to a historical [female artist](#).



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Yet, as Jennifer Higgle argues in this fine, haunting book, women have always made art, despite the discouragement lobbed in their path. Laws, religion, academic snobbery, public disapproval, having to get their husband's supper on the table, museums not buying their work, historians refusing to acknowledge their work, fellow artists referring to their kind as "ridiculous" (Renoir) – none of it has prevented women from sitting at an easel, picking up a brush or a nub of chalk, and doing it anyway.

Higgle is an artist and critic, former editor of the contemporary art magazine *Frieze*. She also makes a podcast about women in art history – *Bow Down* – which was the seed for this book. Researching self-portraits, she was "staggered" at the "depth and variety of paintings made by women [who] have, until recently, been erased from the story of art". You'd be forgiven, she says, "for thinking that women only started making art after World War II – and not many of them, at that".

The Mirror and The Palette (the title nods to the meagre resources most women had at their disposal) is a redress, then, and vividly done – so much so that it rustles with the women's presence. You feel them standing behind you, expectant.

The book is illustrative rather than encyclopedic, covering the period between 1548 and 1980 and the lives of 22 artists, selected by Higgle because they painted their own likeness, often many times over. Of the 700 portraits that the French painter Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun (1755-1842) left behind when she died, for instance, 40 were of herself. The New Zealander Rita Angus (1908-1970) and the Mexican Frida Kahlo (1907-1954), meanwhile, clocked up 55.

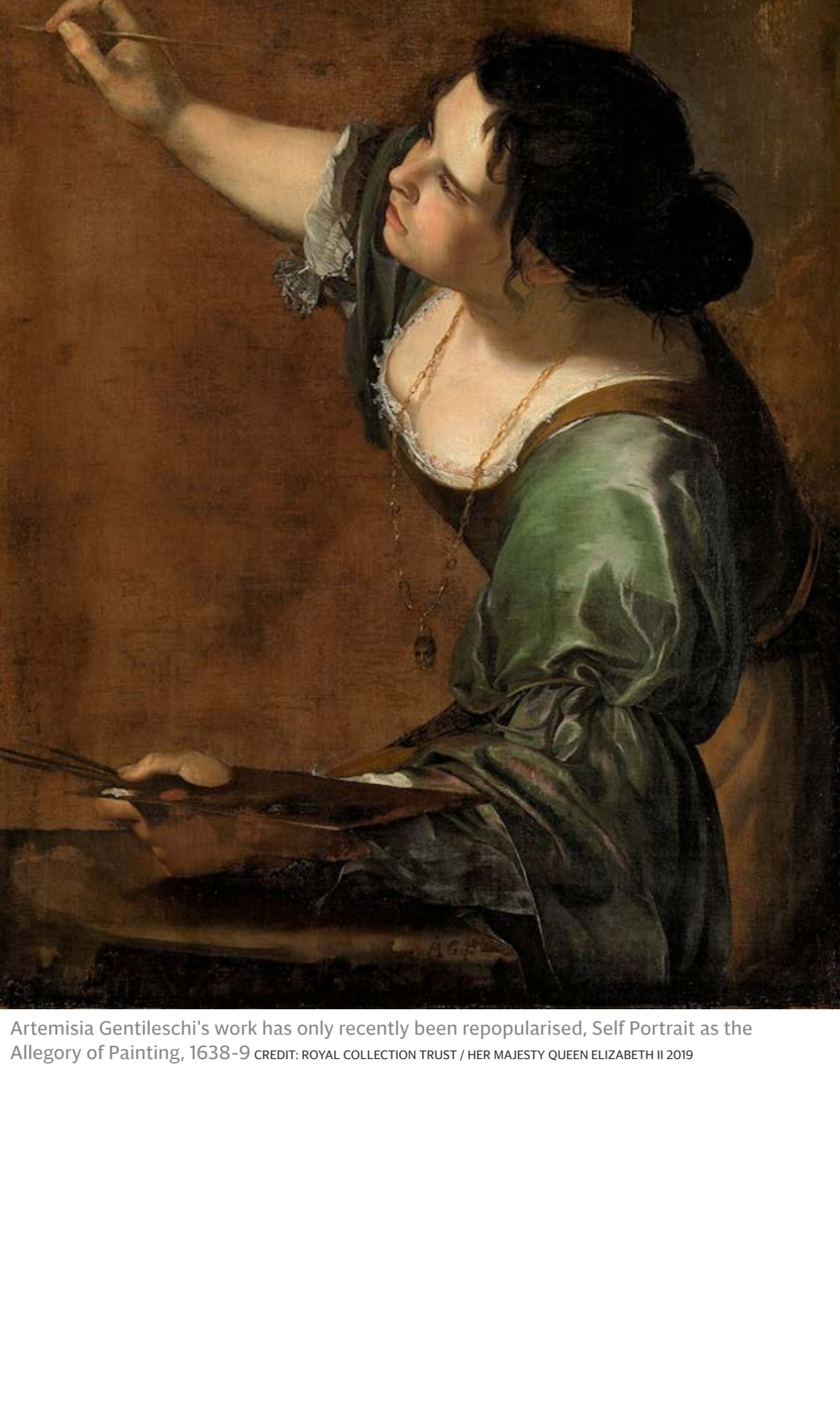


Self portrait by Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun, 1790. CREDIT: THECLA CLARK/ CORBIS HISTORICAL

The Italian Sofonisba Anguissola (1532-1625) is thought to have painted 19 self-portraits – a full century before Rembrandt is credited with popularising the genre. Anguissola was gifted – taught briefly by Michelangelo and later the court painter to Philip II of Spain. Even so, when her 1554 self-portrait was acquired by Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum in 1747, they hung it not in the art galleries, but in the Schatzkammer (Cabinet of Curiosities), next to shark teeth, dragon blood and other rarities.

Higgle divides her meat by theme – smile, allegory, solitude and so on. That means each of the women appear and reappear as the stories suit, though they all get a turn on centre stage. It all pivots on a question – why self-portraits? – to which, as Higgle argues ably, there is more than one answer.

First, since women's movement through the world has historically been so limited, self-portraits were often the most exciting subject they could find. Here's the 21-year-old Russian artist Marie Bashkirtseff, in 1879: "Do you imagine that I get much good from what I see, chaperoned as I am, and when, in order to go to the Louvre, I must wait for my carriage, my lady companion and family?"



Artemisia Gentileschi's work has only recently been repopularised. Self Portrait as the Allegory of Painting, 1638-9. CREDIT: ROYAL COLLECTION TRUST / HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II 2019

Anguissola used the genre as a calling card for her skill, while the Australian Nora Heysen (1911-2003) made one every time she moved home "to create my own territory". Painting yourself makes clear to the world "that you are someone worth looking at, worth acknowledging," says Higgle – and how urgent that feels in the case of Angus, who destroyed some of her work at her husband's request "for I was his wife". She also agreed to give up painting "for the sake of keeping the peace", although thankfully that didn't last long.

Under Higgle's aegis, none of the women appears as victims. They are resourceful, confident, curious and witty. On a painting retreat in Worpsswede, the German artists Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876-1907) and Clara Westhoff (1878-1954) caused a scandal when they climbed a church tower and rang the bells "until they were tired", not realising it was the signal for fire.

Many also challenged artistic and social convention. The French painter Suzanne Valadon (1865-1938), for instance, turned her experience as an artist's model into the magnificent *The Blue Room* (1923), in which she appears draped over a divan, fag in mouth, thumbing her nose at the tradition of the odalisque.

The stories come in slices. One minute Higgle is gently sketching her thoughts, the next, straining you with truths. From time to time, she plunges the reader into an otherworldly present in which a sort of Ur-woman is at her easel. The effect is a little like a video portrait, in which the subject looks for a few seconds into the lens in slight slow motion. Schlocky, you might think, but it isn't. This woman has been here all along. It's just that now she is finally apparent.

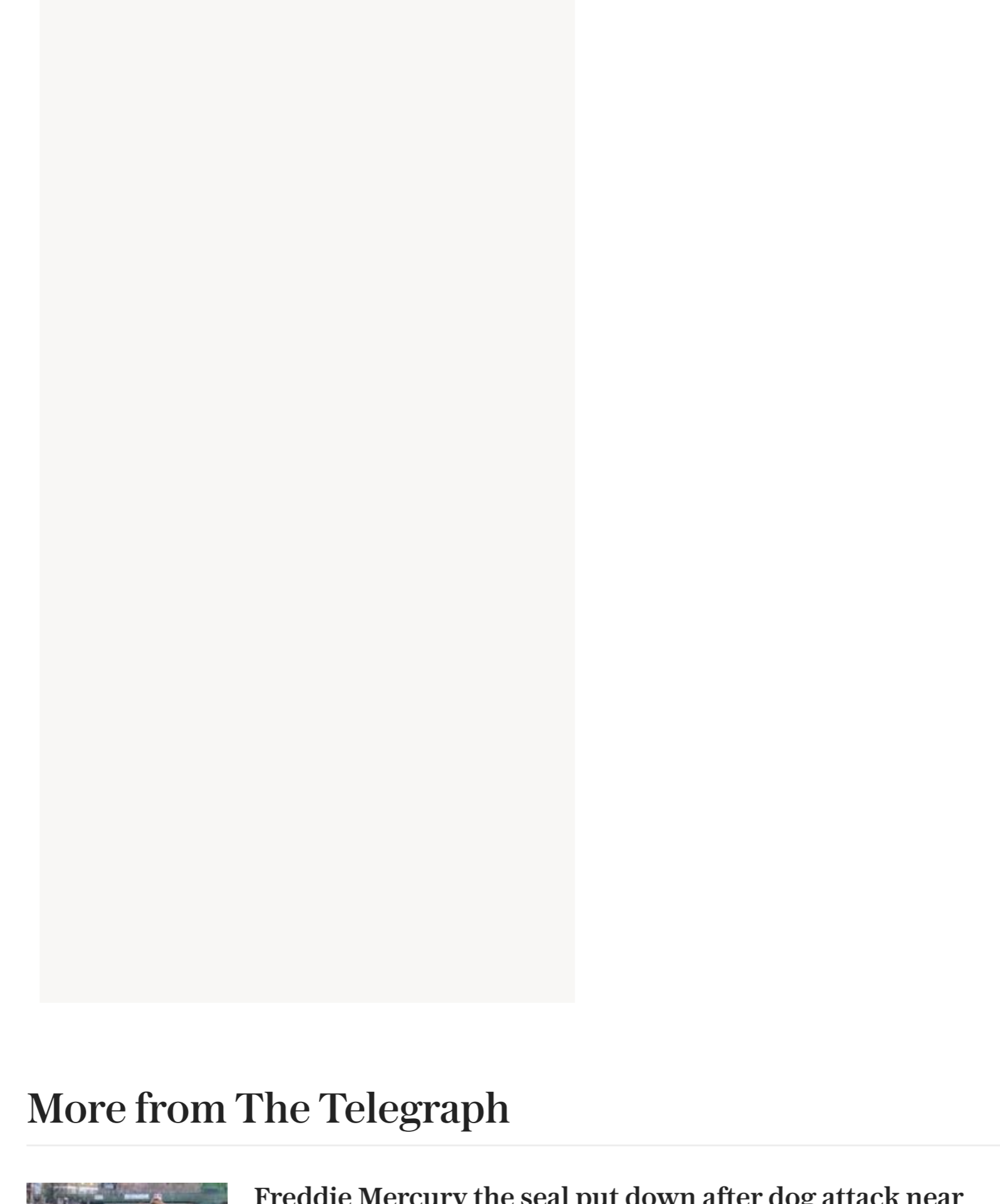
The Mirror and The Palette is published by W&N at £20. To order your copy for £16.99 call 0844 871 1514 or visit the [Telegraph Bookshop](#)

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