

A Companion to
British Art
1600 to the Present

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A Companion to British Art 1600 to the Present

Edited by

Dana Arnold and David Peters Corbett

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Acknowledgements

This volume springs from our interest in developing the field of British art studies. It began as a remapping of the established lines of inquiry and developed into an exploration of the principal themes in the ongoing scholarship and historiography of British art. The interest in the retelling of the story of British art has grown over the past decade as witnessed by the appearance of several new publications including a three-volume *History of British Art*.¹ This volume brings a complementary dimension to this body of literature as well as the canonical surveys that have endured for more than half a century.²

It has been a long road from inception to publication. And there are many to thank who have helped the volume on its way. Jayne Fagnoli, our editor at Wiley-Blackwell, and her production team on both sides of the Atlantic have all made a contribution to the development of this book. In its final stages our copy-editor Camille Bramall worked enthusiastically and effectively on each of the essays.

We are also indebted to our editorial assistants, Mark Westgarth, Maxwell King, and Karen Fielder who have worked on this collection at various points in its evolution.

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Dana Arnold and David Peters Corbett
October 2012

Notes

- 1 Bindman, D., Ayers, T. and Stephens, C. (eds) (2008) *The History of British Art*, 3 vols, London: Tate Publishing.
- 2 See for instance, Waterhouse, E. (1994) *Painting in Britain 1530–1790*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

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Part 1



Editors' Introduction

Editors' Introduction

Dana Arnold and David Peters Corbett

A Companion to British Art: 1600 to the Present is a collection of new essays written by leading scholars in the field. Over the past two decades, British art of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries has been one of the most lively and innovative areas of art-historical study. A series of important monographs, essay collections, exhibitions, and articles has expanded and deepened our understanding of British art of these centuries, raising it from an undertaught and understudied aspect of the history of art to one that is increasingly on syllabuses for undergraduate and MA students. This growth in scholarly depth and interest has made it important to provide a working collection for teachers and their students as an introduction to the field. This book is therefore offered as a text that can be used in multiple ways to approach the rich and varied material of British art.

A word about the nature of the book and how it is organized. The volume concentrates on painting for reasons of space. The reader will find there is some reference to architecture but little to sculpture or graphic art. It is emphatically not a survey and does not attempt to review or cover the whole history of art in Britain. Even if that were possible, we do not think it would be desirable to provide some information about everything at the expense of detailed study of nothing. Instead, the volume is designed for a different task, one that seems to us to be much more important and timely. The book is a selection of substantial essays – partly reporting on existing scholarship and the state of the field, partly original research – which have been designed and written specifically for an undergraduate audience. It is organized and imagined thematically and does not attempt to cover either the full chronological range or some notional list of high points. Instead it is intended to provide teachers of the subject who need to introduce undergraduates to British art with material that they will find

substantial and stimulating in a classroom situation. Our hope is that teachers of the subject will find here a rich and diverse set of approaches to some of the important themes and areas that have emerged in the study of the subject, and that they will find it easy to tailor and adapt the groups of essays we have organized in order to answer particular needs. We do not wish to promote any particular reading of the material here, and the collection has been envisaged primarily as a stimulating way into what, for many students, will be an unfamiliar subject.

In commissioning essays for the book we have selected four themes, together with a broader “general” section at the start, each of which provides the center of gravity for one of the main sections of the volume. “Institutions,” “Nationhood,” “Landscape,” and “Men and Women” are ways of identifying and organizing some of the major preoccupations that have emerged from recent scholarship. They are not meant to seem exclusive, compulsory, or constraining, and the essays in each of the sections have been written and conceived to be diverse and to pursue similar material in distinct ways over the chronological range of the book. Tutors reading through the volume in order to consider how they wish to use the material will see that each thematic section can be used as a whole, can be dismantled and recombined with essays from other sections, or can be reduced to one or two of the contributions in order to pursue specific interests. It is this openness and malleability that we have worked to achieve in designing the volume, and that we hope tutors and students will find in the organization. It is, however, worth offering here some thoughts about the constitution of the individual sections and their themes, continuities, and divergences. The essays are meant to delve in stimulating and useable ways into aspects of their material; they are not conceived as surveys or as exhaustive accounts of all the significant dimensions of their subject matter. For instance, the very extensive work that has recently appeared on the Royal Academy means that the reader will not find, in the section called “Institutions,” any separate detailed discussion of the founding and constitution of the Royal Academy after 1768 (although she or he will find it discussed in Colin Trodd’s essay in the section and in Cynthia Roman’s in the “Nationhood” section). They will, however, find the nature of the art world between the 1760s and 1820s defined, since this is a subject which has had little presence in the literature to date. The reverse of this medal is the decision to provide a constellation of essays – by Sam Smiles, Tom Williamson, and Michael Charlesworth – in the “Landscape” section that consider the work of Constable as part of wider studies of landscape art as it evolved over the period between about 1760 and the mid-nineteenth century. Taken together, this group of essays provides a multiple and multi-directional set of perspectives on one of the central subjects to any study of British art in this key period of its history. Our hope is that tutors and students will find this multiplicity a stimulating way into the issues and meanings of the subject and that “Landscape” in this way can serve as a case study for classroom use that will allow students to use the book to deepen their knowledge of an important aspect of British art and work with it across a range of opinions and approaches.

The volume opens with the “General” section. It contains a trio of essays that deal, in distinct ways, with three of the most important questions which seem to us to be of wide relevance to the field. Mark Cheetham begins the volume with a detailed and scholarly discussion of the ways in which nationhood – “Englishness” – and ideas of and about art have intersected between the early eighteenth century and the present day. In a muscular and comprehensive argument that ranges widely – from Hogarth to the early twentieth century vorticists, to the contemporary artist, Yinka Shonibare, MBE – Cheetham explores how far we might legitimately think of “English” art as a unity, and what it implies to do so. The question of nationhood and nationality in art – the subject of one of the later thematic sections – is lucidly broached and analysed here. In the second essay of the “General” section, Andrew Ballantyne takes up the question of the British and modernity, an attribute they have often been accused of lacking, or at least adopting a skeptical and probably evasive view toward. British art seemed to many commentators in the twentieth century to opt out of the most exciting art of the moment, modernism, an art that claimed for itself a direct relationship with the expression of modern life. Ballantyne traces the idea of modernity from antiquity to the late twentieth century and concentrates on the ways in which architecture in Britain has, at certain key moments from the eighteenth century onwards, become the focus of debate and concern about the modernity of the times and their expression. He reveals that the British attitude to these vital but contested issues has been more complex and more pervasive than has often been acknowledged. Finally, British culture has been a modern, even a modernist, one, but quietly and without fanfare, however saturated in these qualities it might now seem. In the final essay of the “General” section, Janet Wolff considers with a precise, analytic, probe, another key question: how far is “English” or British art to be valued in aesthetic terms. As with modernism and modernity, earlier commentators often considered British art aesthetically inferior to what were seen as the more central national schools, France and Italy above all. Wolff takes on this question directly. Beginning with a discussion of a significant intervention by the important historian of British art, Charles Harrison, she considers the recent “re-evaluation” of the worth and importance of the art produced in Britain, especially in the early twentieth century when France and America have seemed to lead the field. Wolff not only provides a lucid guide to the debates, she also ranges widely across recent political and social theory in seeking to provide the reader with a firm place to stand and make a judgement about both the issues at stake in seeking to value and the value we might attribute to British art. Focusing on the work of Gwen John and the Bloomsbury artists of the early twentieth century, she argues for a “principled aesthetics” that will allow us both to assess the value of British art on its own terms, and to place it in wider art-historical and social contexts.

“Institutions” contains five essays. In “‘Those Wilder Sorts of Painting’: The painted interior in the age of Antonio Verrio,” Richard Johns considers the ways in which the emergent art world of the 50 years or so between the 1670s and the 1720s – a period that has still been little researched – came together through the

decorative history painting practiced by James Thornhill and others. Considering both the architectural settings of such paintings and the ways in which the period and its art can be conceptualized, Johns offers a reading of this art that allows us to understand both its place in a complex network of politics and patronage, and to see it as exemplary of the ways in which we can newly read neglected periods of British art in new and illuminating ways. Johns' discussions of the concept of the Baroque, of the relationship between architecture and painting, and of the historiography of his period all provide a way into the period for the classroom. In the second essay, Colin Trodd offers a detailed and meticulous account of the art institutions of nineteenth-century Britain. Beginning with some comments on the Royal Academy, Trodd traces the way in which art institutions in the period, including the National Gallery, the Royal Academy, and the Victoria and Albert Museum, fought to make space for themselves in a changing society and "battled to make themselves into durable, distinctive and original places of knowledge and venues of value." He concludes that these were fluid and mobile ways of organizing artistic activity, and that we must pay attention not only to the way in which they organized themselves, but to the pressures to which they were obliged to respond. David Peters Corbett takes up another aspect of the institutional construction of art history in the section's third essay, "Crossing the Boundary: British Art across Victorianism and Modernism." Corbett looks at the conventional division in studies of early twentieth-century British art between the Victorian and modernist eras and, drawing on detailed examples, argues that it is misleading to make such a division. The fourth essay in the section, "British Pop Art and the High/Low Divide," sees Simon Faulkner discussing the ways in which Pop Art in Britain found a role within the institutions of British culture by resisting rather than celebrating the popular cultural forms of its subject matter, as the most common critical opinion has it. Discussing artists including Richard Hamilton, Peter Phillips, Peter Blake, Derek Boshier, and Richard Smith, Faulkner marks out the ways in which the specific imagery of British Pop plays a role within the institutions of its culture. The "Institutions" section concludes with an essay by Jo Applin that looks at the ways in which British art "became subject to a range of formal and conceptual pressures in London during the 1960s." Focusing on the London art schools of the sixties and the reception of American modernism in which they were at the forefront, St Martin's and the Royal College of Art are examined as institutions where the understanding and usability of new artistic and conceptual forms was received, debated, and given a British cast during a crucial decade of reformulation and expansion in the British art world. One of Applin's central concepts in her discussion is "antagonism," and it is clear from all the essays collected in this section of the volume, that institutions are more than mere repositories for conventional wisdom and attitudes. Instead, the institutions of British art are mobile, changeable sets of cultural practice in which key changes in the constitution of both the art world and the wider culture are aired and decided upon, not by individuals as much as by and through the fluidity and capacity to change and morph of the institutions themselves. Art schools, museums, national

institutions like the Royal Academy or the National Gallery, the structures in which imagery is described and recirculated, all these crucial aspects of the way in which art works and takes part in the wider culture are examined and opened for consideration in this section.

The second thematic section of the book is concerned with "Nationhood." Five essays consider how this central question can be understood within selected moments of the history of British art. The first essay, by Cynthia Roman, deals with "Art and Nation in Eighteenth-Century Britain." Building on a vivid tradition of scholarship in this area, Roman demonstrates that in this period "narratives about fine art and those about national identity were inextricably intertwined as the visual arts both reflected and mediated constructions of nationhood." Discussing artists including James Barry, Benjamin West, and John Singleton Copley, as well as the print-seller John Boydell, Roman traces this intertwining through the Royal Academy and shows how it is manifested in portraiture as well as history painting, and in the accessible medium of prints as well as in grand manner painting on the Academy's walls. "International Exhibitions: Linking Culture, Commerce, and Nation" by Julie Codell takes up a nineteenth-century subject, looking at international exhibitions around 1851. Drawing on ideas from the study of cultural geography, Codell considers the Great Exhibition of 1851 and other international exhibitions as maps that point to the imperial and colonial substructure of the societies of which they are a part. Analyzing the visual and material culture of these exhibitions, Codell traces the complication of national identities that emerged from the breaking of established boundaries between nations through the operations of art and commerce in this period. She shows that as art came to take up the role of expressing national pride at such events, it forced an increasingly permeable and open character on the nation and its rivals. In the following essay, Ben Highmore considers the nature of an international art form – Surrealism – once it crosses the Channel and takes root in a characteristically British soil. "Itinerant Surrealism: British Surrealism Either Side of the Second World War" allows him to evaluate the nature of nationality in art movements and the ways in which transformations and adaptations occur in a particular context. In "55° North 3° West: a Panorama from Scotland," Tom Normand looks at some of the consequences for identity of the fact that four nations inhabit Britain. "The fascinating geography of British art" stems in part from this foundational political and social reality. By focusing on the period after the Second World War, Normand is able to follow the fortunes of "Scottishness" in its complex relationship both to "Britishness" and to other nations and nationalisms. The 1987 Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art's exhibition "The Vigorous Imagination – New Scottish Art" is seen as an exemplary and telling moment in this history, prompting Normand to look back into the nineteenth century to the career of the artist David Wilkie for the formation of modern Scottish artistic identity, before returning to the contemporary in order to trace the working out of that identity in the context of a new internationalism. Normand finds in the Scottish example a way that internationalism and national

tropes continue to mix and refer in the twenty-first century. The final essay in the “Nationhood” section, Dorothy Rowe’s “Retrieving, Remapping, and Rewriting Histories of British Art: Lubaina Himid’s *Revenge*,” considers the way contemporary black British artists have been involved in “the re-visualization of the borders of nationalism, identity and nationhood in British art.” Rowe’s analysis of Himid’s work allows her to make a strong and politically conscious case for attention to “the visual and aesthetic legacies of artworks produced by black and Asian women artists who have been active in Britain since the 1980s but whose contributions to the re-mapping of British art’s histories during the last 30 years are still being realized,” so that the structures and institutions of “British art,” its meanings and range, are questioned and reformulated as they are, from other perspectives, in the essays by Cheetham, Wolff, and others in the collection. Nationhood, identity, and meaning are all raised and explored in this section of the book’s essays.

One of the most influential and important artistic genres to have flourished in the art of the British Isles is landscape, and this forms the subject that the five essays in the third section of the volume all, from diverse positions, address. The section opens with a wide-ranging survey and consideration of definitions by Anne Helmreich, which orientates the reader and touches on several of the topics raised in subsequent essays. Michael Charlesworth in “Theories of the Picturesque” considers one of the most important moments in the formation of the genre. Dealing with the eighteenth-century theorists William Gilpin and Richard Payne Knight, Charlesworth sets out the character of the picturesque and relates it to those of the beautiful and the sublime. Charlesworth traces the popularity of the concept through its literary and theoretical manifestations and into the visual, including architecture and landscape gardening. An extended analysis of the work of John Constable takes the story into painting and then to Ruskin’s use of the idea. Concluding with a look at the twenty-first century relevance of the term, Charlesworth is able to assess the importance of the picturesque for any understanding of British visual and literary culture since the eighteenth century. Two very different and complementary considerations of landscape art across the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries follow. Tom Williamson offers a precise, historical, and social study of the conditions in which landscape imagery of the period was nurtured and in which it served its function in the culture as a whole. Williamson places a salutary emphasis on the need to understand these aspects of artistic production and on the value and importance of studies of the physical realities of the “real” landscape and of how its meanings are worked into and upon in the realm of visual representation. Sam Smiles, meanwhile, offers a definition of landscape and a consideration of it in the period based on scrupulous and precise attention to four examples. Intended to be exemplary and telling, rather than to exhaust the subject, Smiles’ choices – Stubbs, Turner, Constable, and Palmer – are revealed as significant engagements with British culture at a time of exceptionally intense social and economic transformation. Taken together, these three essays, together with that by Helmreich, all of which consider aspects

of the work of Constable among other elements in the period, allow a faceted and informative set of perspectives on a central moment for the study of British art and its meanings. To close the section, Dana Arnold's fifth essay extends the study of landscape in this period by considering the relationship between the Phoenix Park in Dublin and building and landscape design in London. Drawing on a number of theoretical perspectives, and presenting some detailed historical material about the making of the park, Arnold's essay acts as a bridge as well to the section on nationhood and the making of national visual cultures.

The final section is called "Men and Women" and deals in four essays about gender from the Elizabethan Miniature to Edwardian genre painting. Dympna Callaghan considers questions of representation, identity, and ideology in the Elizabethan genre of portrait miniatures, concluding that it "epitomizes both the ideological and technical problems" posed at the time. Two essays deal with the eighteenth century. Kate Retford provides a focus and revealing analyses of the representation of female chastity in eighteenth-century portraiture, while, in a matching pair to Retford's essay, Whitney Davis considers the painting of men and offers a sophisticated and nuanced reading of the epistemological issues at stake in this moment. Finally, Pamela Fletcher examines Victorian and Edwardian painting in order to show how gender could provide narratives that organized and structured knowledge for the audience, and how the investigation of such visual practices can lead us into an understanding of both the pleasures and oppositional character of representations of this sort.

Part 2



General

The “Englishness” of English Art Theory¹

Mark A. Cheetham

This article examines the intertwining of art theory, national identity, and art in England from the early eighteenth century to the present. We are used to the conjunction of art and nationality because generations of artists, art historians, and the public have typically defined art by its national origin. Students study French and Italian and Dutch art; museums habitually display works by national school or have the mandate to exhibit the art of their nation.² While art historians commonly think of art production in terms of national schools, art *theory* is usually held to transcend accidental particulars. To address the “Englishness of English Art Theory” seems odd because the philosophical bent of art theory (aesthetics) urges us to abjure the specifics of place, gender, race, and nation.³ A central argument in this essay is that art theory and art practice are not so different. To assume that art is connected to place while theory remains unmoored is to deny the palpable interconnectedness of theory and practice in the English tradition. The discipline of art history, the practices of art theory and criticism, and public museums evolved in Britain and Europe in the late eighteenth century together and in concert with discourses of nationhood, nationalism, and patriotism.⁴ Habituated to this rubric, however, today we easily forget that thinking through the frame of nations is more than an innocent expedient. Characterization by nationality can perpetuate stereotypes about the supposed basis of artistic production. Thus English art is expected to be more than art made and displayed in England. It is supposed to include a defining measure of “Englishness” or perhaps “Britishness,” as at Tate Britain.⁵ Is there a self-consciously English type of art theory? The 300th anniversary in 2007 of the Acts of Union that included Scotland in a United Kingdom of Great Britain, with its concomitant assertions of English and other regional nationalisms, is a timely occasion for an assessment of the Englishness of English art theory.⁶

The categories of nation and nationality may seem natural. Portraits of monarchs seek to display the might and virtues of their country through the ruler. Landscape views published by Constable and Turner reflect and demarcate English scenery.⁷ Henry Moore's representations of life in the London underground during the Second World War are memorable because they convey the Churchillian will of a people under siege. Nikolaus Pevsner's famous study *The Englishness of English Art* (1956) is the central example in the history of English art of the widespread urge to deploy nationality as an explanation for the proclivities of artists. Pevsner wrote in the aftermath of the Second World War. As a German émigré, he relied on (while seeking to dispel) German models of national style and race.⁸ His positive view of English art as determined largely by climate and geography demonstrates that discourses of aesthetic nationality are often prompted by concerns beyond the realms of art.⁹ These discourses are common but by no means inevitable. The same is paradigmatically the case with art theory, but because this category normally seeks to transcend specifics in search of the general rule, we must think of theory more pragmatically to measure its embeddedness in the specificities of history and culture. In offering a way to think about the place of art theory in England – whether geographically, in relation to the history of art, or in terms of nationality – we should not assume, however, that there is something called “Englishness” or any other national essence of an immutable, Platonic sort awaiting discovery. The definition of “nation” changes, and England is no different from many other countries in its preoccupation with self-definition in these terms. On the other hand, for centuries and in many different guises, people continue to believe in just this sort of essence. The history of its attractions should not be dismissed without examination.

What difference might it make for a particular speculative view on the visual arts to be deemed “English”? Received opinion suggests that this is an unpromising line of inquiry on a number of counts. First, it is notoriously difficult to disentangle the competing claims to national identity in the United Kingdom today, let alone over the 300 years during which English art theory can be said to exist. To speak of art theory written and having an effect in England is unproblematic. But when we modify art theory with the adjective “English” and imply a specific quality, “Englishness,” what do we say about Edmund Burke (Irish), David Hume (a Scot), James McNeill Whistler (American), or Wyndham Lewis (who was born in Canada)? Englishness tends to mask other British identities, which is in itself a problem. Second, art theory – paradigmatically an intellectual category – is not supposed to sit well in Britain thanks to a purportedly innate aversion to speculation. George Orwell wrote “the English are not intellectual. They have a horror of abstract thought, they feel no need for any philosophy or systematic ‘world view’.”¹⁰ We find self-fulfilling versions of this claim across the considerable range of studies of Englishness, from Kate Fox's penetrating and hilarious *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour* (2004)¹¹ to the more scholarly study by Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain*

(2006).¹² For the most part, what Fox calls "The Importance of Not Being Ernest Rule"¹³ is regarded as a positive quality of Englishness, as is a supposedly anti-rationalist (and anti-theoretical) emphasis on empiricism as the systematic application of innate common sense. Acclaimed biographer and novelist Peter Ackroyd asserts approvingly in *Albion: the Origins of the English Imagination* that the "native aptitude has ... led to a disaffection from, or dissatisfaction with, all abstract speculation."¹⁴ Illustrating David Simpson's claim that in England, "the vigilance against theory has hardly let up since at least the 1650s,"¹⁵ the group Art & Language provided a more colorful, if hyperbolic, instance of the myth in 1976 with the claim that "the French Pox [semiotics] stands in opposition to Anglo-Saxon Empiricism."¹⁶ If one were to credit such stereotypes, in England and Britain, artwriting¹⁷ of a theoretical sort would not exist, appear only as something imported, foreign, and thus suspect, or it would be found under another description.

In England, theory is usually seen as what other people misguidedly do, especially the French and the Germans. Such stereotypes exaggerate accurate observations. If we are to test what Collini labels the "absence" thesis – in this context, that the English do not favor or produce art theory because of its intellectualism – we must attend to at least three paradoxes. First, as noted, art theory is typically held to strive for the universal, to be above the vagaries of nationality. Second, the English are construed as a practical lot, not prone to theory in art or any other realm. Most paradoxically of all, there is an abundance of English art theory that is self-characterized by qualities of "Englishness." To relieve these conundrums, it is important to ask in general whether English traditions of artwriting (in ways analogous to English art) have inappropriately been judged according to "imported" criteria, whether of German idealist aesthetics or French pictorial modernism. Not surprisingly, then, when a non-systematic or common-sensical approach is found in the art historical writing of a German national, for example, it is the occasion for praise. Michael Kitson praised Pevsner's *Englishness of English Art* in such terms, concluding his lengthy review of the book in 1956 as follows:

happily, [Pevsner] is not consistent in his approach, and when he is off his guard, so to speak, he does in fact look first at works of art and seems only to dash in his theme as an afterthought ... when he gave the Reith Lectures, art history, like cheerfulness, would keep breaking in.¹⁸

Just as an historically nuanced understanding of English modernism in the visual arts must augment the paradigms of Continental modernism brought so forcefully to bear by Roger Fry in the early twentieth century to find English art wanting,¹⁹ for example, so too we must recast the category of art theory and abandon the restrictive paradigms of pure thinkers such as Kant.²⁰ Instead of a survey of the English corpus,²¹ what follows provides an account of the claims and tangles of nationality, an examination of issues that are presented as the "Englishness" of this

strain of art theory and which are integral to its various accents. Canvassing such an extensive chronology tempts one to find continuity where there is little, to seem to inscribe a stable “Englishness” merely by discussing attempts to find it. While this quality remains elusive, attempts to promote one or another version of a national identity have nonetheless motivated English art theory from its inception to the present.

It is often claimed – usually with derogatory overtones – that art in England has a particularly language-oriented and literary bent.²² Ronald Paulson has argued that the pervasive English iconoclasm that began in the late seventeenth century is nothing less than the substitution of words for images.²³ John Barrell has vividly described the ostensible difficulty stemming from the propinquity of the visual arts and text in England: for Roger Fry in the early twentieth century, Barrell reports for example, “the English national character was ... defined by that very preoccupation with painting as narrative, as rhetorical, the lack of which had defined it 200 years before.” Barrell elaborates: “The Englishness of English art was characterized ... as a quality distinctive only by its inadequacy.”²⁴ A corollary argument would find English art theory wanting because of its pollution by visual practice. Inverting the commonplace notion that English art is too literary, supplies us with a positive insight about English theory and visual production: in each category, we must see the other pole, that is, read the theory in the pictures and see the images in the text. As I will show, this doubleness has been a feature of English art and artwriting for centuries. Importantly, it continues to figure in contemporary art and perhaps now finds more favor in our less formal, less modernist times. Most of the speculation on the visual arts in England has indeed come from painters: early on, from Jonathan Richardson, William Hogarth, Joshua Reynolds, William Blake, and Henry Fuseli. In the nineteenth and twentieth, we can also think of John Ruskin, Roger Fry, and Herbert Read, though they were amateur artists. As we will see, Wyndham Lewis was a prolific theorist and novelist as well as the founder of Vorticism. In our own time, we can point to Victor Burgin as well as to *Art & Language*, whose very name connects elements that should not be held apart artificially when we discuss the Englishness of English art theory.

Can we move so easily between art and art theory? Yes, because while there are distinctions to be made, there is no fundamental transition to accomplish: to proceed as if there is an ontological divide is to overestimate the viscosity of the visual arts and to assume that theory must be exclusively textual. We can most fruitfully understand the necessary interconnectedness of English art theory and practice by using two categories that underline the impossibility of adequately maintaining separation, autonomy, or purity in disciplinary protocols: W. J. T. Mitchell’s terms “metapicture” and “imagetext.” As David Carrier did by compressing two independent terms in his coinage “artwriting,” Mitchell’s terms refuse to mind the gap conventionally held open between art and its theories. “The power of the metapicture,” he argues, “is to make visible the impossibility of separating theory from practice, to give theory a body and visible shape that it



FIG. 1.1 William Hogarth, *The Painter and his Pug*, 1745. Oil on canvas; support: 900×699 mm frame: 1080×875×78 mm painting.
 Source: © Tate, London 2011.

often wants to deny, to reveal theory as representation. The power of the imagetext is to reveal the inescapable heterogeneity of representation...”²⁵ Because pictures can be theoretical in terms that are neither exclusively visual nor textual but a hybrid of these modes, and because in England especially, artwriters have frequently also been visual artists, we may best explore the Englishness of English art theory with reference to metapictures and their associated imagetexts. Of the four images I have selected, only two literally make words visible: Sir Joshua Reynolds’ personification of “Theory” in the London Royal Academy of 1780 and William Hogarth’s *The Painter and his Pug*, 1745 (Fig. 1.1). The other two imply the textual while articulating their art theories: Gilbert & George’s *The Nature of Our Looking*, 1970 and Yinka Shonibare’s *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews without their Heads* from 1998 (Fig. 1.2).

Art theory is the apperception of what one does and should do as an artist, historian of art, or viewer. It requires critical distance but not necessarily the disinterestedness sought by Lord Shaftesbury, Immanuel Kant, or Roger Fry.



FIG. 1.2 Yinka Shonibare, MBE, *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews without their Heads*, 1998. Wax-print cotton costumes on mannequins, dog mannequin, painted metal bench, rifle 165×635×254 cm with plinth.

Source: © Yinka Shonibare, MBE. Courtesy the artist and National Gallery of Canada, photo © National Gallery of Canada.

With etymological roots in the Greek verb *theorin*, to contemplate, and the noun *theoria*, which describes a group of authoritative judges in a civic arena, art theory can be both an internalized set of principles or judgments of taste and an external perspective marked in texts, images, and institutional protocols. Visitors to the Courtauld Galleries in London, for instance – now housed in Sir William Chambers’ (1723–1796) magnificent Somerset House (1780) on the Strand, and in which the Royal Academy of Arts found an appropriately grand home in 1780 – typically marvel at the architecture, the site, and at the rich painting collection on display. They can be forgiven for not looking up at the ceilings. But doing so in the first room – the former library of the Royal Academy – they will see that “Theory” is a young woman in vaguely ancient dress floating in the clouds. As she was for the students and academicians of Reynolds’ time, theory is a beacon here, yet her intent gaze does not engage with mere mortals. A loosely held scroll proclaims the lesson we are to learn: “Theory is the knowledge of

what is truly Nature."²⁶ This embodiment of Theory was originally painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792), the first president of the Royal Academy and one of Europe's most influential artists and art theorists. His vision of theory's role purposefully framed the approach to art making that he so vividly expounded in one of the pivotal theoretical tracts in the history of art theory, his 15 lectures to graduating students, delivered from 1769 until 1790, the *Discourses*. "What is truly nature," we gather from our guide's purposeful looking, is a truth elevated like Theory herself. Yet we also learn from Reynolds that such theoretical reference points are more down to earth in ways that he and others saw as properly English. His approach was empirical and practical. What he famously called the "great style" or "grand manner" in art was:

not to be sought in the heavens, but upon the earth ... the power of discovering what is deformed in nature ... what is particular and uncommon, can be acquired only by experience; and the whole beauty and grandeur of the art consists ... in being able to get above all singular forms, local customs, particularities, and details of every kind.²⁷

In this way, he believed, "the honorable distinction of an English School" could be achieved.²⁸

Following the lead of his close friend the politician and, in his youth, art theorist Edmund Burke,²⁹ Reynolds increasingly opposed what he construed as the typically French pattern of beginning with first principles, with Reason.³⁰ In an argument that is motivated by political beliefs more than by those strictly pertaining to the art world, Burke and Reynolds in effect blamed the degeneration of the French Revolution into social chaos on the over-application of theory proceeding from the first principles of reason. To be against theory in the abstract, *a priori* sense was at this time to be anti-French, pro-English.³¹ As Burke mused:

What is the use of discussing a man's abstract right to food or to medicine? The question is upon the method of procuring and administering them. In that deliberation I shall always advise to call in the aid of the farmer and the physician, rather than the professor of metaphysics.³²

Perry Anderson claims that Burke's arguments took and lasted so well because they were amenable to the preservation of the British class system: "The British bourgeoisie had learnt to fear the meaning of 'general ideas' during the French Revolution: after Burke, it never forgot the lesson."³³ The British novelist Julian Barnes demonstrates that a light take on this view of theory endures: "A British Euro-joke tells of a meeting of officials from various countries who listen to a British proposal, nodding sagely at its numerous benefits; the French delegate stays silent until the end, then taps his pencil and remarks, 'I can see that it will work in practice. But will it work in theory?'"³⁴ What is also clear from this moment of levity is that theory is usually construed as foreign by the English, as

an import and a useless or deleterious supplement. This was true for Hogarth and became so to some extent for the more urbane Reynolds.

It may appear from Reynolds' pronouncements that the English should simply abjure general speculation about art as in affairs of state – the unwritten British constitution was a constant reference point for Burke and remains so in this context for writers today.³⁵ Ironically, too, it was in part the British constitution that led to the positive view of the English held by Voltaire and Montesquieu in particular, views that in turn led to a reactionary form of French nationalism against which English nationalism came to be defined in the period of the French Revolution.³⁶ What he and others posit, however, is in fact a different sort of speculation about art, a small “t” theory based on empirical observation and pragmatism. Extending the position of Jonathan Richardson that painters must be highly educated and articulate, not only does Reynolds insist on the artist's expertise over that of the philosopher, “that one short essay written by a Painter, will contribute more to advance the theory of our art, than a thousand volumes such as we sometimes see” (*Discourse XIV*, 320). He also held that it “has been much the object of these Discourses” to prevent any young artist from being “seduced from the right path, by following, what ... he may think [is] the light of Reason” (*Discourse XV*, 323). Again, reason was supposed by Reynolds and Burke to contrast sharply with English tradition and empiricism, the latter based on John Locke (1632–1704) especially. The English agronomist Arthur Young (1741–1820) linked theory and nationality as bluntly as anyone:

We know that English practice is good – we know that French Theory is bad. What inducement have we, therefore, to listen to your speculations, that condemn what all England feels to be good and approve what all France experiences to be mischievous?³⁷

Like Shaftesbury, Richardson, and most of the artwriters in England before him, Reynolds' theories were fundamentally cosmopolitan or universalist in the sense that they looked to a transcendent form of what Barrell calls “civic humanism” to ground the moral and political importance of the arts. Typically, however, this rubric was modeled on the perceived uniqueness of the English polity. Structured by class to mirror this society, the doors of taste were open only to those with breeding if not an aristocratic birthright. In his earlier *Discourses*, Reynolds was more patriotic than nationalistic.³⁸ His institutional art theory, his mandate to establish a noteworthy English School through the auspices of the Royal Academy, however, ultimately goes beyond the expected international comparisons and competitions to posit a theory of distinctly English art practice. Burke sketched the English nature of Reynolds' art theory, claiming in his obituary of the painter that “he possessed the Theory as perfectly as the Practice of his Art. To be such a painter, he was [also] a profound and penetrating Philosopher.”³⁹

The earliest writings on the visual arts in England were compendia of practicing artists, lists and brief commentaries modeled explicitly on French and Italian

templates. Bainbrigg Buckeridge's *An Essay Towards an English School of Painting*, 1706,⁴⁰ is appended to a translation of Roger de Piles's *Art of Painting*,⁴¹ which was itself written in the Vasarian mold of artists' lives. National score keeping was a prime motivation for this and similar publications. To keep up with the European nations in painting, Buckeridge claimed Anthony Van Dyke, for example, as native: what counted as Englishness was the place of employment. Hogarth insisted on a more genealogically laden English patrimony for his work as an author and artist. In his famous *The Painter and his Pug*, 1745 (Fig. 1.1), the artist's self-portrait is a picture within a picture, one literally supported by the texts of Shakespeare, Milton, and Swift. Hogarth's chosen patrimony is textual and to him, English, but in this portrait, he is careful to make the formal principle of all his work – the serpentine line of beauty that he featured in his 1753 treatise *The Analysis of Beauty* – both visible and remarkably tactile. As palpable as the paints it replaces on Hogarth's prominent palette and like the painter's dog, Trump, the line of beauty even casts a shadow. Constant in Hogarth's prolific career as a painter, engraver, and writer was the aim to provide a vernacular art theory that was inseparable from the genre of its presentation. *The Analysis of Beauty* was published after he was well established as a printmaker and painter of modern moral scenes. But it was not a belated justification of practice or in this sense an attempt to rival the intellectualism of the Continent. Hogarth composed the text over a long period; more importantly, he aimed to be "systematical, but at the same time familiar."⁴² His 1745 self-portrait, as an imagetext in Mitchell's sense, is familiar yet systematical.

Both the 1745 self-portrait and the *Analysis* envision a practical theory of Englishness. Hogarth makes the indigenoussness of English genius a virtue. Neither is jingoistic in the overt manner of his *O the Roast Beef of Old England* ("The Gate of Calais") of 1748, where the artist, shown sketching the gate in the left middle ground, unleashes a string of nationalistic clichés about the envy of England's main exports, beef and liberty, on the part of the underfed French Papists and even their Scots ally in the foreground. It appears that England should not require the panoply of fashionable French imports mocked, for example, in Louis Philippe Boitard's 1757 etching *The Imports of Great Britain from France*, which the French artist dedicated to the Anti-Gallacian Society in Britain. Unseemly dependence on the Continent in art and art theory was a steady theme at this time. Nathaniel Hone scandalized the Royal Academy in 1775 with his *Sketch for "The Conjuror"*, now at Tate Britain, which shows Reynolds making "new" works appear from old master drawings with the help of a mahlstick wielded as a magic wand. Reynolds and the Royal Academy are again the target in James Gillray's mordant print *Titianus Redivivus; – or – the Seven-Wise-Men Consulting the New Venetian Oracle* of 1797, which shows among myriad other details the deceased Reynolds rising from the grave to ponder what was purportedly a manual containing the lost secret of Titian's painting techniques. As a follower of Locke's epistemology, Hogarth insists instead on the precedence of the senses, especially the eye, and on the elaboration of this data by the mind in imagination. "The line of

grace,” as he also calls his female serpentine line, “by its twisting so many ways, may be said to inclose [sic] ... varied contents; and therefore all its variety cannot be expressed on paper ... without the assistance of the imagination” (Hogarth, [1753] 1997: 42). That Locke’s resonantly English name is invoked regularly in art contexts from his lifetime to Terry Atkinson of Art & Language in our own suggests both that there is indeed art theory in England and that its nationality is a point of pride.⁴³ Hogarth’s method is to look at and picture what is around him, vulgar and unsanctioned by proper taste as such details may be. For him, to see in a properly English way is to be empirical and pragmatic. He derides the supposed “disinterestedness” recommended by his compatriot and prolific artwriter Shaftesbury, a patrician virtue that accrues from class privilege and European travel, neither of which Hogarth enjoyed. Text and image are interwoven in *The Painter and his Pug* into that potent hybrid, the imagetext. If the authors paraded here through their books are exemplars of literary vision, so too both the quotidian and more lofty aspirations of seeing are evident in what is ultimately an exchange of glances between the artist and his beloved pet.

As we look at this work casually, the artist’s eyes engage us while Trump’s look across and below our line of sight. But if we notice a detail such as the absence of the artist’s hands, a suggestion perhaps that imagination or ideation must augment our senses, and therefore think of this as a picture about representation, we can envision how Hogarth made the painting by looking at himself in a mirror that occupied the place where the oval self-portrait sits on its supporting, English texts. Whether his dog was posed at the same time or another, Trump would have been looking at Hogarth. The image of the artist seeing his dog acknowledges and denies the untheorized looking that we attribute to Trump, who sees without the benefits of human imagination. For Hogarth, such details – observed and rendered practically – coalesce into a theory of art.

Landscape and nature are the most consistently theorized subjects in British writing on the visual arts. From Burke’s text on the sublime in 1757, through debates over the garden theory of Capability Brown (1716–1783), the picturesque as conceived by William Gilpin (1724–1804), Richard Payne Knight (1751–1824), and Uvedale Price (1747–1829), to John Ruskin’s championing of Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites as well as his famously litigated accusations about James McNeill Whistler’s (1834–1903) supposed technical inadequacies, it is the human accounting for nature that most animates reflection.⁴⁴ Another metapicture – *The Nature of Our Looking* by Gilbert & George (b.1943, 1942; 1970) – reveals the importance of the discourses of nation in this context. This and related works by Gilbert & George underline the contemporary relevance of nature, landscape, and the English Garden tradition to national identity and remind us that Englishness and its material instantiations are in part the products of memory, of a habitual return to themes and places associated with identity. We can only project history from our places in the present, which is exactly what we watch the “living sculptors” do. They show that there is no more mediated concept in the human repertoire than that of “nature.”⁴⁵ In their video and charcoal on paper

"sculpture" with the same provocative title, Gilbert & George use the double entendre on the concept of nature to direct attention both to the object and manner of our vision. Dressed in suits that mark them as country gents, those with the property and leisure to contemplate nature in a class-based, gendered, "picturesque" way prescribed for English gentlemen for centuries,⁴⁶ Gilbert and George sit or stand motionless in a well-tended "natural" setting. The caption to one of the charcoal works reads: "Here in the country's heart, where the grass is green, we stand very still and quiet." They are surrogate watchers. "Our" looking in the title initially refers to the two artists but then embraces the national collective. We watch them waiting to catch a glimpse of beauty, the picturesque – even Englishness – exactly where the station in life and national proclivities that they perform suggest that they will find it, in nature. These works underline the centrality of thinking about nature and executing landscapes, whether as an amateur or professional, in whatever medium comes to hand. Gilbert & George more or less traced their charcoal drawing from photographic negatives and then distressed the paper to make it look older. The results struck a chord with the public: "We stopped making them because people liked them too much," they report with feigned bemusement.⁴⁷ As crucial as making landscapes is, they acknowledge that human psychological response is the key to landscape. From Burke's sublime to Gilpin's tours of England's scenery to the disappointment Gilbert & George register here when nothing happens, we learn that landscape – like talk of the weather – is part of us, not nature.

Gilpin sought the uniquely English characteristics of his native landscape and elaborated his discoveries into a theory of looking. While national comparisons and rankings are an intellectual habit from the eighteenth century to the present, and while there is a practical dimension to his recommendation of English picturesque scenery, given the ongoing military conflicts between Britain and France that frequently made continental travel difficult, Gilpin's theory of appreciating and composing landscapes was motivated by his sense of Englishness. After a conventional nod to the qualities of various European trees for the composition of landscapes, for example, he extols the English oak: "The chestnut of Calabria is consecrated by adorning the foregrounds of Salvator Rosa. The elm, the ash, and the beech, have their respective beauties: but no tree in the forest is adapted to *all* the purposes of landscape, like the English oak." In general, he continues, "we find species of landscape, which no country, but England, can display in such perfection."⁴⁸

"Why should not subjects purely English be made the vehicle of General Landscape? – and when embodied by its highest principles ... become legitimate, and at the same time original and consequently classic art."⁴⁹ While this forceful statement dovetails with Gilpin's ideas, it was expressed by John Constable (1776–1837), a painter of great reputation usually construed as typically English in his empiricism.⁵⁰ Constable was much more of an art theorist than is generally recognized. Akin to that in Gilbert & George's *The Nature of our Looking*, though more positive, his sedulous gathering of visual details in his studies of clouds and

trees, for example, was purposeful, even theoretical. His scientific study of nature's components in their specifically English manifestations provided the elements of what he called a "Grand Theory" of landscape painting, a form that revealed the general and characteristic of England through the particular.⁵¹ As Ray Lambert has established in a revisionist study of the artist, Constable was familiar with the central strands of eighteenth-century British art theory – drawing from Archibald Alison (1757–1839) and Reynolds especially – and purposefully married the psychological and ultimately religious response to nature found in Alison's associationism with Reynolds' neoclassical pedagogy and aspirations for an English school.⁵² Paradoxically, a commitment to the Englishness of nature's characteristic phenomena allowed Constable to forge what he felt was a universal landscape art that achieved moral and institutional parity with history painting. Writing about Constable shortly after his death, C. R. Leslie underscored the painter's Englishness with a positive comparison to Hogarth:

They were both genuine Englishmen; warmly attached to the character and institutions of their country; alike quick in detecting cant and quackery, not only in religion and politics, but in taste and in the arts; and though they sometimes may have carried their John Bullism too far, they each deserved well of their country, as steady opponents to the influence of foreign vice, folly, and bad taste.⁵³

The ideology of Englishness is also strong and morally purposeful in the work of the most prolific English art theorist, John Ruskin (1819–1900). His art theory both supports and refutes the stereotype that English art theory is aberrant or somehow lacking in comparison with its Continental comparators. Stating the obvious without irony, Ruskin plays the "no theory please" card: on the "grand style" he writes in *Modern Painters*, "I do not intend ... to pursue the inquiry in a method ... laboriously systematic."⁵⁴ Yet the tome as a whole is organized by endless subdivision and begins with a section titled "Of General Principles." For Ruskin too, "Theoria" or the "Theoretic Faculty" stands in contrast to and above mere "aesthetics" because it can and must, through art such as Turner's, address general, theoretical issues: "Power," "Imitation," "Truth," "Beauty," and "Relation."⁵⁵ Herbert Read was not exaggerating when he claimed that "*Modern Painters* ... is a whole system of aesthetics arising out of and justifying the work of Turner."⁵⁶ While Ruskin by no means confined his speculations to English art or to nature and landscape, one of his fundamental arguments was that the explicitly national geography of an artist's birthplace rightly determined his visuality: "Whatever is to be truly great and affecting must have on it the strong stamp of the native land." He applied this dictum to his most favored painter, Turner. Recognizing that much of Turner's best work in landscape featured French, Swiss, or Italian scenery, Ruskin emphasized that the preponderance of his art depicts Britain. He then argues that "Turner's nationality" is the source of his "power": "no artist who has not this hold upon his own [landscapes] will ever get good out of any other."⁵⁷ Ruskin was motivated not only by patriotism – though he did

hold that Gainsborough was "the greatest colourist since Rubens" – but by what he called in the same context the purity of "English feeling."⁵⁸ Whether he is discussing the merits of Turner or defending the Pre-Raphaelites' knowledge of nature, then, Ruskin believed in the palpability of Englishness. For him, the nature of our looking was always English.

Ruskin's assertion of an Englishness grounded in locale was nostalgic during the years of the geographical expansion of the Empire under Queen Victoria. For him, modernism and its international reach was a nightmare to be resisted through the traditions of Englishness. The most visually radical of English art movements – Vorticism – would appear to be typically avant-garde in its internationalism and its reflex to dismiss the past, especially the Victorian past. Yet even Vorticism featured the English landscape⁵⁹ and set its speculative agenda in terms of the rhetoric of Englishness, whose qualities would now be seen to be quintessentially modern. The radical periodical *Blast* – edited by the writer and painter Wyndham Lewis (1882–1957) and appearing only in June, 1914 and July, 1915 – is a central document in the history of English art theory as well as in the contested relationship between modernism and modernity in the UK. The manifesto format of *Blast* is a familiar early twentieth-century vehicle in which to present normative propositions. Lewis uses the purported inferiority of the English in theoretical exploits as a foil; the extent to which his theories are motivated by an angry search for Englishness deserves emphasis. Writing in the ultra-nationalistic context of the First World War, he holds out hope that the Germans and other foreigners will "no longer be able to call [the English] 'The unphilosophic race'."⁶⁰ "We hear from America and the Continent all sorts of disagreeable things about England: 'the unmusical, anti-artistic, unphilosophical country'," he wrote in *Blast 1*, adding "We quite agree."⁶¹ Lewis believed in qualities and circumstances that are "fundamentally English," citing the sea as the main influence.⁶² For him, England's relative geographical and cultural isolation led to a Victorian backwardness that was a strength in his quest for renewal, because for him change could only come from the peripheries, from the artist as an "enemy," as he dubbed himself and a subsequent periodical. Vorticism – the term coined by Lewis' collaborator Ezra Pound – was the plastic manifestation of coming to terms with modern life in England. Lewis, forever embroiled in the rhetoric of nation, tried to show "the way in which the English VORTICISTS differ from the French, German or Italian painters of kindred groups."⁶³ So too his limited success as an avant-gardist – recognition garnered more as a matter of novelty than of profound public understanding – was measured in nationalist terms and those of the supposedly indigenous resistance to theory. Reviewing a show in 1915 in which Lewis' painting *The Crowd* (1914–1915) hung, a critic complained that these "pictures are not pictures so much as theories in paint. In fact ... we can only call them Prussian in their spirit. These [English] painters seem to execute a kind of goose step, where other painters are content to walk more or less naturally."⁶⁴

In 1931, Herbert Read published *The Meaning of Art*, a book expansive in its categories and sympathies that sought to counter the predominantly Francophile,

formalist reading of art and its goals promoted in England by Roger Fry and Clive Bell especially. Many of Read's writings from the 1930s mark an early point in his lifelong attempt to articulate the virtues of a specifically English art and art theory. Given his extensive knowledge of world art and his European sympathies, one could be forgiven for taking Read's subsequent disclaimer about essential Englishness at face value. Speaking about the success of British sculptors in the 1950s – Chadwick, Butler, Moore – he asked “can we say they possess some common quality – something that is distinctively English? ... I do not think so. One must realize that art is now essentially international.”⁶⁵ While Read was rarely parochial in his promotion of English artists such as Henry Moore, he clearly did work with a sense of Englishness typical of his time and place. Not unlike Pevsner, his belief system and aesthetic was at root inflected by determinants both of race and environment. “The mind has its milieu,” he wrote in the catalogue for *Fifty Years of British Art*, seen in Oslo and Copenhagen in 1956. In a telling, if unusual, combination of native, Lockean empiricism and environmental determinism, he elaborated: “which in this case is English; and nothing is in the mind that was not first in the senses.” In “*English Art*,” first published in 1933 and reprinted as a chapter in *The Philosophy of Modern Art* in 1952, he relates his long search for works of art that “speak ... English to us.”⁶⁶ Here and throughout what Kevin Davey calls “the story of Englishness Read told for half a century,”⁶⁷ his nationalist identity theory builds on Wilhelm Worringer's – with whom Read maintained a close friendship and extensive correspondence – famous delineation of southern and northern peoples' aesthetic proclivities in *Abstraction and Empathy* (1908), and John Ruskin's machinations on English exceptionalism.⁶⁸ From the time he developed an art theory independent from the Francophilia of Fry, through his management of the essentializing national displays of the 1951 Festival of Britain and English representation at the Venice Biennale in 1952 and including his last pronouncements on art in 1968, Read's accent in the intra-national art world was unapologetically English.

Is English art theory still motivated by the search for national identity and by this species of nationalism? In the register of nostalgia – critic and publisher Peter Fuller's conservative rehabilitation of Ruskin in *Theoria: Art, and the Absence of Grace* (1988), for example – the answer is yes, as it is again in the realm of cliché such as the yBa's (Young British Artists) posed anti-intellectualism in the 1990s. More significant, however, is the ongoing redefinition of English and British identity and national belonging in art theory that engages with the conditions of post-coloniality, race, and urbanism. A concluding look at the work of two contemporary British figures, Yinka Shonibare (b. 1962) and Rasheed Araeen (b. 1935) – the first more an artist than a writer, the latter more a writer than an artist, but both developing a significant body of theory through all their work – serves as a guide to this territory.

With an insistence on the complexities of place and wicked humor, Yinka Shonibare's work resists the worn notion that the visual is a universal language. Shonibare turns cultural stereotypes to the business of critique. In *Reverend on Ice*

(2005) and *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews without their Heads* (1998, Fig. 1.2), he recalls icons of cosmopolitan enlightenment and "Britishness": *The Reverend Robert Walker Skating on Doddingston Loch* of c. 1795, usually attributed to the Scot Sir Henry Raeburn (1756–1823), and Thomas Gainsborough's equally famous conversation piece *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* of 1750. The signature headlessness of Shonibare's sculptural allusions makes us question the existence of Africanness, Britishness, or any other reductive national or racial essence. Where Raeburn's protagonist playfully performs the inscription of form and reason in a manner calculated to flatter the Scottish (such elegant maneuvers are not easy), Shonibare's sculpture has no conventionally recognizable identity. Because reason and sight are lodged in the head, we ask who these faceless, exotically dressed brown people are who usurp the station of Gainsborough's imperious landowners? Where Gainsborough's *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* commanded their property with a proprietary gaze, Shonibare demands that we, the contemporary spectators, constitute all meanings by looking at them.

Born in London, raised in Nigeria, and living since his student days in the UK, Shonibare claims to be a citizen of the world. But the batik he buys for his sculptures in London's street markets only has the *look* of exotic authenticity. These fabrics, originally Indonesian, have since the nineteenth century been simulated in the Netherlands and England, then exported to West Africa, where in the 1970s, "progressive Afrocentric political movements" made these bold textiles their own.⁶⁹ As the artist says about these materials but with wider implication, "at the shop in Brixton Market, they are never quite sure of the origins."⁷⁰ Like batik, Shonibare is, in his own words, a "post-colonial hybrid." In his usual, ironic way, he elaborates: "I watch the same news as everybody else ... I'm a citizen of the world."⁷¹ Yet his work insists on the irreducible complexities of place and on his nuanced sense of cultural translation. If one doubts that Shonibare's design is to theorize visually the cosmopolitanism identity of his city, London, *Global Underground Map* of 2006, should be convincing. He has cleverly applied the famous colors of the London underground lines to the 1974 Peters projection of the world, suggesting the flow of peoples to and from the metropolis.⁷²

Shonibare's self-descriptions are multiple. He sees himself as working out of art history and also taking a place in it by forging an identifiable style. He comments on being English or British but steps back, too, claiming that his work is about the politics of representation. In London art school in the 1980s, he was encouraged to make work about his African heritage. His response: why would he know any more about that than a typical white English student would know about the clichés of Englishness, such as Morris dancing? "I've never been to an African village," he reports.⁷³ His point is about race, authenticity, and perceived belonging: these students would never be pushed to explore an essentialist heritage. Shonibare's photo series *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* (1998) analyzes the representation of race and identity through the history of art. Casting himself as the dandy in this sequence, he and a group of actors constructed a series of *Tableaux vivante* in a rented English stately home. Each of the five scenes presents

a fantasy of opulence and indulgence for the central character. The dandy rises late, attended by a fawning staff. By afternoon, he is the impeccably dressed center of attention in his library. The dandy seems to dictate a letter, encouraged and supported not only by his many friends, advisors, and servants, but by his impeccable heritage, underwritten by the worthies looking on in the form of art objects.

It is in this the second photo from the *Diary* that Shonibare comes closest to his acknowledged art historical inspiration for this series, Hogarth's *The Rake's Progress* from 1735. What is most significant about this affiliation is not to be read in detailed parallels or discrepancies between the two series. A dandy is not exactly a rake, and Shonibare substitutes a Victorian setting and allusions for Hogarth's mid-eighteenth-century London. Nonetheless, both offer moral tales. Hogarth's protagonist, "Rakewell," is similarly surrounded by those who would help him spend his fortune: a gardener, musician, dancing master, and jockey. The painting over his shoulder – depicting the Judgement of Paris – announces the theme of life choices, in this case between pleasure (Venus) and wisdom (Minerva/Diana). The flanking portraits of roosters may buttress the classical allusion with a vernacular reference to cock fighting, whose main purpose is gambling. We can find other analogies and differences internal to both images. Most important, however, is Shonibare's grand genuflection to Hogarth, that most outspokenly and stereotypically English of artists. Demonstrating the cumulative nature of Englishness in art and speculation over three centuries, Shonibare recalls Hogarth from the perspective of a simulacrum of the nineteenth century constructed in the present.

In Hogarth's art as in his time and place, racial "others" were stock figures, usually servants, exotics, or miscreants. Shonibare updates these stereotypes. He knows that when blacks are rich and famous in the UK these days, they are often sports stars who not infrequently flaunt their wealth in ways that are not seen as aristocratic. In *Diary of a Victorian Dandy*, Shonibare steps back to the apex of empire and dares us *not* to see him as typically English (or British). He challenges us to see him as out of place, as somehow an "extra" in the excess he presents. In the final image, for example, set at 3 a.m., the dandy has chosen Venus and pleasure over his learned pursuits, a lifestyle out of keeping with the clichéd moral rectitude of Victorian Britain. The mid-eighteenth-century French morality picture over the bed acts as a commentary to the scene. In part, Shonibare is simply playing the sybarite, a role not unknown to artists, dandies, and even sports heroes. But the purposefully Victorian setting in this series has a more local set of meanings and references, ones that can lead to a further understanding of his placement in contemporary British society and his reflections on empire.

It is hard not to notice the letters that Shonibare records in his biography and in the form of his name he uses as standard: MBE, or Member of the British Empire, an honor that he received in 2004. As a self-proclaimed post-colonial hybrid, this designation is deliciously ironic. The British Government's official website explains that the MBE is "Awarded for achievement or service in and to the community of a responsible kind which is outstanding in its field; or very local

'hands-on' service which stands out as an example to others. In both cases awards illuminate areas of dedicated service which merit public recognition." Shonibare, the exception among a long list of mostly military and sports figures, was cited for "services to art."⁷⁴ In significant measure, then, Shonibare's *Diary* records his ironical but later actual placement at the centre of contemporary British society.

Shonibare phrases issues of identity and belonging in jocular terms. "If you are a black artist who chooses not to make work about being black, that's cool, that's fine," he asserts, "you will be described as the black artist who doesn't make work about being black."⁷⁵ Rasheed Araeen elaborates this logic of difference: an artist or thinker who is racially and culturally "other" and who has moved to or was born in the UK, is "not defined or recognized by what [s/he] does in art, one's position as an artist is predetermined by these differences."⁷⁶ Araeen systematically examines the theoretical dimensions of racism and postcoloniality in Britain, issues that have been as central to art theoretical concerns in Britain and elsewhere since the 1980s as the feminist movement that began decades earlier was in the "new art history."⁷⁷ In both cases, too, fundamental questions and priorities in these domains remain unresolved and thus act as motivators for speculation, art education, production, and institutional display. Araeen provided a compelling manifesto for change in the way we think about art in the context of a review in 2000 of the accomplishments of *Third Text*, the academic journal that he founded in 1987 "to explore, expose and analyse what has been excluded and repressed by institutional power in the art world."⁷⁸ In company with Salman Rushdie and others, Araeen sees institutional racism in Britain as a consequence and festering symptom of "The New Empire in Britain,"⁷⁹ that is, the fact that the practices of Britain's colonial "past" were never abandoned or corrected but simply brought back to the mother land. Calling for solutions specific to the visual arts, Araeen is especially critical of what he sees as the misapplication of postcolonial theory based in literary and cultural studies by prominent figures such as Edward Said, Stuart Hall, and Homi Bhabha and of official multiculturalism in the UK since the 1980s. "The struggle [for equality and access] has been hijacked," Araeen writes. "With the success of the young non-white artists, writers, and curators, from the metropolis as well as from the Third World, legitimized with the use of postcolonial cultural theory, the system has now built a thick wall of multiculturalism around itself." Multiculturalism in this view "is based on a separation of the dominant majority culture from the cultures of the minority population," forcing the minority perpetually to identify itself as "other" and therefore as a mere "subcategory or supplement to the dominant culture."⁸⁰ Araeen's art theory projects nothing less than a complete overhaul of art production, display, and reception, one that moves away from exclusionary definitions of identity based on race and culture. "Is it possible," he asks in a further discussion of these issues published in 2008, "for art to move forward and offer a model, or metaphor, for the organisation of society which aspires to human equality but within a falsified framework which in fact denies all humanity its equality?"⁸¹ In company with Shonibare's art, which avoids the logic of multiculturalism by refusing to be an

“otherness machine,”⁸² Araeen nonetheless engages with the politics of Englishness and Britishness as part of his ambitious project to “interrogate the whole history of ideas – theoretical and art historical – which has built the edifice of Eurocentric discourse ... to develop an alternative radical scholarship.”⁸³

“Englishness” is a moving target, not only because of the historical complexity and renewed topicality of any such national category, but also because of the temporal span during which its articulation has been central to art theory. One consistency over 300 years, regrettably, is the habit of using hackneyed national stereotypes as a shorthand for the praise or, more often, the condemnation of art and artists. Albert Einstein perfectly encapsulated the pattern: “If my theory of relativity is proven correct, Germany will claim me as a German and France will declare that I am a citizen of the world. Should my theory prove untrue, France will say that I am a German and Germany will declare that I am a Jew.”⁸⁴ Collini has written insightfully that “cultures, like individuals, can become imprisoned in images of themselves.”⁸⁵ Collini refers to the longstanding English self-characterization as anti-intellectual, but his comment applies equally to the intellectual activities of art theory. A similar caveat is registered by Gerald Newman regarding the tendency to ignore the existence of English and British nationalism: as historians we have largely missed these important phenomena, he argues, because “England’s past cultural interpreters ... were so influenced by national myths [about the absence of nationalism] that we ourselves, inheriting their concepts, have not quite yet gotten so far above these myths as to be able to understand their multifarious workings.”⁸⁶ Substitute “art theory” for “nationalism” and we see the pattern of occlusion that is the focus of this chapter. Put positively, such a repositioning or remapping reveals the extent and importance of the English art theory that is supposed not to exist.

Can and should we move away from the discourses of nation in art theory? Given that theory is as much a part of its temporal, cultural, and geographical coordinates as anything else – despite its recurring fantasy of transcendence – and that nations seem fundamental still to the dialectic of globalization, talk of national schools and the national identity of artists is likely to continue. The focus on the Englishness of art theory is itself value neutral. Emphasizing the vernacular can be good or bad: Hogarth’s plea that collectors patronize native artists, for example, was more than self-serving. It tried to overthrow the automatic priority lent to European sources in both the art market and artwriting. Wyndham Lewis saw English parochialism around the visual arts as a lack that could be turned to a gain for the avant-garde. Einstein offered an alternative to nationalism in his telling quip: the panacea of cosmopolitanism, of becoming a citizen of the world instead of merely one country. An ideal with an ancient pedigree and contemporary import, cosmopolitanism as much as nationalism has its more and less positive incarnations. It can promote a nuanced recognition of otherness – proclaimed for example by Araeen and Shonibare – or it can be nothing more than a superficial, touristic response to the pleasures of globalization. Thus the Englishness of English art theory is neither a positive nor a negative manifestation. It is typically an impure and sometimes genial concoction, more often than not created by

artist-theorists than by philosophers. Recognizing its long history is a step towards assessing its value for the present and the future. Is there a unique Englishness of English art theory? No, because the discourse of nation is fundamental to the modernity in which many global societies have lived since the Renaissance. Is English art and art theory measurably different? Yes, inevitably, because its histories, institutions, and protagonists are individual.

A significant challenge to artists and artwriters alike is to maintain national and individual specificity in the face of a contemporary global art world defined, at least superficially, by movement and cosmopolitanism. While there is tacit agreement that members of the art world are cosmopolites and that this is a good thing, the pull of national categories remains irresistible in the organization of the major international art biennials, whose pavilions and displays are grouped by nation. A final example of the ongoing complexities and ironies of the discourse of nation in contemporary art is Turner Prize winner Simon Starling's *Island for Weeds (Prototype)*, 2003. A metawork, though typically for our times, not a metapicture, this island-like garden animates the eighteenth-century importation to Scotland of rhododendrons as well as the plants' subsequent takeover of local flora and re-categorization as weeds. Mirroring the plants' original migration from Spain, Starling's island "transported" them to the Venice Biennale, where he represented Scotland in 2003, though he was born in England. There are analogies to be made with Robert Smithson's *Floating Island to Travel around Manhattan Island* (envisioned in 1970; realized posthumously in 2007), and perhaps more significantly, with earlier practices of species migration. The naturalist Joseph Banks, who accompanied James Cook to the South Seas in 1768–1771, for example, sought to improve the lot of indigenous peoples by giving them domesticated animals previously unknown in their ecosystems. The ecological impact was horrendous. With happier overtones, Starling's *Island* raises issues of indigeneity, immigration, and hybridity that are directly analogous to the concerns of national self-definition in the present.

Notes

- 1 Some time after the completion of this essay I came across the same title, used by Harry Mount in a book review *Oxford Art Journal*, 25, 1, 2002, 102–106. I trust that the addition of "Theory" to Nikolaus Pevsner's famous book title has enough applicability to be performed twice.
- 2 The categorization of art and artists into national schools was commonplace by the end of the eighteenth century. Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann provides an extensive reading of this habit in *Toward a Geography of Art*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004.
- 3 Such "disinterestedness," aesthetic distance, or exclusionary aloofness is an essential ingredient in mainstream European philosophical aesthetics since the time of Shaftesbury in the early eighteenth century and Kant at its end. For critiques of this position, see Elizabeth A. Bohls (1993) "Disinterestedness and the denial of the

- particular: Locke, Adam Smith, and the subject of aesthetics,” in P. Mattick, Jr. (ed.) *Eighteenth-century Aesthetics and the Reconstruction of Art*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 16–51; Schor, N. (1987) *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*, New York: Methuen., and Woodmansee, M. (1994) *The Author, Art, and the Market: Rereading the History of Aesthetics*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- 4 It is beyond the scope of this chapter to delineate the shades of difference among national self-consciousness, patriotism, and nationalism. For a thorough canvassing of these distinctions in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, see Newman, G. ([1987] 1997) *The Rise of English Nationalism: a Cultural History, 1740–1830*, London: Macmillan.
 - 5 See Peter Mandler’s (2006) apt remarks in *The English National Character: The History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
 - 6 Nation-based identity terminology in the UK is of course complex. It is impossible to choose one inclusive descriptor, such as “British,” that will accurately and without offense include the whole population. People in England make up about 85% of the total population of the UK, but many of these would not describe themselves as “English.” While it is potentially offensive to other nations within the UK to presume that “English” describes the whole, that assumption is often made, especially in the discourses of art and art theory. For an historical account of English/British terminological usage, see Mandler, P. (2006) *The English National Character: the History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
 - 7 John Constable, *English Landscape Scenery: a Series of Forty Mezzotinto Engravings on Steel* (1833). J. M. W. Turner, *Picturesque Views in England and Wales* (1832).
 - 8 Pevsner, N. (1978). *The Englishness of English Art: an Expanded and Annotated Version of the Reith Lectures Broadcast in October and November 1955*, Harmondsworth: Penguin. For a thorough account of Pevsner’s text and its many implications, see Vaughan, W. (2002) “Behind Pevsner: Englishness as an art historical category,” in D. Peters Corbett, Y. Holt and F. Russell (eds) *The Geographies of Englishness: Landscape and the National Past, 1880–1940*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
 - 9 For the history of arguments for the linkage of environment and nationality, see Glacken, C. J. (1967) *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
 - 10 Orwell, G. (1941) “The lion and the unicorn: socialism and the English genius,” in Orwell, G. (2001) P. Davison (ed.) *Orwell’s England*, London: Penguin, 253. For a full history and analysis of the stereotype, see Collini, S. (2006) *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain*, New York: Oxford University Press.. There is a long Marxian tradition in Britain of doubting the existence of a native intelligentsia. In a famous essay, Perry Anderson ends up defining British theory in ways directly relevant to my study: “The hegemonic ideology of this society was a much more aristocratic combination of ‘traditionalism’ and ‘empiricism,’ intensely hierarchical in its emphasis, which accurately reiterated the history of the dominant agrarian class. The British bourgeoisie by and large assented to this archaic legitimization of the status quo, and sedulously mimicked it. After its own amalgamation with the aristocracy in the later

- nineteenth century, it became second nature to the collective propertied class." Anderson, P. (1968) "Components of the national culture," *New Left Review*, 50, 3–57, 12.
- 11 Fox, K. (2004). *Watching the English: the hidden rules of English behaviour*. London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd.
 - 12 Collini (2006).
 - 13 Fox (2004), 179.
 - 14 Ackroyd, P. (2002) *Albion: the Origins of the English Imagination*, London: Anchor, 448.
 - 15 Simpson, D. (1993) *Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt Against Theory*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
 - 16 Art and Language (1976) "The French disease," *Art-Language*, 3, 4, 25. The Art-Language group was not necessarily anti-theoretical in its interests but did favor indigenous theory. Terry Atkinson's notes in an article on "Art Teaching," for example, that the "evolution of (particularly) the Lockean influence upon British education can be seen to have fastened in the central 'desiderata': 'liberality,' 'choice,' etc." Atkinson, T. (1971) "Art teaching," *Art-Language*, 1, 4, 25. Empiricism is of course a philosophical position or theory that has and can be applied to art making.
 - 17 The term "artwriting" is purposefully broad and includes art theory, art history, and aesthetics as well as art criticism in a few cases. While it is often important to acknowledge a distinction in classification between, say, aesthetics and art criticism, that distinction must be historicized. My aim in using this inclusive term "artwriting" is to avoid pre-judging what counts as a "theoretical" approach.
 - 18 Kitson, M. (1956) "The geography of English art," *The Times Literary Supplement*, May 25, 312.
 - 19 See David Peters Corbett's revisionary study: Peters Corbett, D. (1997) *The Modernity of English Art, 1914–30*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
 - 20 Kant legislated "disinterestedness" in aesthetics, but as I argue (Cheetham, M. A. (2001) *Kant, Art, and Art History: Moments of Discipline*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.), this paradigm was itself built on nationalistic and disciplinary interests.
 - 21 Chapter 1 in Barrell, J. (1986) *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt: "the Body of the Public,"* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, offers a thorough reading of art theory in England from the perspective of one dominant theory of art, "civic humanism." Philosophical perspectives are canvassed under individual author headings in Kelly, M. (1998) *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. See Vol. 1, "British Aesthetics."
 - 22 This view has been effectively challenged by Peters Corbett, D. (2004) *The World in Paint: Modern Art and Visuality in England, 1848–1914*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 14.
 - 23 Paulson, R. (1989) *Breaking and Remaking: Aesthetic Practice in England, 1700–1820*, New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press. While I have drawn much from Paulson's ever-insightful writings, I will dispute the dichotomy suggested by his notion of substitution and develop here a modified version of the "metapicture" as a category that inevitably combines the textual and visual.
 - 24 Barrell, J. (1990) "Sir Joshua Reynolds and the Englishness of English art," in H. Bhabha (ed.) *Nation and Narration*, London: Routledge, 156.

- 25 Mitchell, W. J. T. (1994) *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 418.
- 26 Why is theory female if not as a form of praise? The explanation is modeled on theory's habitual description as foreign – often French – and the two characterizations can be linked. The French were endlessly parodied for their effeminacy by eighteenth-century English writers and caricaturists. Theory *must* be foreign so that its alternative can be English. When theory is cast as female as well as foreign, it is doubly excluded from what can then be, by contrast, “natural,” “customary,” and therefore English in a superior sense. For a related argument, see Readings, B. (1990) “Why is theory foreign?” in M. Kreiswirth and M. Cheetham (eds) *Theory Between the Disciples: Authority/Vision/Politics*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 84. As in Hogarth's *The Painter and his Pug* (1745, Fig. 1.1), which was created in part in response to this song, effeminacy, foreignness, and national comportment were starkly if humorously contrasted with manly Englishness and independent invention. What has been called the identification of Englishness by exclusion has here a theoretical as well as a sociological dimension. See Wolff, J. (2001) “The ‘Jewish Mark’ in English painting: cultural identity and modern art,” in D. Peters Corbett and L. Perry (eds) *English Art 1860–1914: Modern Artists and Identity*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 180, and Colls, R. and Dodd, P. (1986) *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880–1920*, London: Routledge, Kegan and Paul.
- 27 Reynolds, J. (1992) *Discourses III*. P. Rogers (ed.) London, 105–6.
- 28 Reynolds, J. (1992) *Discourses IV*. P. Rogers (ed.) London, 301.
- 29 Burke, E. (1757) *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, first published in 1757 and highly influential, is one of the classic statements of the theory of the sublime. For a comparison of Burke's theories with those of Immanuel Kant published in 1790, see Cheetham, M. A. (2001) *Kant, Art, and Art History: Moments of Discipline*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 30 See Barrell, J. (1986) *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt: “the Body of the Public,”* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press., especially Chapter 1.
- 31 See Simpson, D. (1993) *Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt Against Theory*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. To be anti-French as a way of defining Englishness and Britishness is a consistent theme from the later eighteenth century more or less to the present, as many examples adduced in this article demonstrate. See Newman, G. ([1987] 1997) *The Rise of English Nationalism: a Cultural History, 1740–1830*, London: Macmillan, for the origins of this pattern.
- 32 Langford, P. (gen. ed.) (1981–1997) *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, viii, III.
- 33 Anderson (1968), 47.
- 34 Barnes, J. (2007) “‘The odd couple,’ review of *That Sweet Enemy: The French and the British from the Sun King to the Present*,” *New York Review of Books*, 54, 5, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/19990> (retrieved 15 August 2012).
- 35 Scruton, R. (2000) *England: an Elegy*, London: Continuum.
- 36 See Grieder, J. (1985) *Anglomania in France, 1740–1789: Fact, Fiction, and Political Discourse*, Geneva: Librairie Droz, and Newman ([1987] 1997).
- 37 Young, A. (1793) *The Example of France a Warning to Britain*, Third edition, Bury St. Edmund's, 85.
- 38 Barrell (1990), 159.

- 39 February 24, 1792. Reynolds, J. (1992) P. Rogers (ed.) *Discourses*, London, 363.
- 40 Buckeridge, B. (1706) "An essay towards an English school of painting," in R. de Piles, *The Art of Painting, and the Lives of the Painters*, J. Savage (trans.), London: printed for J. Nutt near Stationers-Hall.
- 41 de Piles, R. (1706) *The Art of Painting, and the Lives of the Painters*, J. Savage (trans.), London: printed for J. Nutt near Stationers-Hall.
- 42 Paulson, R. (ed.) (1997) *The Analysis of Beauty*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 18. Paulson's introduction to the text is a masterpiece of insight and erudition.
- 43 An important reading of Locke's influence is Gibson-Wood, C. (2000) *Jonathan Richardson: Art Theorist of the English Enlightenment*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. While it is not Gibson-Wood's purpose to trace Locke's legacy in art theory in detail, she does underline that it was he, not Lord Shaftesbury or the concept of "civic humanism" elaborated by Barrell (1986), "that most powerfully shaped Richardson's thought" (p. 8). Tacitly acknowledging the patrimonial politics at play in art theory, she also claims that "the negative reception on the continent of Richardson's writings was probably rooted in a more general disdain for his English empiricist art-theoretical programme" (p. 89).
- 44 A good place to enter the vast and varied bibliography on this topic is D. Peters Corbett, Y. Holt and F. Russell (eds) (2002) *The Geographies of Englishness: Landscape and the National Past, 1880–1940*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- 45 See Williams, R. (1983) *Keywords: a Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Rev. ed., New York: Oxford University Press.
- 46 On this history, see Marshall, D. (2002) "The problem of the picturesque," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 35, 3, 413–437.
- 47 Interview at Tate Modern, April 30, 2007. http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/webcasts/gilbert_george_artists_talk/default.jsp.
- 48 Gilpin, W. (1792) *Observations, Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty, Made in the Year 1772, on Several Parts of England; Particularly the Mountains*, London, 9, 10.
- 49 Constable, J. (1970) prospectus for *English Landscape Scenery*, in R. B. Beckett (ed.) *John Constable's Discourses*, Ipswich: Suffolk Records Society, 83.
- 50 For a complex and full reading of Constable's reputation, see Vaughan, W. (1996) "Constable's Englishness," *Oxford Art Journal*, 19, 2, 17–27.
- 51 On the legitimization of the natural and specific as the national, see Helsinger, E. (1989) "Constable: the making of a national painter," *Critical Inquiry*, 15, Winter 189, 253–279.
- 52 Lambert, R. (2005) *John Constable and the Theory of Landscape Painting*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- 53 Leslie, C. R. ([1951] 1980) *Memoirs of the Life of John Constable, Composed Chiefly of his Letters (1843)*. J. Mayne (ed.). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 269.
- 54 Ruskin, J. ([1856] 1987) *Modern Painters*, ed. and abridged by D. Barrie, London, Vol. III, Part IV, 283.
- 55 Ruskin, J. ([1846] 1987) *Modern Painters*, ed. and abridged by D. Barrie, London, Vol. II, Chap. II, 190–191; Vol. I, Part I.
- 56 Read, H. ([1931] 1949) *The Meaning of Art*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 128.
- 57 Ruskin, J. ([1843] 1987) *Modern Painters*, ed. and abridged by D. Barrie, London, Vol. I Part I, 51, 53.

- 58 *Modern Painters*, Vol. I, Part II, 49.
- 59 Peters Corbett, D. (2002) "The geography of *blast*: landscape, modernity, and English painting, 1914–1930," in D. Peters Corbett, Y. Holt and F. Russell (eds) *The Geographies of Englishness: Landscape and the National Past, 1880–1940*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 115–140.
- 60 Lewis, W. ([1915] 1981) "Constantinople our star," *Blast* 2, Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow, 11.
- 61 Lewis, W. ([1914] 1981) "Manifesto," *Blast* 1, Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow, 32.
- 62 *Blast* 1, 35.
- 63 *Blast* 2, 33.
- 64 *The Times*, March 10, 1915, 8. Cited in Peters Corbett, D. (1997) *The Modernity of English Art, 1914–30*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 44.
- 65 Herbert Read, lecture for BBC General Overseas Service, 1956. Herbert Read Fonds, University of Victoria (HR 35-51).
- 66 Read, H. (1952) *The Philosophy of Modern Art*, London: Kessinger Publishing, 249.
- 67 Davey, K. (1998) "Herbert Read and Englishness," in D. Goodway (ed.) *Herbert Read Reassessed*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 273.
- 68 See Russell, F. (2002) "John Ruskin, Herbert Read and the Englishness of British modernism," in D. Peters Corbett, Y. Holt and F. Russell (eds) *The Geographies of Englishness: Landscape and the National Past, 1880–1940*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 303–321.
- 69 Enwezor, O. (2004) "Yinka Shonibare: of hedonism, masquerade, carnivalesque and power. A Conversation with Okwui Enwezor," in L. A. Farrell (ed.) *Looking Both Ways: Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora*, New York: Snoeck Publishers, 164. See also Tolia-Kelly, D. and Morris, A. (2004) "Disruptive aesthetics? Revisiting the burden of representation in the art of Chris Ofili and Yinka Shonibare," *Third Text*, 18, 2, 153–167.
- 70 Quoted in Mercer, K. (1995) "Art that is ethnic in inverted commas," *Frieze*, 25, 40.
- 71 Artist's talk, Tate Britain, November 3, 2004.
- 72 Shonibare's London Underground project is described on the official Transport for London website: <http://www.tfl.gov.uk/tube/arts/platform-for-art/artists/shonibare.asp>,
- 73 Enwezor, O. (2004), 167.
- 74 Source: <http://www.honours.gov.uk/honours.aspx>; <http://www.gazettes-online.co.uk/New%20Year%20Honours%20United%20Kingdom%2031%20December%202004.pdf>, p. N 22.
- 75 Artist's talk, Tate Britain, November 3, 2004.
- 76 Araeen, R. (2000) "A new beginning: beyond postcolonial cultural theory and identity politics," *Third Text*, 50, 6.
- 77 Rees, A. L. and Borzello, F. (eds) (1986) *The New Art History*, London: Humanities Press International.
- 78 Araeen (2000), 3.
- 79 See Rushdie, S. ([1982] 1991) "The new empire in Britain," *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991*, London: Penguin.
- 80 Araeen (2000), 18; 16.

- 81 Araeen, R. (2008) "A very special *British* issue? Modernity, art history and the crisis of art today," *Third Text*, 22, 2, 125–144, 126.
- 82 Mercer (1995), 40.
- 83 Araeen (2000), 19.
- 84 Address at the Sorbonne, Paris, possibly early December 1929, in *New York Times*, February 16, 1930. From *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*.
- 85 Collini (2006), 69.
- 86 Newman ([1987] 1997), xix.

Modernity and the British

Andrew Ballantyne

Ancient Modernity

The modern is a symptom of looking back. For as long as we go unselfconsciously about our daily lives, we make our decisions about what to do without reference to the idea of modernity. Sometimes, though, when we look back we notice that things used to be different, and it is then that the need arises for a concept, “the modern,” to indicate the characteristics of the present. Had we lived in a culture that continued unchanging and that knew nothing of a time before the current state of affairs, then the idea of modernity would never have been coined. Many people do live in such cultures, perhaps with an idea of a distant mythic past populated by gods or heroes. Before we can have modernity, we need to reflect critically on the relatively recent past, and to notice that it is a foreign country, with differences from our own time.¹ Thucydides did it in Greece in the fifth century BCE. He did not have a word that translates directly as “modern,” but he described how the city-state Athens developed and came to adopt the current ways of doing things. He tells us that it used to be the case that the noble men would have long hair, which they used to fasten back with gold clasps in the form of grasshoppers. That was no longer the case in Thucydides’ own time. Translators of this passage reach for the word “modern” to help give voice to Thucydides’ idea. For example, Richard Crawley, in a translation first published in 1876, says that “a modest style of dressing, more in conformity with modern ideas, was first adopted by the Lacedaemonians, the rich doing their best to assimilate their way of life to that of the common people.”² The Lacedaemonians were the citizens of Sparta. For the use of the word “modern,” we should pay attention to the date of the translation – 1876 – but for the concept of the present as something different from the past, we need only to pay attention to Thucydides’ project, not to his choice of individual words. He was contemplating the ancient origins of Greek society,

and speculating about things that had according to traditional stories occurred, supplemented by inferences about what he supposed must have been the case in ancient times. His history of the Peloponnesian War was an account of recent events – he had been a witness to some of them – but the opening passage sets the scene in a much broader context, drawing in “the period just preceding this, and those of a still earlier date.”³ Crawley renders that into more idiomatic English as “remote antiquity, and even those that immediately precede the war.”⁴ So Thucydides establishes a periodization for his history, where we have three distinctly articulated eras: that in which current events take place, the remote past, and the more recent past. We can add a fourth: the future, in which at some unspecified time, posterity will read the text that Thucydides has carefully wrought. To put them in chronological order, then, and giving them names that are convenient for me, but anachronous for Thucydides, they would run (i) antiquity; (ii) past (before the war); (iii) modern; (iv) future. It could be mapped on to an idea of the source materials and the narrator’s experience of them: (i) myths and legends, traditional stories; (ii) events recounted by my parents’ and grandparents’ generations, which happened before I was born; (iii) events I remember; (iv) events that have not yet happened.

I will be taking up this schema and applying it to different history-tellers from different eras. When one does so, it prompts further observations. For example, if we look at Giorgio Vasari’s account of the lives of the artists of Renaissance Italy, there are distinctions that are exactly parallel. He makes a distinction between the “old” and the “antique” – *vecchio* and *antico* – for the less distant and the more distant past.⁵ And the current era is modern: “*I quali facevano alcune cose piuttosto a moi moderni ridicole, che a loro lodevoli.*”⁶ The modern era is recognized through the adoption of the new way – *nuovo modo* – of doing things.⁷ Thucydides and Vasari share a sense that the events of their own modern era have special importance, but there is a difference between the valuation of the different eras. For Thucydides eras i and ii are more or less distant, and although the Trojan War stands out as an event that drew the Greek states together, he does not find in the intervening time events to compare with those of his own time. For Vasari the distant past was antiquity, particularly the great age of Rome (far away in an unimaginable future for Thucydides). The more recent past was what we have come to call “medieval,” but which Vasari called “old” (*vecchio*), associated with the Goths (*Goti*) and Germans (*Tedeschi*).⁸ The modern era with the *nuovo modo* was a re-birth of the antique. So although the schema readily transfers from Thucydides to Vasari, it is overlaid with new valuations: (i) antiquity and greatness; (ii) past, when people lost their way; (iii) the modern age, when the way was found again and antique greatness was reborn; and (iv) future.

Early Modern Modernity

Vasari’s periodization became entrenched, and the Renaissance under various names (the Revival of Letters, for example) came to be adopted as the threshold for

the modern age. Historians of our own time use the name “early modern” for the period c.1500–1800, which entrenches the idea that there was a significant break at about the time of Vasari’s artists’ lives. However, although Renaissance artists might have changed perceptions across Europe in general, their epoch-defining status is more likely to be due to the fact that they lived and worked at the time when medieval feudal power was giving way to commerce, and political structures were changing. It was a gradual process, and different historians in different places would choose different events to mark the break. In eighteenth-century Britain, for example, Lord Bolingbroke and David Hume concurred in selecting the regime change at the Battle of Bosworth (1485) as critical. Understanding of events before that had no utility in the present, they suggested, but an understanding of subsequent events was indispensable.⁹ The Battle of Bosworth was where Richard III was killed. He was the last of the Plantagenet kings of England, and his successor, Henry VII, ushered in the House of Tudor – so-named by Hume, and the name stuck. So in Britain the modern era begins with the Tudors, and has done so since the eighteenth century. As time has passed, and the Industrial Revolution began and then moved on from Britain, the first 300 years have been bracketed apart, as “early modern,” but “modern” it remains for academic historians. Richard III is known to most of us mainly through Shakespeare’s play about him, and Shakespeare himself is one of the characters who was instrumentalized in forming an idea of British identity, after the Restoration and the reintroduction of theatres from 1660. The puritans of the Commonwealth had banned the theatre altogether, but the king encouraged it and patronized the two theatres he licensed. Shakespeare’s plays, often about monarchs, fitted the bill, and his reputation grew thereafter.¹⁰

In looking for early uses of the word “modern” in English, it seems unnecessary to go back further than Shakespeare. He did use the word, but with him it usually seems to mean something more like “commonplace” or “ordinary” than “belonging to our current era.” For example, in *All’s Well That Ends Well* we find elderly Lafeu saying:

They say miracles are past; and we have our
philosophical persons, to make modern and familiar,
things supernatural and causeless. Hence is it that
we make trifles of terrors, ensconcing ourselves
into seeming knowledge, when we should submit
ourselves to an unknown fear. (Act 2, Scene 3)

The point here is that the miracles of the past are explained away. The magic that we used to live with, no longer colors our lives. The scientist (or “natural philosopher”) looks for the causes of things in nature, and does not allow supernatural explanations. Lafeu is being presented in this utterance as belonging to an older world – actually as a relic of the pre-Bosworth medieval world – but the “modern” for him is flat and dull. There is a similar usage in the famous “seven ages of man” speech in *As You Like It*. It begins “All the world’s a stage,” and goes

on to characterize seven stages in life from cradle to senility. In the fifth age, which we would call “middle age,” the character has achieved social standing and has become a bit pompous. His figure has filled out, and he is inclined to pontificate:

And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lined,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances. (Act 2, Scene 7)

The “wise saws” are “conventional wisdom,” and the “modern instances” would be examples drawn from the justice’s own experience of life, but in this context the implication would seem to be that they are boring, not that they are up to date. Shakespeare might be an “early modern,” but his “modern” is not ours.

Present Modernity

By the time that Jonathan Swift published *The Battle of the Books* (1704), “modern” clearly meant “belonging to the present era,” as the battle was between “ancient” and “modern” books – the classical and the modern world vying for cultural supremacy, described as a literal fight between books in the King’s Library (which is now in the British Library, but was then in St James’s Palace). The style is mock-heroic, and the outcome unclear. Swift’s “moderns” have more in common with Vasari’s “*moderni*” than with Shakespeare’s “modern.” Again there is the contrast with the ancient, and an understanding that in between there was a gulf. Medieval authors are not in contention in this battle (though Duns Scotus is mentioned as having, with Aristotle, usurped Plato’s place, so he is on the side of the ancients). It is only in the modern era that the ancients have serious rivals.

There is regular use of the word “modern” through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, always used to distinguish “our” age from that of the past, and most often from antiquity. For example Henry Fielding has Tom Jones encounter a Mr Nightingale:

On [the subject of love] ... the young gentleman delivered himself in a language which might have very well become an Arcadian shepherd of old, and which appeared very extraordinary when proceeding from the lips of a modern fine gentleman; but he was only one by imitation, and meant by nature for a much better character.¹¹

Part of the culture of Fielding’s day was the reading of Virgil’s poetry, including the *Eclogues*, where shepherds tending their flocks occupy their minds by singing to one another about their absent loves. Fielding is consistently facetious about the foppiness of modern manners, and the young gentleman presenting the

character of the ancient shepherd as “better” is characteristic of modern affectation. (His name “Nightingale” also indicates his ability to “sing” prettily, though he turns out to be untrustworthy.) The person in the narrative who throughout is absolutely beyond reproach is the benevolent squire, Mr Allworthy, who is shown to be of settled stock and stable character by being equipped with an old-fashioned house:

The Gothic stile of building could produce nothing nobler than Mr Allworthy’s house. There was an air of grandeur in it that struck you with awe, and rivalled the beauties of the best Grecian architecture; and it was as commodious within as venerable without.

It stood on the south-east side of a hill, but nearer the bottom than the top of it, so as to be sheltered from the north-east by a grove of old oaks which rose above it in a gradual ascent of near half a mile, and yet high enough to enjoy a most charming prospect of the valley beneath.¹²

There is further detail about the imaginary landscape, which is presented as ideally Arcadian, with old elements surviving in it, not only the old oaks, but also villages that have not been swept away for the sake of the view, and a pre-Bosworth abbey has been allowed to remain as a romantic ruin.

the midst of the grove was a fine lawn, sloping down towards the house, near the summit of which rose a plentiful spring, gushing out of a rock covered with firs, and forming a constant cascade of about thirty feet, not carried down a regular flight of steps, but tumbling in a natural fall over the broken and mossy stones till it came to the bottom of the rock, then running off in a pebbly channel, that with many lesser falls winded along, till it fell into a lake at the foot of the hill, about a quarter of a mile below the house on the south side, and which was seen from every room in the front. Out of this lake, which filled the center of a beautiful plain, embellished with groups of beeches and elms, and fed with sheep, issued a river, that for several miles was seen to meander through an amazing variety of meadows and woods till it emptied itself into the sea, with a large arm of which, and an island beyond it, the prospect was closed.

On the right of this valley opened another of less extent, adorned with several villages, and terminated by one of the towers of an old ruined abbey, grown over with ivy, and part of the front, which remained still entire.

The left-hand scene presented the view of a very fine park, composed of very unequal ground, and agreeably varied with all the diversity that hills, lawns, wood, and water, laid out with admirable taste, but owing less to art than to nature, could give. Beyond this, the country gradually rose into a ridge of wild mountains, the tops of which were above the clouds.¹³

Fielding was well versed in ancient literature, which he studied for his degree at Leiden, but although he shows himself to be familiar with the ancient texts, he does not allow them to invade his thoughts to the point where they seem to have

become an affectation, as Mr Nightingale did. All Fielding's trustworthy characters are immune to the lure of fashion, and the most fashionable are the most wrong-headed. He equates good sense with nature, seeing truth and goodness most clearly in the places where fashion does not reach. So for Fielding the past acts as a guide for the present, and whatever is novel and fashionable in the present is not to be trusted. If there is to be progress, then it should be progress guided by nature, which will give us a good grounding. The stance is plainly anti-modern.

Some comparable thinking is to be found in Winckelmann's writings. In presenting the art of ancient Greece he could not fail to express something about the differences between the ancient and the modern worlds. He presents the ancient world as ideal, so the modern world must be less-than-ideal. His enthusiasm for ancient art was not because it was old, but because of its superb quality, which reached an apogee in antiquity and then declined, never to be equaled since. The reason it was possible was that there was a uniquely fortunate combination of circumstances:

The superiority that art achieved among the Greeks is to be attributed in part to the influence of their climate, in part to their constitution and form of government and the way of thinking induced by it, yet no less to the respect accorded to artists and to the use and application of art among the Greeks... Much that we might imagine as ideal was natural for them... Where Nature is less enveloped in clouds and heavy vapors, she gives the body a riper form earlier; she expresses herself in powerful, particularly female creations, and in Greece she will have perfected its people to the finest degree.¹⁴

The lean, well-exercised youths of Sparta, trained from infancy to swim and wrestle, are contrasted with a "young Sybarite of our time," who is obviously less satisfactory as a model for art.¹⁵ In our own time the vitality and grace of the youths of ancient Greece are to be found, but not in the modern metropolis:

Behold the swift Indian who pursues a deer on foot – how briskly his juices must flow, how flexible and quickly his nerves and muscles must be, how light the whole structure of his body! Thus did Homer portray his heroes, and his Achilles he chiefly noted as being "swift of foot."¹⁶

Winckelmann's most assiduous British reader, Richard Payne Knight, mentioned that the painter Benjamin West (a president of the Royal Academy but born in America) when he saw the Apollo Belvedere in Rome was immediately struck by the figure's resemblance to Mohawk warriors. The reason, said Knight, was that "the Mohawks act immediately from the impulse of their minds, and know no acquired restraints or affected habits."¹⁷ These figures are presented as ideal, and as being in the state of grace in which artistic perfection can be achieved. There is political liberty, and an absence of inhibition or fashionable affectation. The

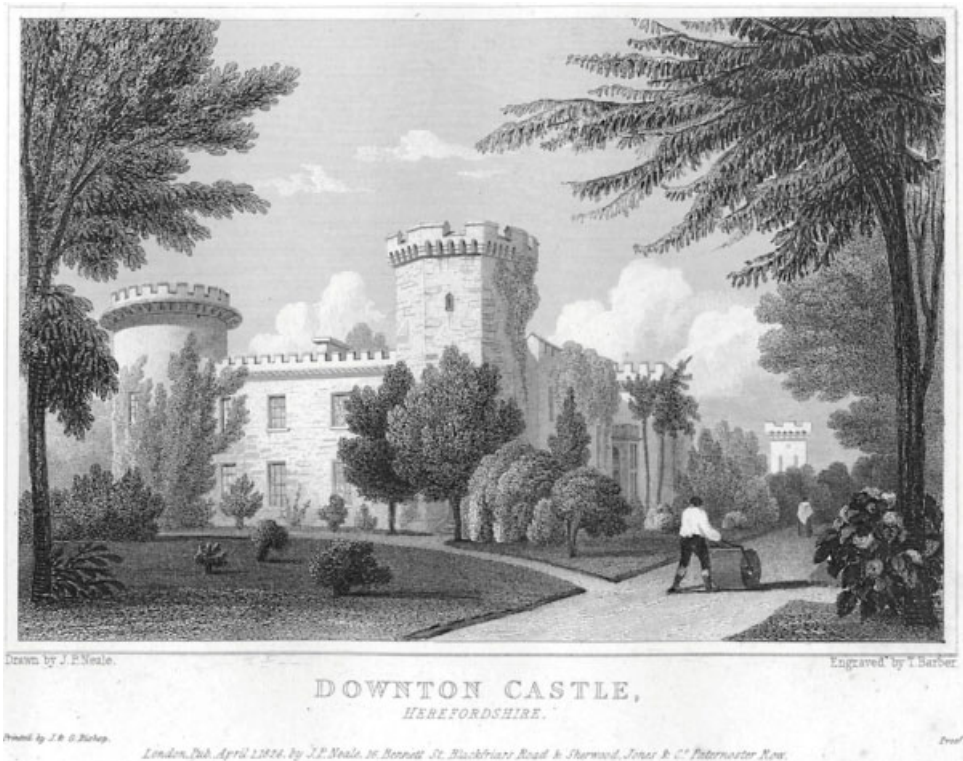


FIG. 2.1 Richard Payne Knight: *Downton Castle, Herefordshire*; print from Heaton's of Tisbury.

Source: From a series of small steel engravings, uncolored written by Neale. Drawn by John Preston Neale and engraved by various artists. Published, as proofs by subscription between 1812 and 1825.

Spartan youths and the swift Indians are presented as the type of person who can achieve the very greatest results in the realm of art, but they are presented as fully alert and vital, not as being especially learned. It is their spontaneity that is being idealized, not their sense of history. They are being idealized as modernists, fully absorbed in their own time, and able to act in ways that are perfectly attuned to their times. It is their good fortune that their time is perfect. It is also remote – long past in the case of the Greeks, and far distant in the case of the Mohawks – and the culture that makes the arts happen is not in place around them. So although Winckelmann and Knight were enthusing about Greek art, they were recommending it in a way that made it sound like the freshest, most inspirational and spontaneous kind of art imaginable.

Knight designed himself a house, Downton Castle (Fig. 2.1), which was highly original because of its freely irregular plan. It had battlements, which he knew Greek and Roman fortifications had had, and it evoked buildings on distant hills

in Claude Lorrain's paintings.¹⁸ The irregularity of the plan made it straightforward to organize the rooms in a convenient way, and they had sash windows, such as we would expect in a smart Georgian house, some of the windows being large enough to allow access to the garden. Because it was original, Knight's contemporaries thought it was strange.

It is embattled, and built of stone, in which particulars only it can, with propriety, be said to resemble an ancient castle; for the windows are all square modern sashes, and the door-way is equally fashionable, and equally inconsistent. One of the angles of the building is terminated by an octagon tower, the other by a diminutive circular turret, containing a closet with a square sash window.

Nothing within sight of the building bears the slightest appearance of the antique... If Mr. Knight had expended half the sum which it has cost him to provoke satirical reflections on his extraordinary taste in building, in repairing the roads near his seat, he might have possessed one of the most elegant and complete residences, – one of the prettiest villas which this country can boast, without the mortification of finding every visitor a critic, – without incurring the frowns of the fastidious, – or provoking a comparison of this avowed imitation of the ancients, with works which must every day bring it not only into disrepute, but even into contempt ... the modern-antique mansion at Downton is unworthy of the dignified title of a castle.¹⁹

The traveller who is commenting here in 1802 has recast the historical categories. "Modern," plainly, means "of our own era," which means that it looks like what we would call Georgian architecture; but his "antique" category is what we would call "medieval," not the world of ancient Greece that it normally designates and with which Knight was in fact much more enamored. The modern aspect of the design seems to be accepted, but the supposedly old-fashioned aspects do not go down well with this visitor. Soon after this, Knight published his *Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste*, in which he remarked that:

A house may be adorned with towers and battlements, or pinnacles and flying buttresses; but it should still maintain the character of the age and country in which it is erected; and not pretend to be a fortress or monastery of a remote period or distant country; for such false pretensions never escape detection; and, when detected, necessarily excite those sentiments, which exposed imposture never fails to excite.²⁰

So this is a direct assertion that a building should be designed in a way that unaffectedly belongs to the current age, in just the same way – one might add – as an ancient Spartan might have done; or a Mohawk warrior, come to that. The originality of Knight's house is sparked by the stock of unusual learning in his head, so his impulses are different from those of his contemporaries, and he is always disinclined to submit to the artificial constraints of established rules. What Knight learnt from Winckelmann was that to reawaken what mattered most about ancient

Greece, one would not set about the servile copying of old artifacts, but try to reanimate their way of life and habits of action.

The importance of Knight's house in British architectural history is not in its oddity as such, but in the fact that its free planning was taken up by John Nash and through him set a pattern that made it the established norm for the generation of picturesque country buildings that followed. We need to know about that subsequent generation of architecture before we can see that, for good or ill, the house was "ahead of its time." It would have looked typically "modern" had it been built after 1820, rather than in the 1770s. Of course properly speaking nothing is ever ahead of its time, and to think that it is simply to misunderstand the thing or the time. Nevertheless with the benefit of hindsight it becomes possible to tell a story about stylistic change where that change can look like progress.

Progressive Modernity

Progress was one of the great ideas of the eighteenth century, as developments in experimental science and industrial production ushered in new possibilities that changed the face of the countryside and led to the growth of cities.²¹ It became clear that the modern age could outdo the ancient in the scale of its operations if not in the quality of its accomplishments. Winckelmann's history of Greek art was the first attempt to give a narrative of stylistic progress in the arts. Thomas Rickman's antiquarian analysis of British medieval architecture published in 1817 was a milestone in establishing a chronology and therefore a sense of progress through architecture,²² but the idea of progress in general was widespread and deeply ingrained in thought by this time, and the architectural history of the nineteenth century can be told as a series of waves of fashionable enthusiasms for different styles overlaid on the progressive development of engineering and constructional techniques.

The most sustained analysis of progress was Hegel's, whose sense of destiny is evident in his *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (*Phenomenology of Spirit*) of 1807, and whose thoughts about history were eventually published posthumously in 1837.²³ His work was little read in Britain, but its impact has been felt everywhere, especially by way of Karl Marx, whose analysis of capital is underpinned by his reading of Hegel. Hegel's importance for the story being presented here lies in the fact that he changed the relative importance of the eras of history. If we have progress in history then it becomes important to understand where history is going, and to position ourselves well, so as to be able to deal with the future as it arrives. Returning to our earlier categories: (i) antiquity and (ii) the recent past are necessary preambles to (iii) our own time, but (iv) the future is what gives our own time its progressive drive. Without an anticipated future we have no sense of where we are going and we lose our purpose. Translating this into architecture's culture, there is no better formulation than Semper's. He was writing in 1860, at

the beginning of a book as large and dense as Hegel's, setting the general scene for what is to follow:

The nocturnal sky shows glimmering nebulae among the splendid miracle of stars – either old extinct systems scattered throughout the universe, cosmic dust taking shape around a nucleus, or a condition in between destruction and regeneration.

They are a suitable analogy for similar events of the horizon of art history. They signify a world of art passing into the formless, while suggesting at the same time a new formation in the making.

These phenomena of artistic decline and the mysterious phoenixlike birth of new artistic life arising from the process of its destruction are all the more significant for us, because we are probably in the midst of a similar crisis – as far as we who are living through it (and therefore lacking a clear overview) are able to surmise and judge.²⁴

The rate of change has increased since Semper's day, and seems to be changing more rapidly for each generation, so his description of our place in a state of flux continues to seem apt. This "world of art passing into the formless, while suggesting at the same time a new formation in the making" captures the sense of transition, and clearly leaves the creative architect desiring to be part of the becoming of art, rather than part of what is passing. One tries to discern the order of things to come, and then one helps that new order to find its way into the world.

Semper's own work included great institutional structures in Dresden, Vienna, and Zürich. They look now to be the very embodiment of an established *status quo*, but there was a real attempt to re-think from first principles what architecture was and could become. The Vienna Art History museum, for example, was laid out in accordance with Semper's suggestions, which gave an unexpected prominence to textiles. The reason for that lay in his understanding of architecture. In 1851 he had visited the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park. He said little about the architecture of the Crystal Palace, which was taken by some of his contemporaries as the harbinger of a new architecture or a new world. There are no appreciative remarks about the building, just suggestions about how it could be used in the future, after the exhibition had gone.²⁵ In fact at the Great Exhibition the building that made the greatest impression on him was a small Caribbean hut, which he made the basis of his theory of architecture, illustrating it in order to show architecture's four essential elements: (i) the hearth; (ii) the earth-work that makes the base of the building; (iii) the framework that establishes its volume; and (iv) the textiles that modify the climate within. It is clear from this that he represented architecture as having continuity with ancient traditions, or primitive instincts. Premonitions of novelty in architecture would be understood through the ancient roles of the forms, however unprecedented the forms themselves might be.

A clear and fresh conception is very desirable in an artistic work, because we gain thereby a foothold against the arbitrary and the insignificant and even positive guidance in invention. The new becomes engrafted onto the old without being a copy and is freed from a dependence on the inane influence of fashion.²⁶

So in Semper's mind there is a clear distinction between "fresh conception" and "fashion." Both would involve novelty, but the former would represent progress, where fashion would just be temporarily diverting. Although fresh conceptions are welcomed, there is no suggestion that they make a break with tradition. On the contrary, the tradition develops and is enriched by these new conceptions. Without them there would be no progress with the tradition, and no story to tell.

Semper's orientation with reference to the new seems to share many of the same intuitions as his contemporary Charles Baudelaire, who praised the work of Constantin Guys (an artist who worked for *The Illustrated London News*) in a eulogy *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*.²⁷ One of its 13 sections is entitled "*modernité*," which is what he says his artist is searching out. Baudelaire's modernity is clearly distinguished from the old-fashioned, and is rooted in the present. His point is that harmony and grace can be found in subjects that are all-of-a-piece, not attempting to combine anachronistic elements, such as medieval costumes, which will not be compatible with modern gestures. "Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable."²⁸ Baudelaire was certainly cultivating enthusiasm for modernity, and promoting the idea; but he seems to be advocating that the artist of today should be as completely in tune with current conditions as the artists of ancient Greece had been in tune with theirs, according to Winckelmann and Knight. The forms of art might be new with Baudelaire in 1859, but the conception of exemplary artists' practices was not.

In case we become preoccupied with the word "modern," rather than focusing attention on the concepts that attach to it, it is worth pointing out here that a book with the title *The Modern Architect* had been published as early as 1854.²⁹ Its author, Edward Shaw, an American carpenter, had no great pretensions as an avant-gardist, but issued practical guidance on how to design timber buildings that looked plausibly Classical and Gothic. Shaw's book significantly pre-dates Otto Wagner's *Moderne Architektur* of 1896, a much more artistically influential work, but the modernity suggested in its title had the same meaning as had been current for a couple of centuries. It was supposed to suggest that it was about the architecture that is normal today, even though it was illustrated mainly with Wagner's own designs. After discussions with Hermann Muthesius, who pointed out the close etymological connectedness of "*mode*" (fashion) and "modern," for the fourth edition (1914) Wagner changed the title to *Die Baukunst unserer Zeit* (*The Building-Art of Our Time*) which makes clear what he had in mind.³⁰

The suggestion that the normal art of the day did not adequately rise to the challenge of connecting with current conditions had certainly been implied by Winckelmann. He was discussing ancient art, but he suggested that it was a profound connection with current conditions in the ancient world that made ancient art so much greater than the art of Winckelmann's own contemporaries. In the nineteenth century, Viollet-Le-Duc called for the forms of new buildings to be re-thought, so that they would properly express the qualities of new building materials, rather than repeating the old forms in new materials. He saw Gothic

architecture in particular as a rational way of using stone, and imagined that as nineteenth-century architects were using iron, that a new architecture should develop from the no-less-rational use of iron.³¹ This belief that there should be a new architecture of the nineteenth century that derived from the properties of building materials and not from imitation of the architectural styles of earlier ages became pervasive among nineteenth-century architects who thought and published their ideas, but it was not evident in most nineteenth-century building.

The great rupture in world history did not arrive with the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century, but with the war of 1914–1918, which saw some 20 million people killed or wounded, many of the deaths caused by starvation because of the disruptions in food production. Stefan Zweig wrote movingly and with conviction in his autobiography about the passing of a world – the cultured Viennese world in which he grew up.³² It vanished with the 1914–1918 war, and was replaced by a more restless but nevertheless intensely creative world (which was suppressed as Nazism took hold in the 1930s). The world of the 1920s was the world of Zweig’s maturity, and the world in which a new vision of modernity took shape. He visited Berlin and Paris, but was formed in Vienna, and he described how he was devoted to study at the expense of everything else, and how he was convinced that contemporary culture was transforming people, so there would be real progress in human affairs. It was an optimism that vanished as the Nazis gained control, but it gives a clear impression of the intense intellectual culture that produced weighty books about the ideas that should drive architecture and the other arts. Their arguments were complex and often baffling, but their conclusions were clear. The spirit of the present and the future was seen to lie in new building materials and industrial manufacture. The cultural problem was how to embrace and give expression to this aspect of things, which was transforming society and making industrialized countries more prosperous and powerful than any had previously been in the history of the world. One could engage with the spirit of the time, or one could choose to be irrelevant. This was not only an aesthetic preference, but something much more urgent in the eyes of its advocates. In British culture there was no appetite for the more densely argued texts, which have been translated only recently as architectural historians have tried to understand better how these ideas took hold.³³

Insular Responses

We see something of the reception of modernism in 1920s’ Britain in Evelyn Waugh’s novel, *Decline and Fall*, in which a flighty creature of fashion (Margot Beste-Chetwynde) demolishes the finest Tudor house in England in order to replace it with “something clean and square.”³⁴ It has just been completed when it enters the story, and 20 pages on we learn that it is demolished some years later.³⁵ The architect is an unsympathetic character, who would prefer to be designing for machines than for people. He is German, from Hamburg, has spent time in Moscow

and at the Bauhaus at Dessau, and is himself so machine-like that he does not sleep.³⁶ The house itself is unforgiving and alienating. There is an aluminum lift, balustrade, and window blinds – aluminum being a very new material in the 1920s – and much glass: a green glass floor, a colonnade of black glass columns – and a vulcanite table. There is a luminous ceiling, a room with a tank of octopi prominent in it, and a floor that is a kaleidoscope, set in motion by an electrical switch.³⁷ This is architecture for fashion victims. It is cultivatedly surreal and programmatically disorienting, but most significantly it is presented as foreign. Not only that, but as coming from a country with which Britain had recently been at war; and building it involved demolishing an emblematically British house. The number of wartime deaths was on such a scale that almost every family had at least one member who had died for the country, and there was resistance to foreign ideas. In Britain, patriotism seemed not only necessary, but also quite natural. In continental Europe there was a feeling that a reformulation of contemporary culture was an imperative, but in Britain there was a strong desire to see continuity with the past. Waugh's fictional foreign architect is presented as annihilating the British past, and the charge was repeated by the folk of Middle England, the architect Sir Reginald Blomfield prominent among them. "Since the war," he says, "Modernism, or '*Modernismus*', as it should be called on the German precedent, has invaded this country like an epidemic, and though there are signs of reaction, its attack is insidious and far-reaching, with the wholly fallacious prospect of a new heaven and earth which it dangles before the younger generation."³⁸ Blomfield presents continental modernist architecture's arrival as an attack – an invasion. There is no need to read between the lines: that is what he says. And he goes on:

The most formidable claim of our young lions in architecture is that they are starting a new manner of their own, and they keep on assuring each other and the public that this is so, in order, I take it, to prevent any misgivings in themselves. They consider that the past has no meaning for them, and that all they have to do is look to the present.³⁹

This is a method that Winckelmann might have advocated as a manner of achieving work of a stature to rival the ancient Greeks', and there were certainly architects who espoused such a view, but equally there were those who sought to defuse Blomfield's argument by showing that the new architecture did have a history, despite what its enthusiasts might say. Nikolaus Pevsner, German, but living in England and writing for a British audience, wrote *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*, which set out to show that "the new style, the genuine and legitimate style of our century, was achieved by 1914."⁴⁰ In other words, there is no need to feel that it is startlingly new: it was already there before the war. If Adolf Loos and especially Walter Gropius saw the realization of this project, the Modern Movement, in foreign places (Vienna and Dessau), it had its start with John Ruskin and William Morris in England. The title of Ruskin's *Modern Painters* (1843) suggests a kindred spirit, and indeed he was like-minded in making strong

connections between art and morality, but his use of the word “modern” was more like Vasari’s than Pevsner’s. More surprisingly Pevsner also cited Oscar Wilde from 1882:

All machinery may be beautiful, when it is undecorated even. Do not seek to decorate it. We cannot but think that all good machinery is graceful, also, the line of the strength and the line of the beauty being one.⁴¹

Wilde was to develop a line of argument against Ruskinian morality in art, and here the line of beauty is presented as the line of mechanical efficiency, rather than sacrifice, truth, or any of Ruskin’s “lamps” of architecture.⁴² So Wilde is invoked in support of the “machine aesthetic” that Pevsner (following Le Corbusier) saw as necessary in modernity. Pevsner’s account of the development of the Modern Movement makes sense strategically because he believed it to be “the genuine and legitimate style of our century” (the twentieth century) and his version of the story was calculated to overcome the resistance of people like Blomfield, by making the Modern Movement seem rather old and rather English, despite its superficial alien novelty. The crucial link was forged by Hermann Muthesius, whose study of the English house was published in German in 1904, commending the practicality and objectivity (*Sachlichkeit*) of English domestic design to a receptive audience.⁴³ However, despite Blomfield’s feeling that an epidemic of alien architecture was sweeping the country, the British public in general were slow to be won over, if indeed won over they have been. The Hegelian idea of progress and destiny, which was certainly espoused by Pevsner and other evangelical modernists, would see the arrival of “the genuine and legitimate style of our century” as more or less inevitable, given time. This was the new formation in the making, the cosmic dust settling round a new nucleus. One could encourage and hasten the arrival of the new architecture, or one could be irrelevant. Therefore one need pay attention only to the architects and buildings that helped the new order to emerge. The attitude is most rousing expressed at the opening of *The Victory of the New Building Style*, by Walter Gehrendt, published in German in 1927 but only recently translated into English.

Influenced by the powerful spiritual forces in which the creative work of our time is embodied, the mighty drama of a sweeping transformation is taking place before our eyes. It is the birth of the *form of our time*. [...] Though the public regards these new building forms with immediate and visible excitement, their unfamiliar appearance often leads to a feeling of unease and incomprehension. For the public, and at best for those members of the profession who have not been hardened by the dead certitude of a doctrine, only one path leads to a vital understanding of the new architecture. These new forms must be shown to be inevitable, so that they will be seen as a natural consequence and logical result of a changed formulation of the problem.⁴⁴

This is the view of architecture that Pevsner promoted in England, pitching his rhetoric in a less exalted register so as not to alarm his readers, but saying the same

thing. People might not like or want these buildings, but they were necessary, correct, and imperative. The modernist manifesto that had the greatest direct influence in Britain was Le Corbusier's *Vers Une Architecture*, which was translated into English in 1927 as *Towards a New Architecture*.⁴⁵ It presents the valid architecture of the day as being dependent on the engineering that produces airplanes and grain silos, ocean liners, and automobiles. Greek temples are compared with cars. It is probably images from this book that informed the satire in *Decline and Fall*, as in 1928 there was no house in England that compared with Margot Beste-Chetwynde's. Given the complex genealogy involved, there probably can be no "first" modernist house in Britain, as it will depend on the definition of "modern" that one is using, as well as a judgment about where to draw the line. However, a significant threshold was crossed when the archaeologist Bernard Ashmole returned from his stint as director of the British School at Rome and abandoned his intention to build an Elizabethan-style house. Instead he employed a young New Zealander who had been studying architecture at the school, Amyas Connell, who in 1930 designed High and Over, a striking three-winged house arranged around a central hexagon. It embraces the landscape in a way that Le Corbusier's villas of the 1920s never did, and it was not set on *pilotis* to separate it from the ground, but its indebtedness to Le Corbusier's text is manifest. Other stylistically similar houses followed, but in numbers that were small compared with the thousands of acres of suburban development in more traditional Tudoresque styles. Berthold Lubetkin arrived from Russia, and designed the penguin pool at London Zoo (1934) and Highpoint in (1933–1935). The Canadian Wells Coates' Lawn Road flats date from 1934, and Erich Mendelsohn's De La Warr Pavilion at Bexhill-on-Sea from 1935 (Fig. 2.2). Meanwhile in New York in 1932, Alfred Barr, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, and Philip Johnson staged a famous exhibition called *The International Style*, which gathered together European buildings that looked as if they were working to a unified aesthetic program. It crystallized an idea of modernity in the minds of its visitors, and those who read the book of the exhibition. The only British building included was a yacht club in Burnham on Crouch by Joseph Emberton (1931) and that was dropped from the book's second edition (1966) by when there were many more works that could have been included, and Emberton's subsequent work had tended to include Art-Deco elements – symmetry, diagonals, geometric decoration – which did not conform with the approved style.

Now if one were to take a definition of modern architecture to be "the architecture characteristic of our time," then these *soi-disant* Modern Movement buildings were not modern at all. They were alien to the time they were built in, but sought to claim legitimacy by being presented as a true and clear-headed response to current conditions. If the massed multitudes of buildings suggested that something else was normal, then they were missing the point. In this frame of reference one would want to say that the International Style buildings were not



FIG. 2.2 The De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, by Erich Mendelsohn.
Source: Photo Dean Thorpe, www.aspexdesign.co.uk.

characteristically modern, but were futuristic. This is the problem with Pevsner as a historian of the present in 1936. He was convinced that he knew the future, and he was piecing together a story that made sense of that future and helped it to come into being. *Pioneers of Modern Design* is a partisan polemic, not a report on the precursors of mainstream British architecture of the 1920s and 1930s, in which modernist works were heavily outnumbered by historically allusive buildings with Tudor or Georgian overtones.

Modernist Tradition

Blomfield characterized the modernist architects as repudiating the past as being without interest to them, and Pevsner's work was one way of rebutting the charge, by showing that the apparently new did in fact have roots in the past. Those roots

anchored the new buildings in a tradition, and also gave value to certain works from the past that might otherwise have passed unnoticed. The idea was further entrenched in the most influential of all modernist texts, Sigfried Giedion's, *Space, Time and Architecture: the Growth of a New Tradition*, which first appeared in 1941. Giedion's illustrations were more persuasive than the argument in his text, which tried to establish that the important modern architects were making use of a new concept of space-time that had something to do with Einstein's ideas. It does not hold water, but the text is dense enough for that not to be immediately apparent.⁴⁶ It belongs to the tradition of heavyweight Germanic books, but had special status because it was published in English in the USA. It went from strength to strength and presented in its various editions the new modernist architecture that met with the approval of CIAM – the Swiss-based international congresses of modern architecture, which were effectively controlled by Le Corbusier, and for which Giedion (who also was Swiss) acted as secretary. The illustrations make it clear what modern architecture is, by showing the authoritative examples. They also make it clear where it came from: nineteenth-century engineering structures, and before that the spatially fluid German Baroque churches. It is probably fair to say, but impossible to verify, that every British architect who started practice in the 1950s and 1960s knew the illustrations in this book. A very much smaller number would actually have read the text. Its difficulty lent the work gravitas, and the architectural works became canonic. Its authority was undermined in the 1970s, when postmodernism broke loose and revisionist histories pointed to Giedion's exclusions and incoherences, but for a generation of British architects it was this text more than any other that established what modern architecture was.

The idea of a new tradition sounds paradoxical, but it is not. All traditions begin at some time or other, some more self-consciously than others. We might think that we are being completely original if we remain ignorant and act spontaneously, but there is a tradition of doing just that. The most firmly rooted traditions are unselfconscious, and we only begin to notice them when they falter. It is then that we start to attach importance to them and make them continue artificially by effort of will.⁴⁷ It is then that we start to conserve buildings and feel that we will lose touch with the past if we change them too much. If we are still operating within the tradition that produced the buildings then we allow ourselves a freer hand in making changes, and of course in those circumstances the tradition seems in some sense "modern." Traditions can develop, and can accept novelty. Indeed when novelty is produced, it is tradition that gives it its meaning, or which finds the novelty meaningless. The poet T. S. Eliot, writing in 1919, explained the idea of tradition with reference to monuments:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone ... what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all

the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new.⁴⁸

With this view of tradition it is clear that the major figures are the innovators whose work leaves the tradition changed, and plainly that change is likely to be a challenging and uncomfortable experience. The “modern” here is “the really new,” which often goes by the name of the *avant-garde* – the vanguard – and that name makes explicit the idea that “the really new” is the advance guard that is arriving early in order to secure the territory for an invading army. If one is on the side of the incoming army, then one welcomes the advance guard as a harbinger of liberation, but the British people has a horror of invasions. Popular opinion has it that the islands have remained inviolate since 1066, and for the generations that lived through the World Wars in particular, *avant-garde* ideas from the continent, that challenged the British tradition, were to be treated with suspicion or hostility.⁴⁹ If intellectuals and experts were enthusiastic about the avant-garde ideas, then that showed that intellectuals and experts were not to be trusted. Middle England continues to feel that it is under attack from the forces of progress, and if one does not already have those instincts oneself, the evidence that they prevail in the country is abundant in the popular press. *Avant-gardism* is still treated as a form of insanity in the tabloid newspapers, but on the high street and on eBay mid-twentieth-century modernism is now an accepted part of the scenery, albeit under a new name “Retro,” which makes it clear that it belongs in the past. This positioning of modernism as something belonging to the past is the definition of “postmodern” attitudes, which were so-labeled as early as 1962, by Pevsner, but to more potent and determined effect by Charles Jencks in 1977.⁵⁰ For Pevsner “postmodern” had been a term of disapproval for buildings designed by architects who had lost sight of the true principles of their art and their age. For Jencks and his contemporaries it was something to be embraced and celebrated, and indeed the current work by high-profile international architects, some of them British, tends to be sculptural and willfully individualistic in its form-making, which would make it post-modern in Pevsner’s as well as Jencks’s sense. However, the term “postmodern” fell out of favor with architects and since the later 1980s has been used mainly as a term of abuse, directed particularly against the more commercial *Kitsch* versions of Jencks’s program. In other disciplines – geography, philosophy, literature, and so on – the meaning that was attached to the term “postmodern” was rather different, and it continued to be used and to cause confusion for another decade.

If we try to categorize the buildings that are actually being designed and built in Britain, then we see various interpretations of modernism being used routinely in commercial and industrial buildings in locations where the aesthetic impact of work is seen to be tolerable. In well-established city centers, however, there is often a requirement to harmonize with more traditional surroundings, especially in places of historic importance. In Britain the cities often have a medieval core, though their great expansion was during the nineteenth century, and given the nation's prosperity at that time, the buildings were often of high quality and deserve to be treated with respect. Where individual choice is given free rein, such as in private-sector housing, the British public continues to feel warmly about designs that have a traditional appearance, and often prefer to live in old houses that have been refurbished. The technology that makes the houses work should be up-to-date, and will include plumbing and electronics that make life more easily comfortable than was possible in the past, but for a house the appearance of something old-fashioned and settled is generally preferred, and indeed is often enforced by planning committees. The adoption of a modernist aesthetic is seen by the general public as a matter of taste rather than the moral imperative that architects used to feel it to be. There is no doubt that the British public has been excited by startling new buildings from time to time, but it would seem to be the case that it would prefer them to be exceptions, rather than the normal fabric of everyday life, and if modernism has taken a hold in Britain, it has done so quietly, undemonstratively and belatedly, while the most high-profile British architects secure their more spectacular commissions abroad.

Notes

- 1 Hartley, L. P. (1953) *The Go-Between*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 7; Lowenthal, D. (1985) *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 2 Thucydides, translated by Crawley, R. (1876) *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, London: Longmans, Green and Co., 4. Thomas Hobbes's translation of 1629 had said "conformable to the wearing of these times," 4. Jowett's translation of 1881 gives "the simple dress which is now common" (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1881) 2 vols, vol. 1, 5. The Loeb edition of 1919, translated by Charles Forster Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919) gives "unpretentious costume after the present fashion," 11. Sir Richard Livingstone published a small-format edition, and adopted Crawley's translation (London: Oxford University Press, 1943). Rex Warner, in what is currently the most widely distributed translation, gives "in accordance with our modern taste" (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954), 38.
- 3 Thucydides, 1919 edn, 3.
- 4 Thucydides, 1876 edn, 1.
- 5 Vasari, G. (1822–1823) *Opere di Giorgio Vasari: pittore e architetto Aretino*, Firenze: Presso S. Audin, 6 vols. Vol. 1, cciii.
- 6 Vasari (1822–1823) Vol. 1, cxcv.

- 7 Vasari (1822–1823) Vol. 1, ccv.
- 8 Vasari (1822–1823) Vol. 1, *Goti*, clxxxvii; *tedeschi*, cxcv.
- 9 Lynch, J. (2002) *The Age of Elizabeth in the Age of Johnson*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 66; citing St. John, H., Viscount Bolingbroke (1972) *Historical Writings*, edited by Isaac Kramnick. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 81–83, and Hume, D. (1983) *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688*, 6 vols, Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, vol. 3, 82.
- 10 Lynch, J. (2007) *Becoming Shakespeare*, New York: Walker and Company.
- 11 Fielding, H. *Tom Jones*, Book XIII, end of chapter 5.
- 12 Fielding, H. *Tom Jones*, Book I, chapter 4.
- 13 Fielding, H. *Tom Jones*, Book I, chapter 4.
- 14 Winckelmann, J. J. ([1767] 2006) *Anmerkungen über die Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (Dresden) translated by Harry Francis Mallgrave, *History of the Art of Antiquity*, Los Angeles, CA: Getty Foundation, 186.
- 15 Winckelmann (1767), 33.
- 16 Winckelmann (1767), 35.
- 17 Payne Knight, R. (1795) *The Landscape: a Didactic Poem* (1795), 30; and see Ballantyne, A. (1997) *Architecture, Landscape and Liberty: Richard Payne Knight and the Picturesque*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 41.
- 18 Ballantyne (1997), 275.
- 19 Ballantyne (1997), 253; citing Lipscomb, G. (1802) *A Journey into South Wales*, London, 268–271.
- 20 Ballantyne (1997), 258–259, citing Payne Knight, R. ([1805] 1808) *Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste*, London, 224.
- 21 Bury, J. B. (1932) *The Idea of Progress*, London: Macmillan.
- 22 Rickman, T. (1817) *An Attempt to Discriminate the Styles of English Architecture from the Conquest to the Reformation*, London.
- 23 Hegel, G. W. F. (1807) *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, translated by Bamberg and Würzburg, *Phenomenology of Spirit*; Hegel, E. Gans (ed.) (1837) *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*, translated by J. Sibree, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (1857, reprinted London: George Bell and Sons, 1902).
- 24 Semper, G. ([1860] 1863) *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten, oder Praktische Aesthetik, ein Handbuch für Techniker, Künstler und Kunstfreunde*, 2 vols, Frankfurt am Main: Verlag für Kunst und Wissenschaft; Munich: F. Bruckmann (1863) translated by H. F. Mallgrave; and M. Robinson (2004) *Style in the Tectonic Arts, or, Practical Aesthetics*, Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 71.
- 25 Semper, G. ([1852] 1989) translated by H. F. Mallgrave and W. Herrmann, “science, industry, and art: proposals for the development of a national taste in art at the closing of the London Industrial Exhibition” in Gottfried Semper, *The Four Elements of Architecture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 130–167. Various attempts to reinvent architecture from “first principles” had gathered momentum in the eighteenth century with Laugier’s *Essai sur l’architecture* of 1753, which proposed the abandonment of elaborate baroque ornament in favor of an architecture of load-bearing columns and useful walls; and with Quatremère de Quincy, who traced different architectural traditions back to the timber hut, the cave, and the tent.
- 26 Semper, G. ([1852] 1989), 137.

- 27 Baudelaire, C. (1863) *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, written during 1859, and first published in *Le Figaro* in three installments, November 26, 1863, November 29, 1863, and December 3, 1863; translated by P. E. Charvet, "The Painter of Modern Life," in Baudelaire, C. (1992) *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- 28 Baudelaire, C. (1863), 403.
- 29 Shaw, E. (1854) *The Modern Architect*. Boston, MA: Dayton and Wentworth.
- 30 Wagner, O. (1896) *Moderne Architektur, 1896* (also 1898, 1902 and then as *Die Baukunst unserer Zeit – Architecture of Our Time –* in 1914).
- 31 Viollet-Le-Duc, E. (1858–1872) *Entretiens sur l'architecture*, 2 vols, Paris, translated by H. Van Brunt (1875) *Discourses on Architecture*, New York.
- 32 Zweig, S. ([1942] 1964) *Die Welt von Gestern*, translated, *The World of Yesteryear*, New York: Viking; republished Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- 33 See for example Semper's *Der Stil*, *op. cit.*, translated in 2004, or Riegl, A. (1893) *Stilfragen* (Berlin) translated by Evelyn Kain (1993) *Problems of Style: Foundations for a History of Ornament*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- 34 Waugh, E. ([1928] 1993) *Decline and Fall*, London: Chapman and Hall, page references to Everyman edition, London: Everyman, 1993, 98, 100.
- 35 Waugh, E. ([1928] 1993), 121.
- 36 Waugh, E. ([1928] 1993), 103, 108.
- 37 Waugh, E. ([1928] 1993), 105, 106, 108, 120, 121.
- 38 Blomfield, R. (1934) *Modernismus*, London: Macmillan, v–vi.
- 39 Blomfield, R. (1934), 9.
- 40 Pevsner, N. (1936) *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*, London: Faber and Faber, 38.
- 41 Pevsner, N. (1936), 27.
- 42 Ruskin, J. (1849) *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, London.
- 43 Pevsner, N. (1936), 32–33. Muthesius, H. (1904) *Das Englische Haus*, 3 vols, Berlin: Wasmuth, edited by D. Sharp, translated by J. Seligman and S. Spencer (2007) *The English House*, 3 vols, Frances Lincoln.
- 44 Behrendt, W. (1927) translated by H. F. Mallgrave (2000) *The Victory of the New Building Style*, Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 89.
- 45 Le Corbusier (1924) *Vers une architecture*, Paris: Crès, translated by F. Etchells (1927) *Towards a New Architecture*, London: John Rodker, translated by J. Goodman (2007) *Towards an Architecture*, Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute.
- 46 Watkin, D. (1977) *Morality and Architecture: the Development of a Theme in Architectural History and Theory from the Gothic Revival to the Modern Movement*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Watkin, D. (2001) *Morality and Architecture Revisited*, Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.
- 47 Pierre Nora has coined the term "*lieu de mémoire*" for such objects. See Nora, P. (1992) *Les Lieux de mémoire*, 3 vols, Paris: Gallimard, translated by A. Goldhammer (1996) *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, 3 vols, New York: Columbia University Press.
- 48 Eliot, T. S. (1932) "Tradition and the individual talent," in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, London: Methuen, 15.
- 49 HRH The Prince of Wales (1989) *A Vision of Britain: a Personal View of Architecture*, London: Doubleday; Latour, B. (1991) *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes*, Paris:

Editions la Découverte, translated by C. Porter (1993) *We Have Never Been Modern*, New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

- 50 Pevsner, N. (1962) *Norfolk*, in the series *The Buildings of England* (Harmondsworth: Allen Lane) described housing by Tayler and Green as “post-modern, if by modern one still understands what is now familiar as the International Style of the 1930s.” Quoted by Hugh Pearman, “Modernism – or should that be Modernwasm?” in *Gabion*, <http://www.hughpearman.com/2006/08.html>. Jencks, C. (1977) *The Language of Postmodern Architecture*, New York: Rizzoli. The book was very influential, and documented its own influence in the later editions.

English Art and Principled Aesthetics

Janet Wolff*

The opening address at a conference on English art at the University of York in July 1997 proved to be an unexpectedly controversial event.¹ The speaker was Charles Harrison, whose book, *English Art and Modernism 1900–1939*, had been instrumental in stimulating debate and research on twentieth-century English art. Since the book's first publication in 1981 there has been an enormous proliferation of work on English (and more generally British) modern art, which had received only sporadic, and primarily specialist, attention before that date (for instance, in the form of monographs and exhibitions devoted to a few select artists). In the three decades since the publication of Harrison's book, we have seen the growth of a substantial field of study, manifest in catalogues, books, book series, and the journal *Visual Culture in Britain*, whose first issue appeared in 2000.² The assumption behind this new enthusiasm, implicit and sometimes explicit, has been that English art of the period is, after all, worth talking about, despite its historic marginalization and its relative invisibility on the international scene. So for many at the 1997 conference it was something of a shock to hear Harrison apparently denigrate English art, and register doubts and second thoughts about his earlier interest in certain English artists. His argument was taken by some of his audience to be that, since the category of "Englishness" is irrelevant in the aesthetic evaluation of works of art, we cannot make a special case for English art. Instead, this must be judged by "non-sociological" aesthetic standards, by which it will very likely appear inferior.³ The conference organizers themselves clearly interpreted this as an unequivocal challenge to the field, suggesting that in the later essay version of his address Harrison "argued that the category of the modern in fact does not pertain to the art of England and that English art has little claim on our attention, either as an expression of modern experience or for aesthetic reasons."⁴

In fact this was not Harrison's point. Rather than arguing that the category of the modern does not pertain to the art of England, he was suggesting the reverse: that the category of "Englishness" is unhelpful in exploring modern art in England. Nor did he maintain that English art is worthless – indeed he spoke (and later wrote) enthusiastically about the paintings of Gwen John. This judgment, he now maintained, has to be made in *aesthetic* terms, and not through the lens of a presumed national identity or set of characteristics.

My conclusion was that ... there could be no viable study of the modern, whether in English art or in art at large, without some non-sociological grounds upon which to determine what is and is not deserving of attention. And by non-sociological I mean adequately theorised in aesthetic, or formal, or, let us say, Greenbergian terms – a requirement which seemed to rule out any use of Englishness as a criterion.⁵

With this change of perspective, he now re-thought his earlier admiration for the abstract reliefs and sculptures of Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth, whose lack of insularity and whose engagement with the international avant-garde had seemed paramount. Now, he says, a certain conservatism has become visible in Nicholson's work. On the other hand, "it has become easier to perceive the relative technical and psychological sophistication of Gwen John's work, and to connect that sophistication to a renewed sense of modernism."⁶ The reasons for this aesthetic shift, the revaluation of works, is partly to do with the changed circumstances (from the late 1970s, when he was writing his book, to the late 1990s, when he gave his address); and partly because he increasingly came to the conclusion that aesthetic judgments have, or should have, nothing to do with sociological facts like Englishness and internationalism.

I want to consider what is at stake in the (re)evaluation of English art. I am interested in general in the fate of aesthetics after cultural critique, by which I mean the multiple and diverse challenges in the past three decades to the notions of a "pure" aesthetic and of universal and transcendent values in art.⁷ And I am interested in particular in the case of English modern art, and the basis (both sociological and aesthetic) of its new visibility in both the gallery and the academy. I will come back to the work of Gwen John, to consider the grounds for Harrison's (and others') high opinion of her work, since it is generally agreed that she has been "rediscovered" in recent years.⁸ I will also look at the work of the three artists of the Bloomsbury Group – Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant, and Roger Fry – since I think they provide a useful case study for examining aesthetic discourse about English painting. The central question in all of this is how we assess works of art. Lisa Tickner has made the important point that, when we have done the valuable work of demonstrating the various social factors in play in privileging certain work, determining which people have access to art, and producing particular ideological effects in the works themselves, we still have not

answered the primary question of aesthetics: how good is it? As she says, “the question of value doesn’t go away because the emphasis shifts from value to meaning.”⁹ This question of aesthetic value poses particular problems for English art of the early twentieth century, only recently retrieved from obscurity and now challenged to demonstrate its worth.

It is by now well established that from the middle of the twentieth century the dominant story of modern art was defined by New York (in particular the Museum of Modern Art, and certain key curators and critics) and characterized by a Franco-centric prejudice. The narrative traced the development of modern art (already narrowed down to *modernism*) from post-impressionism through Cézanne, cubism, and surrealism to American abstract expressionism. This narrative was confirmed and rendered material in the collections and layout of the major art galleries, in art history books and in college and school curricula. The corollary of this trajectory was the exclusion and denigration of other artists and movements. German expressionism and Russian constructivism, among the great early twentieth-century modernist movements, were perceived as secondary to the cubo-futurist tradition.¹⁰ Non-modernist modern art (figurative work, more traditional realist painting), such as the work of the American realist painters of the Ashcan School, was more or less ignored. The only American art of the early twentieth century taken seriously in the post-war period was the work of the modernist artists associated with the gallery of Alfred Stieglitz (Marsden Hartley, Arthur Dove, Georgia O’Keeffe, John Marin), precisionists (Charles Sheeler, Charles Demuth, Elsie Driggs, Ralston Crawford), synchronists (Morgan Russell, Stanton Macdonald-Wright), and one or two others (Stuart Davis, Max Weber, for example).¹¹ But many of these artists were not well known outside the United States, and considered inferior to the European modernists at home. The “MoMA narrative” had no place at all for English art. Even those English artists who adopted and adapted cubist, futurist, and fauvist styles (Mark Gertler, David Bomberg, Wyndham Lewis, and others) did not emerge onto the international scene, and are not included in major collections outside Britain. Where they are known, they are likely to be judged poor imitations of their Continental counterparts.

The past couple of decades have seen a radical re-thinking of this orthodoxy. Figurative and realist art has been re-valued and presented in major exhibitions and is highly visible in the art market.¹² And although English modern artists have not become, and seem unlikely to become, better known in New York, at home they have achieved a new respectability, and gained a new respect, through the work of scholars, curators, and gallery owners. And yet the problem of value – the question of aesthetics – hangs over this revisionist project. The organizers of the York conference are straightforward in their objection to the “long series of dismissals which deny the importance of English art to any history of modernism,” and they reject the assumption that the same standards apply across cultures:

It is true that English art made between, say, 1860 and 1914 does not strongly resemble the most celebrated examples of French modernist painting and sculpture. But why should we expect it to? How could cultures with different histories, which inherited different languages of representation and were possessed of different audiences, produce comparable work? There is no reason to assume that an account derived from the circumstances of one culture will adequately describe the conditions of another. Judging the achievements of one culture according to the norms of another is a certain recipe for missing what is characteristic and significant in the culture that you intend to explain.¹³

Their particular complaint is about the assumption that only modernist art is adequate to modern life – that non-modernist modern art (realist or figurative work) is not the art of modernity.¹⁴ But this raises a more general question, about the transfer of values across fields. Is it, after all, the case that aesthetic judgment is not based on universal standards? Does it make sense to claim that English art should be judged by different criteria than French art? The question “how good is it?” has not been answered by laying bare the (non-aesthetic) processes and values involved in the side-lining of a tradition. This, I think, was Charles Harrison’s concern in returning to consider the implications of invoking “Englishness” as both a response to the Franco-centric narrative and a basis for a competing aesthetics. But it is far from clear that the “formal ... Greenbergian terms” he reverts to will prove adequate here. In fact, he goes on to make a very different (and at first sight anti-Greenbergian) argument: that aesthetic evaluation is something mobile, subject to the particularities of place and time. After all, he insists that he has not changed his mind about either Ben Nicholson or Gwen John. He also asserts that works do have stable and intrinsic properties. His point is that the circumstances of viewing (and judging) are in flux, with the consequence that perceived value is in some important sense provisional.

How we perceive and understand the work of art is a matter which is subject to continual change in accordance with shifts in our knowledge, interests, cognitive capacities, and material circumstances, however banal. I am saying neither that Nicholson’s work has somehow got worse, nor that my judgement has got better. I am saying that as the projective political implications of that work have come to seem less interesting, it has become harder to ignore those aspects which were always present as signs of its psychological conservatism.¹⁵

Aesthetic judgment, on this view, is a relative affair, dependent on circumstances and in general a product of specific historical factors. This is not exactly an answer to the question of how good a work of art is, and it still leaves open the possibility that some of the “stable and intrinsic properties” of works might transcend these contingent judgments. But I think we can probably do no better than accept what we might call the “situated aesthetics” underlying Harrison’s explanation

for his change of heart (whatever we happen to think about either Ben Nicholson or Gwen John as specific examples). The task is to formulate more carefully the principles of such an aesthetic theory, and then to consider in what way (if at all) it differs from the radical relativism that has seemed to be the product of critical theories of art and culture.

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In another context, I have suggested that aesthetics can usefully take its lead from recent work in moral and political theory.¹⁶ All three fields have had to deal with the crisis resulting from the demolition of those universals we inherit from Enlightenment thought. The ethical dilemma produced by the charge of ethnocentrism is how it is possible to justify the promotion of western liberal ideals to other cultures. Moral and political philosophers have accepted this challenge, refusing either to revive pre-critical “universal values” or to abandon the possibility of principled positions.¹⁷ Indeed, some have welcomed the contemporary state of lack of certainty as a basis for a truly moral position. As Zygmunt Bauman has put it: “Uncertainty is the home ground of the moral person and the only soil out of which morality can spring shoots and flourish.”¹⁸ The point is that a genuinely principled ethics emerges from the negotiation of values in dialogue. Similarly in the case of aesthetics, we start from the recognition that there are no universal aesthetic values that transcend the contingencies of time and place or the interests and investments of diverse social groups. Nor are there necessarily agreed criteria of evaluation. Instead, as I concluded at the time, “the establishment of criteria of judgment and of hierarchies of works of art is, ideally, the product of reflexive deliberation in the context of communities of interpretation.”¹⁹ The reference both to reflexivity and to communities is, I think, important here. Others responding to the problem of relativism have accepted the contingency of value, and for them the persistence of value across time and place is simply the accumulation of consecutive and continuing evaluations – in this sense, then, ultimately still provisional and arbitrary.²⁰ On this view, competing aesthetic values cannot be reconciled on any common ground. Opposed to this is the dialogic approach, premised on the belief that out of dialogue, negotiation, and debate agreement can be reached and new, perhaps composite, aesthetic judgments and regimes produced. However, the discursive model that underlies this type of pragmatist account (that is, a model of conversation and debate) ignores something crucial about the nature of dialogue: namely that it takes place in a social context, and this often produces unequal voices and unequal access to the power of persuasion. A sociological account, which pays careful attention to the situation and structure of the communities involved in aesthetic discourse, is essential for any useful theory of “uncertain” and “principled” aesthetics. Such an approach is reflexive in its commitment to laying bare the basis – social, cultural, ideological – of any judgment, including one’s own.²¹

How does this help in addressing the problem of English art? The aesthetics of relativism (perhaps implied by the statement of the York conference organizers, quoted earlier) might conclude that there are simply competing value systems, and that (for example) there is no way of comparing English art with French art of the period, or, more importantly, assessing their competing claims. On that view, the fact that a hierarchy of values – a canon – has emerged, which has marginalized modern English art, would be seen as an effect of the relative power of art markets, art institutions, and art professionals. That is, for a series of complex social and historical (and economic) reasons, one account of twentieth-century art became dominant.²² But the main conclusion would be that English art, in general, is not comparable with the art of other cultures. A dialogic account (including the kind of approach I am proposing as a “principled aesthetics”) would be able to go further than this, and consider the possibilities of cross-cultural aesthetic evaluation. It would not, importantly, insist on deference to the dominant aesthetic, but instead initiate dialogue based on recognition of the social production of that aesthetic (that is, based on reflexivity). At the same time, the criteria for judgment would be made explicit, whether formal (composition, line and color, innovation), extrinsic (content) or more subjective (beauty, connotation, pleasure). The art-historical revisionism that has taken place in the past three decades, challenging the privilege of the MoMA story, may well make this possible. Although this story is now established in the materiality of the major collections, and therefore fixed in a certain way, it is not out of the question that through the mechanism of visiting exhibitions, as well as the publication of catalogues and both scholarly and non-academic books, English artists of the first half of the twentieth century will achieve the attention and interest they have so far failed to receive outside Britain.

In the rest of the essay I will look in some detail at the critical language employed with regard to four English artists. What is quite striking is the tendency, even among the most dedicated promoters of these artists’ work, to assume an international or universal aesthetic, with half-apologetic asides about the limited claims to be made about their work. For example, Cecily Langdale, a long-time aficionado of Gwen John’s work, partner of a gallery which shows and sells John’s work, and author of a major study, with catalogue raisonné, of her paintings says this in the conclusion of her book:

It would be a mistake to claim too much for her. She was not a major historical force, affecting those who followed; she neither set new problems nor discovered new solutions. Her art for the most part turns its face from the greater world, choosing instead to explore shy corners of feeling. But in the riches of that “interior life”, in the beauty, integrity and fierce resolve of her work – in the whole brave isolation of her career – lies that strange mixture of gift and will that can only be termed genius. Though perhaps a minor one, she must nonetheless be acclaimed as an enduring master.²³

And Richard Shone, author of a book on the Bloomsbury artists, and curator of a major exhibition of their work in 2000, is equally modest in his claims, inserting this comment in the last paragraph of his essay in the exhibition catalogue:

Although their work carries little of the weight and resonance of some of their pre-eminent European contemporaries, it is conspicuously adventurous in Britain.²⁴

Of course the question is by what criteria John is judged only a “minor” master, and Vanessa Bell and her Bloomsbury colleagues less “weighty” than European artists. In the next two sections I cite and discuss a range of opinions about the work of these artists, before concluding with some thoughts on how a principled aesthetics might approach these and consider the basis and the validity of such hierarchical ranking.

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The catalogue to a major 2004–2005 exhibition of the work of Gwen John and her brother Augustus John begins with the claim that Gwen “almost disappeared from history, but her reputation has been recently revived and she has become an artist of international repute.”²⁵ Indeed, there is a certain perception that Gwen John has in recent years, and for the first time, emerged from an obscurity that characterized her lifetime and the years since her death in 1939.²⁶ This is often put down to her self-imposed exile from the art world and her choice of the life of a recluse, a view that has been challenged by Alicia Foster.²⁷ It has also been assumed that both she and her work were overshadowed by the more public and flamboyant life and the more successful work of her brother, Augustus (though almost every text on Gwen John makes a point of quoting Augustus’s own prediction that 50 years after his death he would be remembered as Gwen John’s brother²⁸). But a review of the critical reception of her work reveals a more complex history of aesthetic judgment. Although her reputation has grown enormously in the past 20 years, she had her supporters and enthusiasts among critics, curators, and collectors from the very beginning of her career. It is worth looking at a few examples of this critical response over a 100-year period before coming back to the question of the social basis of aesthetic judgments.

In the early twentieth century, during Gwen John’s active career, she gained many complimentary, and some superlative, reviews. In 1926, she was described as “a sort of modern Vermeer.” Her 1907 portrait of Chloe Boughton-Leigh, exhibited at the New English Art Club in 1908, was considered by T. Martin Wood, writing in *The Studio*, “one of the greatest achievements in this exhibition because of [its] sincerity.” John Quinn, the American collector who was her great supporter, said of a later portrait of Chloe Boughton-Leigh, “I think it is finer than anything of that kind that Whistler ever did.” Wyndham Lewis wrote an admiring piece about her in *The Listener* after her death. John Quinn lent her

1911 painting, *Girl Reading at a Window*, to the landmark 1913 Armory Show in New York. In 1917, her painting *Nude Girl* (1909–1910) was presented by its first owner to the Tate Gallery, the first of her works in a public collection.²⁹ In the following decades, her work continued to receive praise from important figures in the art world. Alfred Barr, who became the first director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, is quoted by Lisa Tickner as praising the three paintings by Gwen John that were by 1928 in the Tate Gallery, “which by their subtlety and color, make the work of her flashy brother seem awkward and uncertain.” She also quotes John Rothenstein, in his 1952 *Modern English Painters*, as describing John as “one of the finest painters of our time and country.” And writing in *The Observer Review* in 1968, Nigel Gosling has this to say:

The force of this almost obsessive reticence is astonishing ... the extreme subtlety and reticence of the exquisite tonal arrangements ... is a chief source of delight in the oil paintings ... the essential mystery and atmosphere of these little works ... depend on the intense vision... Its power within awesomely restricted means is reminiscent of Morandi's.³⁰

The language of these reviews gives a clue to the basis of the judgment in some cases. Subtlety is valued as against “flashiness.” Reticence, mystery, and atmosphere are important attributes of the paintings, and their achievement by “awesomely restricted means” seen as a great advantage. If we look at John’s 1903–1904 painting *The Student*, we can see these qualities manifest (Fig. 3.1). The tonal range is minimal, contributing to the quality of the piece as a chamber work. The solitary figure, her downward gaze and her self-absorption, produce both a sense of calmness (reinforced too by the books in her hand and on the table, alluding to immersion in reading) and a certain intensity. (Unusually for John, the effects of light also produce a suggestion of drama, as the figure is front-lit, with the edge of its looming shadow visible to the left of the frame.) Here too it was the modest and self-contained nature of the painting and its subject which gained praise, as in Lawrence Binyon’s 1909 discussion of its “singular delicacy and beauty.”³¹ The painting is one of several Gwen John made of Dorelia McNeill, her close friend at that time (when they were both living in Toulouse), and also the lover of her brother Augustus, whose many paintings and drawings of Dorelia construct an entirely different person – sensuous and bohemian as opposed to Gwen John’s version of a more introverted and thoughtful woman. This is an early painting of John’s, in which she is still using the rich color and careful layering she had learned as a student at the Slade. As Mary Bustin has shown, after 1910 John abandoned this for an increasingly “Spartan method of painting,” with more fluency and immediacy.³² As a result, her later paintings (more likely the ones the various reviewers I have quoted had seen) were even better able to capture the ephemeral but intense moment of the interior scene.

Although John’s reviews were not uniformly positive (David Fraser Jenkins quotes a particularly dismissive one from 1901, describing her work as “altogether



FIG. 3.1 Gwen John, *The Student*.
Source: © Manchester City Art Galleries.

wanting in every pleasant quality”), it is interesting to see that the terms of praise did not vary much from the early twentieth century through to some of the most recent responses.³³ And yet I still want to make the case that aesthetic evaluation is always situational, and a product of its contemporary culture and its values. The continuities of judgment (and there were also, we can be sure, other, more critical responses) point to the persistence across the decades of certain values, particular investments and, not least, the staying-power of art-critical discourse itself (as critics inevitably take up and respond to the judgments of earlier critics). It is the discontinuities that are illuminating, and that expose the cultural shifts subtly or dramatically registered in changes in aesthetic regimes. The changing fortunes of Augustus John’s work perhaps confirm this more than Gwen John’s own history. The Tate exhibition organizer refers to a “cross-over” in the relative appreciation of

Gwen and Augustus in 1926, with the former in the ascendancy and the latter in decline. It is suggested that the Symbolist art that Augustus favored was no longer in vogue by that date, and that his rather uncritical overproduction of work inevitably entailed a fall in quality.³⁴ With a fuller range of contemporary reviews, it would be interesting to explore the different constituencies (writers, journals, groups) that favored one artist rather than another, one style of work over another. I think one could also make the case that although John has found an admiring audience among her viewers from early in her career and since, certain cultural shifts have privileged the kind of work she did. There is no question that the feminist revisions of art history, which date from the 1970s, have been crucial in the “rediscovery” and promotion of women artists. Gwen John is included in several of the key texts of 1970s feminist art history.³⁵ In addition, it is not only her gender but also the nature of her work that feminists have valued, and helped make respectable – the intimacy, domesticity, female-centeredness in its subjects and subject matter.³⁶ Also relevant to the re-evaluation of John’s work has been

the aesthetic revisionism that has brought more traditional figurative art back into the mainstream; a sociology of aesthetic taste would need to look closely at the discourses and interests involved in this transformation.³⁷ Here I am only suggesting what the analysis of the critical judgment of Gwen John's work might involve. The question of whether it is "any good" is unavoidably a question of considering past and present aesthetic judgments and their context, as much as it is a matter of composition, form, and originality.

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The Bloomsbury artists have fared less well than Gwen John. The *Guardian* correspondent greeted the major Tate exhibition of their work in 1999 by describing it as "an ambitious attempt ... to rescue the word Bloomsbury from a century of derision."³⁸ When the show travelled to the Yale Center for British Art, *The New York Times* opened its review with the remark that "the art has the earmarks of provincialism."³⁹ I have already noted that the curator, Richard Shone, himself appeared to see the work of Bell, Grant, and Fry as less important than that of their European contemporaries. Defending Vanessa Bell against accusations of merely "pleasant, thoughtful paintings," which proclaim "the unadventurous status quo of the English middle classes," Richard Morphet, in an essay in the exhibition catalogue, can only manage a rather weak defense:

One of many texts which imply that in order to be significant art must "develop", this seems to overlook the quiet strength of painting that draws on long experience, slows the viewer down as the means of disclosing its content, both plastic and affective, and has greater stamina in the long run than much work that is more "progressive"... Bloomsbury's finest still lifes reflect the artists' increasing indifference to the demands of idiomatic advance. While certain qualities were thereby lost (a problem compounded by a degree of overproduction) others, associated with the very inwardness of the works, were gained. Today's is not perhaps the most propitious climate for the recognition of these lasting qualities.⁴⁰

(There is, incidentally, a resonance here with the Augustus/Gwen John comparison – weakness resulting from overproduction as against the appeal and success of more "inward" paintings.) The literature on the Bloomsbury artists is full of disappointment, dismissive terminology, and faint praise: "thin and amateurish," "uneven" output, "workmanlike quality," "always a trifle disappointing."⁴¹ Sometimes this works indirectly, by comparing one with another (Bell often seen as inferior to Grant) or by citing the three artists' criticisms of one another's work (for example, Bell and Grant's "unflattering view" of much of Fry's work; or, more self-deprecatingly, Bell's being convinced of Grant's "greater gifts").⁴² The main criticisms are that the artists were too eclectic in style, picking up and dropping different influences and



FIG. 3.2 Roger Fry, *Self-portrait*, oil on canvas, 1928.

Source: © Samuel Courtauld Trust, The Courtauld Gallery, London, UK/The Bridgeman Art Library.

approaches; that they (and especially Grant) were too prolific, sacrificing quality in the process; that a good deal of their work consisted of poor imitation of Cézanne or Matisse; and that their purely abstract work was generally uninteresting and uninspired. Indeed, the catalogue entry for Vanessa Bell's 1914 *Abstract Painting* points out that this was merely an academic exercise for which she felt no real passion.⁴³

Against this background and history of aesthetic denigration it is illuminating to pick out the compliments, and to discover which works were judged "good." Lisa Tickner, comparing a number of paintings and sketches of Studland Bay by Vanessa Bell, is clear that one of them (*Studland Beach*, c. 1912, now in the Tate Gallery) is superior to the others.⁴⁴ Andrew Causey and Charles

Harrison have both said that the por-

traits by the Bloomsbury artists are better than their other work.⁴⁵ Richard Morphet talks about Grant's "final flowering" in the 1960s and 1970s, after his renewed contact with the European avant-garde.⁴⁶ And at least one abstract work by Grant is singled out for special praise.⁴⁷ This suggests both that it is unhelpful to judge (or dismiss) a body of work as a whole and that the particular assessment of individual works is based on specific aesthetic criteria. Grant's 1917–1918 portrait of Bell may reveal its fauvist influences; nevertheless, it has been judged a successful portrait, which "captures some of the qualities for which Bell was revered by her friends; she appears both seductive and monolithic, straightforward and mysterious."⁴⁸ Roger Fry's 1928 self-portrait (Fig. 3.2; in Courtauld Institute of Art Gallery), whose directness and immediate sense of character reminds us as much of German expressionist and Neue Sachlichkeit portraits as it does of the post-impressionist revolution in style, also invites us to judge it in its own terms. The fact of European influence (absolutely and explicitly clear for all three Bloomsbury artists) does not entail that the work will be derivative. What the artists make of their influences, how they adapt them to their own particular subject matter and concerns, their own (*pace* Harrison) English heritage, is an entirely open question, and the work is judged accordingly. But it would be as well to confront directly the assumed aesthetic standard, with its Franco-centric bias, which operates subtly even

among English critics, inclining them to denigrate English modern art as a poor imitation. Here we come back directly to the question of the grounds of aesthetic judgment.

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As we saw earlier, both Charles Harrison and Lisa Tickner insist that aesthetic judgment is distinct from assessment of the social origins, uses, or meanings of a work of art. Harrison offers formal (Greenbergian) criteria as key to this. Tickner, though equally opposed to the reduction of aesthetics to sociology, is less willing to return to a pure (Kantian) aesthetics and instead proposes a radically contingent approach that sees artistic value, and its persistence in time (and in the canon), as the successive evaluations of situated social actors. But this only reproduces, in a different form, the sociological account, as is clear from this passage:

A work that has ceased to be valued (books out of print, paintings in basements) may be rediscovered and rescued when its original functions are again desired or “when different of its properties and possible functions become foregrounded by a new set of subjects with emergent interests and purposes.”⁴⁹

The question of the intrinsic evaluation of works is avoided entirely in this account. More useful is her invocation, earlier in the essay, of Bourdieu’s concept of the “field of cultural production,” which brings into view the complex array and intersections of institutions, individuals, and discourses in the specific field of visual art. There is room here for the aesthetic values in play in a particular context – the judgments made about composition, tonal quality, formal innovation, and so on. These are the criteria usually invoked (or implicit) when we call a painting “good.” These criteria too are historically variable – but they are distinct from questions of interest and use. In practice, aesthetic judgments often mix the purely formal with referential criteria, which, though not directly expressions of interest, may be traced to social or political values. In the cases of Gwen John and the Bloomsbury artists, we have seen that critics talk about the intimacy of the paintings, the character of the figure portrayed, at the same time as they analyse color and composition.

But it is not a question of the “right” criteria for aesthetic judgment. In some ways, it does not matter whether judgments are “purely” formal or informed by personal or social interests. My argument here is that the important project is to make transparent the grounds for judgment, as well as the possible interests invested in evaluations (for example, the feminist interest in Gwen John). Such interests do not invalidate aesthetic judgment, though they do require us to support it in non-sociological terms. With regard to the situation of English modern art on the international scene, the recent relaxation of the dominant, Franco-centric, story of modernism has certainly opened the way to dialogue about alternative aesthetic regimes. It makes possible a debate about the relative

qualities of the so-far separate visual cultures, without either assuming the superiority of one or accepting the incommensurability of the two. A principled aesthetics, explicit about the cultural context of judgments, takes English art on its own terms without absconding from the broader, more challenging, questions of the value of art.

Notes

- * A version of this essay was published in Janet Wolff (2008) *The Aesthetics of Uncertainty*, Columbia University Press.
- 1 The conference was “Rethinking Englishness: English Art 1880–1940.” It was organized by David Peters Corbett, Ysanne Holt, Lara Perry, and Fiona Russell.
- 2 A very abbreviated list of publications includes the two collections which came out of the York conference, Peters Corbett, D. and Perry, L. (eds) (2000) *English Art 1860–1914*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, and Peters Corbett, D., Holt, Y. and Russell, F. (eds) (2002) *The Geographies of Englishness: Landscape and the National Past 1880–1940*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press; Peters Corbett, D. (1997) *The Modernity of English Art 1914–30*, Manchester: Manchester University Press; Tickner, L. (2000) *Modern Life and Modern Subjects: British Art in the Early Twentieth Century*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press. Exhibitions include *British Art in the 20th Century: the Modern Movement*, Royal Academy of Arts 1987; *Modern Art in Britain 1910–1914*, Barbican Art Gallery, 1997; and numerous specific exhibitions of the work of David Bomberg, Mark Gertler, Gwen John, the Bloomsbury Group, and many others.
- 3 His particular example of radical re-thinking here is the abstract art of Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth, whose work he commended in the book. In the lecture, and in the version of it subsequently published as an essay, he compares Nicholson unfavorably with Mondrian and Rothko (Harrison, C. (1999) “‘Englishness’ and ‘Modernism’ revisited,” *Modernism/Modernity*, 6, 1, 85).
- 4 Peters Corbett and Perry (2000), 1. See Harrison (1999).
- 5 Harrison (1999), 79.
- 6 Harrison (1999), 86.
- 7 These critiques include feminist and post-colonial approaches, which have made clear the exclusionary practices involved in canon formation; sociological work on art institutions (the museum, the art academy, the dealer–critic system), which shows the particular interests involved in the selection and promotion of some works/artists/styles and not others; interpretative strategies (hermeneutics, ideology-critique, semiotics, psychoanalytic criticism) that challenge traditional notions of the purely formal character of art.
- 8 Her work has been included in many of the key texts of feminist art-historical revisionism, starting in the mid-1970s. See, for example, Tufts, E. (1974) *Our Hidden Heritage: Five Centuries of Women Artists*, New York and London: Paddington; Petersen, K. and Wilson, J. J. (1976) *Women Artists: Recognition and Reappraisal from the Early Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century*, New York: Harper and Row; Sutherland Harris, A. and Nochlin, L. (1976) *Women Artists 1550–1950*, Los Angeles and New York: Los Angeles County Museum/Knopf (catalogue of an exhibition at Los Angeles County Museum); and Greer, G. (1979) *The Obstacle Race: the Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work*, London: Secker and Warburg.

- 9 Tickner, L. (2000) "English modernism in the cultural field," in D. Peters Corbett and L. Perry (eds) *English Art 1860–1914*, 28.
- 10 Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach famously demonstrated how this was still manifest in the organization of rooms in the Museum of Modern Art in the 1970s: "The Museum of Modern Art as late capitalist ritual: an iconographic analysis," *Marxist Perspectives*, 4, 1978.
- 11 See Davidson, A. A. (1981) *Early American Modernist Painting 1910–1935*, New York: Da Capo.
- 12 See Wolff, J. (2003) *AngloModern: Painting and Modernity in Britain and the United States*, Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, especially Introduction and Afterword, on this revisionism.
- 13 Peters Corbett and Perry (2000), 1.
- 14 This is addressed fully in David Peters Corbett's book, *The Modernity of English Art 1914–30*. In fact his proposal here, repeated by Peters Corbett and Perry, is that it would be better to define "modernism" more broadly as the art of modernity, on the grounds that it is not only post-cubist art that is suited to the depiction of the modern world. With this definitional change, English art (and not just the work of the vorticists) is "modernist." On non-modernist modern art, see the catalogue of the Museum of Modern Art exhibition, *Modern Art Despite Modernism*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2000.
- 15 Harrison (1999), 85, 86.
- 16 Wolff, J. (2006) "Groundless beauty: feminism and the aesthetics of uncertainty," *Feminist Theory* 7, 2, 143–158.
- 17 See the essays in Squires, J. (ed.) (1993) *Principled Positions: Postmodernism and the Rediscovery of Value*, London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- 18 Bauman, Z. (2003) *Liquid Love*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 93.
- 19 Wolff (2006), 152.
- 20 See, for example, Herrnstein Smith, B. (1988) *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory*, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.
- 21 Lisa Tickner has suggested that Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "the field of cultural production" may be useful in addressing the problem of value. This too has the advantage of citing aesthetic judgment clearly in a sociological context, though in a different kind of conceptual framework, with different implications. Tickner (2000), 23–24.
- 22 See Serge Guilbaut (1983) *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, for a now-classic account of the post-war dominance of New York in the art world.
- 23 Langdale, C. (1987) *Gwen John*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 123.
- 24 Shone, R. (1999) "The artists of Bloomsbury: Roger Fry, Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant," in R. Shone, *The Art of Bloomsbury: Roger Fry, Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant*, London: Tate Gallery, 22. The exhibition was shown at the Tate Gallery, London, The Huntington Library, California, and the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Connecticut. See also Shone, R. (1976) *Bloomsbury Portraits: Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant, and Their Circle*, Oxford: Phaidon.
- 25 Fraser Jenkins, D. and Stephens, C. (eds) (2004) *Gwen John and Augustus John*, London, 6. The quotation is from the Supporters' Foreword, in the name of Lady

- Hollick, Chair, Tate Members. The exhibition was shown at the Tate Gallery, London, and the National Museum and Gallery, Cardiff.
- 26 In one of the catalogue essays, Lisa Tickner says "Gwen John has always seemed a marginal figure but her reputation has risen steadily." Tickner, L. (2004) "'Augustus's sister': Gwen John: wholeness, harmony and radiance," in D. Fraser Jenkins and C. Stephens (eds) *Gwen John and Augustus John*, London: Tate Gallery, 31.
 - 27 Foster, A. (1999) *Gwen John*, London: Tate Gallery. See also Foster, A. (2000) "Gwen John's *Self-Portrait*: art, identity and women students at the Slade School," in D. Peters Corbett and L. Perry (eds) *English Art 1860–1914*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
 - 28 Quoted by Langdale (1987), 2.
 - 29 These are cited in (in order): Tickner (2004), 29 (quoting Mary Chamot in *Country Life*); Fraser Jenkins and Stephens (2004), 95; (the portrait is from 1910; the statement is in a 1914 letter); Tickner (2004), 40 (*The Listener* of 1946); Tickner (2004), 30 (the painting is now in the Museum of Modern Art, New York); Fraser Jenkins and Stephens (2004), 96 (the subject is Fenella Lovell).
 - 30 Quoted by Langdale (1987), 131 n.17; the other references are from Tickner (2004), 31 n.18 and 31.
 - 31 "Here is that intensity, quiet and shy though it be, which counts for so much more than brilliancy, and which is so rare in contemporary art. It is a picture of singular delicacy and beauty." *Saturday Review*, 11 December 1909, quoted in Fraser Jenkins and Stephens (2004), 73.
 - 32 Bustin, M. (2004) "The rules or problems of painting: Gwen John's later painting technique," in D. Fraser Jenkins and C. Stephens (eds) *Gwen John and Augustus John*, London: Tate Gallery, 196.
 - 33 "Amazement will grip the visitor on looking at Miss G. John's portrait of 'Miss Winifred John', a work altogether wanting in every pleasant quality." *The Lady's Pictorial*, 20 April 1901, quoted by Fraser Jenkins, D. (2004) "Gwen John and Augustus John: mutual differences," in D. Fraser Jenkins and C. Stephens (eds) *Gwen John and Augustus John*, London: Tate Gallery, 14.
 - 34 Fraser Jenkins (2004), 24.
 - 35 See note 8 above.
 - 36 In this John's work can be related to the paintings of Impressionist Mary Cassatt, another artist celebrated in books – and art gallery visibility – since the advent of feminism. But I am also thinking of an exhibition in 2001 at New York's Metropolitan Museum of the work of the male Danish artist, Vilhelm Hammershøi, featuring especially "Vermeer-like" figures in interiors, also in the most minimal range of tones.
 - 37 Charles Harrison claims that John's work has come to embody better than Nicholson's the historic and critical concerns of modernism, specifically "the use of the opaque picture plane as a kind of frontier across which self-critical imaginative exchanges are conducted between the absorbed and self-exerting spectator on this side and whatever may be contained or connoted by an evoked or illusory depth on the other." Harrison (1999), 86.
 - 38 Kennedy, M. (1999) "Bloomsbury comes in from the cold," *Guardian*, June 25.
 - 39 Zimmer, W. (2000) "Art: from the high-energy Bloomsbury crowd," *New York Times*, August 6.
 - 40 Morphet, R. (1999) 'Image and theme in Bloomsbury art', in Richard Shone, *The Art of Bloomsbury: Roger Fry, Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant*, London: Princeton University Press, 35.

- 41 In order: Harrison, C. (1981) *English Art and Modernism 1900–1939*, 71; Shone (1999), 22; Morphet (1999), 36 (discussing Roger Fry); Rupert Brooke’s 1912 review of Duncan Grant’s work, quoted by Shone (1976), 83.
- 42 Shone (1999), 17; Morphet (1999), 36; Shone (1976), 81.
- 43 “Intellectually she must have been convinced by her brief excursion into abstraction: but emotionally she found no compensation for what she regarded as the ‘loss’ of subject matter” (Shone, 1999, 160).
- 44 Tickner, L. (2000) “Vanessa Bell: *Studland Beach*, domesticity and ‘significant form’,” Chapter 4 of *Modern Life and Modern Subjects: British Art in the Early Twentieth Century*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press.
- 45 Causey, A. (1986) “Formalism and the figurative tradition in British painting,” in S. Compton (ed.) *British Art in the 20th Century*, Munich: Pressel, 16; Harrison (1981), 70, writing specifically about Duncan Grant.
- 46 Morphet (1999), 35.
- 47 Russell, J. (2000) “Rambling amid a springtime of the arts in a garden that was Bloomsbury,” *New York Times*, June 2, reviewing the exhibition at the Yale Center for British Art. He calls Grant’s *In Memoriam Rupert Brooke* (1915, Yale Center for British Art) a “hauntingly beautiful abstract image.”
- 48 Shone (1999), 192.
- 49 Tickner (2000), 29. The quotation is from Barbara Herrnstein Smith, whose version of pragmatist aesthetics she endorses in her conclusion. See Herrnstein Smith (1988).

Part 3



Institutions

“Those Wilder Sorts of Painting”

The Painted Interior in the Age of Antonio Verrio

Richard Johns

The painted saloon, or “Heaven Room”, at Burghley House in Lincolnshire (Fig. 4.1) is the largest space in a sequence of six rooms and one very grand staircase that were decorated for the fifth Earl of Exeter during the 1690s by the Neapolitan artist Antonio Verrio. On entering the saloon for the first time, the visitor to Burghley is confronted with an overwhelming array of pictorial elements that extend across the ceiling and all four walls, interrupted only by a pair of large windows that overlook the formal gardens to the south of the house and which, on a bright day, fill the double-height room with natural light. The decoration is organized around a series of painted architectural motifs: a feigned double colonnade of Corinthian columns adorned with animal skulls and festooned with brightly colored flowers introduces an essential, rhythmical framework into the room, forming an open pavilion around which a multitude of fantastical characters are assembled. On the east wall (immediately to the viewer’s right when entering the room from the adjacent stairs; see Fig. 4.2), a team of Cyclops toil amid the heat of a blacksmith’s workshop, while overhead a group of winged infants, or putti, struggle playfully under the weight of a newly forged helmet and shield. Elsewhere in the room, other mythical creatures, many identifiable from their various attributes, disport themselves with apparent abandon: winged figures wrestle in mid-air, others play a fanfare, as a determined-looking Neptune (trident in hand) steps out of the sea toward a group of dancing figures that includes Pan, the lecherous shepherd god (half man, half goat), and Bacchus, the corpulent god of wine. On the ceiling (best illustrated by the artist’s preparatory sketch; Fig. 4.3) upwards of 50 further deities, heroes, and allegorical figures recline upon a great



FIG. 4.1 The saloon, or “Heaven Room,” at Burghley, Lincolnshire, with painting by Antonio Verrio, c.1696 (north and west walls).

Source: Burghley House Preservation Trust Limited.

cumulus-like cloud that spills over the painted entablature into the room below. In this way, the formal space of the country house saloon is transformed by the painter into an otherworldly fantasy of gods and heroes, unbound by the rules and logic of the sublunar world. It is the kind of place where the visitor can witness a horse and rider charging headlong into the room from the coving overhead and think nothing out of the ordinary.

On a second glance, however, an order of sorts begins to emerge from the *mêlée* of faces, limbs, and drapery that play across the painted architecture. Several of the figures along the north wall seem to be looking, laughing, and pointing in the same direction, while others appear to look away out of fear – or is it embarrassment? The cause of the commotion is revealed on the west wall where, beneath a rich blue velvet canopy, two stirring lovers are exposed for all to see, seemingly oblivious to the mirth and excitement their presence has aroused. Verrio’s scheme rehearses a popular classical myth, told by Homer and Ovid and well known to the artist’s late seventeenth-century audience, in which Venus and Mars, the beautiful goddess of love and the lusty god of war, are caught in an adulterous



FIG. 4.2 The saloon, or "Heaven Room," at Burghley, Lincolnshire, with painting by Antonio Verrio, c.1696 (north and east walls).

Source: Country Life Picture Library.

embrace by Venus's husband Vulcan, the blacksmith god of fire.¹ According to the story, Vulcan, enraged upon hearing of his wife's secret liaison, repaired to his forge (depicted on the east wall) where he made a web of chains, unbreakable yet so fine as to be almost invisible, with which to catch Venus and Mars in the act. It is the subsequent discovery of the two lovers, and the myriad responses of the assembled gods as Vulcan and the messenger god Mercury uncover their illicit affair, that commands the attention of all those who enter the Earl of Exeter's extraordinary saloon.

Verrio's painting at Burghley represents a form of pictorial and decorative art that found an appreciative audience among the English elite during the later



FIG. 4.3 Antonio Verrio, *An Assembly of the Gods*, sketch for the saloon ceiling at Burghley, c.1694. Oil on canvas, 90×118 cm.

Source: Northampton Museum and Art Gallery.

seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. So appreciative that over the 30 years that the artist worked in England, he won the enthusiastic support of some of the most powerful patrons in the land and enjoyed an artistic reputation that was rivaled during his lifetime only by the portrait specialists Peter Lely and Godfrey Kneller. He amassed a considerable fortune from painting, managed a workshop that launched the careers of several other successful artists and craftsmen, and left a body of work that could be measured by the acre.² Despite these extraordinary achievements, however, Verrio's posthumous reputation, and the critical fortunes of grand-scale decorative painting more generally, have been rather less impressive. Frequently caricatured as the belated expression of an artistic tradition that had already run a more effective course on the Continent, decorative history painting in England (and Verrio's example in particular) has become synonymous with a misguided liking for visual excess and an over-reliance on allegory. Worse still, it has come to represent the epitome of poor taste against which the "genuine" art of the period – typically a more sober variety – may be defined.

Contrary to the title of this essay, there never has been an "Age of Verrio" in the written history of British art.

This essay reflects on the rise and fall of the painted interior in early modern England. It is concerned with half a century or so of decoration: roughly from the early 1670s, when Verrio arrived in England and quickly established himself as one of the leading artists at the Restoration court of Charles II, to the 1720s – a decade in which decorative history painting in England reached greater audiences than ever before, most notably through the larger schemes produced by the English artist James Thornhill. It is a field defined as much by changing patterns of architectural patronage and design as by the careers of individual artists. It begins with the overambitious building projects initiated by Charles II during the first two decades of his reign, encompasses the grand aristocratic palaces built by an ascendant nobility during the decades that followed the Glorious Revolution of 1688–1689, and reaches a decisive turning point around the time of George II's accession in 1727, by which time the land-owning, country house-building elite, more self-assured than ever, had begun to favor an architecture of lighter interiors, refined plasterwork, and molded ceilings, all of which demanded a different sort of decoration to the kind of grand pictorial gestures exemplified by Verrio's work for the Earl of Exeter.³ We shall have cause to return to Burghley. First, it will be helpful to situate Verrio's work at the house within a broader history of English decorative history painting – to point toward the exceptional range of imagery encompassed by the term, to introduce its other principal exponents, and, in a more literal form of remapping, to indicate where in England some of the more accessible surviving examples of their work may be found.

The Bigger Picture

The English elite's enthusiasm for painted decoration on such a grand scale had its origins half a century earlier, with the cosmopolitan patronage of Charles I and the early Stuart court. The King's pursuit of the best available art and artists from the Continent culminated in the 1630s with the installation of nine canvas panels by Peter Paul Rubens in the heavy, compartmentalized ceiling of the Banqueting House at Whitehall. Together with the Italian artist Orazio Gentileschi, who devised a complementary scheme for the hall of the Queen's House in Greenwich (later removed to Marlborough House), Rubens and his studio introduced into England a form of illusionistic allegorical decoration that, in articulating the cultural and political self-confidence of the Caroline court, made an ideal counterpart to the cool classicism of Inigo Jones's architecture and the sophisticated swagger of Anthony Van Dyck's portraits.⁴ In doing so they also established a standard against which the achievements of future decorative painters would be measured.

Following the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, after seven years of civil war and a decade of republican government (for which the creation of lavish interiors was not a priority), few painters in England possessed the necessary skills even to attempt the kind of ambitious, illusionistic painting that had emanated from the Continent during the first half of the century. Two notable exceptions were the English artists Isaac Fuller and Robert Streater. Both painters had made separate journeys to France earlier in their careers (Streater had also visited Italy), where they gained a working knowledge of the kind of decorative painting that had recently been introduced to the French court by Simon Vouet and François Perrier.⁵ Following their return to England, both artists pursued similarly eclectic careers decorating the churches, inns, and playhouses of Restoration and post-fire London. But it was under the more salubrious patronage of the university and colleges at Oxford that Fuller and Streater earned a high reputation among their fellow countrymen, and decorative history painting began to reach an audience beyond the court.

The demand at Oxford was mostly for religious decoration (college chapels being one of the few places where overtly religious imagery was still tolerated by the protestant Church). The *Last Judgment* that Fuller painted in the chapel at All Souls, for example, was admired by the diarist John Evelyn in 1664 (although, like the master of ceremonies in the Sistine Chapel upon seeing Michelangelo's painting of the same subject, he thought it "too full of naked[s]" for a place of worship); and Fuller's *Resurrection* above the altar at Magdalen College inspired a laudatory response by the young Joseph Addison, who praised the "glowing Lines and vast Command [of] the Painter's Hand."⁶ Both of these important decorative schemes have long since disappeared, leaving the ceiling that Streater painted for Oxford's Sheldonian Theatre (installed in 1669) as the most ambitious surviving example of decorative history painting in England from the 1660s.⁷ Streater's response to the building's high-brow architectural allusions to the open-air Theatre of Marcellus in Rome comprises a great illusionistic awning drawn back by putti to reveal an open sky with the embodiment of Truth (also pictured as an infant) surrounded by the personified Arts and Sciences. This secular and overtly theatrical paean to the academic endeavors of the University gave rise to several printed explanations of the ceiling's novel allegory, and even inspired one anonymous viewer to imagine a time when the artist's achievements would be praised more highly than those of Michelangelo.⁸ If such a prediction seems comically inflated to modern eyes, it nonetheless deserves our attention – alongside the approving remarks of Evelyn and Addison – as a reminder of the high hopes that contemporary viewers were prepared to invest in painting of this sort.

Notwithstanding the diverse achievements of Fuller and Streater, it wasn't until the arrival in England of Verrio that the grand manner of decorative history painting became fully established among England's political and cultural elite. Verrio's early career on the Continent is scantily documented.⁹ Born in southern Italy in 1639, he spent the first years of his professional life moving between the principal artistic centers of Italy, attracting relatively little attention as a painter of altarpieces and other religious works, before finding some success in France – first in Toulouse,

then for a brief spell within the orbit of the *Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture*. It was while in Paris in the early 1670s that Verrio encountered his first English benefactor, Ralph Montagu (later first Duke of Montagu), who persuaded the painter that his fortunes may be better served in England.¹⁰ Within a few years Verrio's designs could be seen on the walls and ceilings of some of England's most fashionable buildings: on the stairs and saloon at Montagu House; at Cassiobury, the Hertfordshire home of the Earl of Essex; and in a series of rooms at the Duke of Lauderdale's Ham House (a rare survival from the artist's first decade in England).

Verrio's abilities as a designer and decorative painter first came to the attention of Charles II around 1674, at the instigation of the King's secretary of state, the Earl of Arlington. The artist had already decorated Arlington's country seat, Euston Hall in Suffolk, and was painting the hall of his townhouse near St James's Park when, according to George Vertue writing several decades later, the King called to see how the work was progressing.¹¹ The timing of the royal visit was fortuitous for Verrio. Charles had recently engaged the architect Hugh May to refashion the old palace of Windsor Castle into a modern royal residence that would rival the emerging splendor of Louis XIV's richly decorated complex at Versailles. May was in the process of refashioning the medieval layout of the north range at Windsor, introducing an expansive arrangement of rooms where once there were courtyards; and with each new room he left a coved ceiling of uninterrupted white plaster, ready for the painter's brush.¹² Verrio began working at Windsor in 1675, as May's building work continued, and over the next decade he painted the ceilings of more than 20 rooms and three staircases. The once-spectacular result was a succession of opulent royal spaces in which the King and his consort, Catherine of Braganza, featured repeatedly in an all-encompassing allegory of Restoration taste and power. All but three of Verrio's ceilings at Windsor were destroyed during the 1820s when the Castle was transformed once more, this time for George IV. The appearance of those lost interiors (including St George's Hall, the ceremonial heart of the Restoration palace) must now be gleaned from a few fragmentary sources: the occasional royal head, salvaged by nineteenth-century workmen; a handful of contemporary engravings and later interior views; and a few early written accounts of the palace with titles such as *Deliciae Britannicae*.¹³

Royal employment continued for Verrio following the accession of James II, at Windsor and at Whitehall, until the Glorious Revolution brought the entire Restoration project to a sudden and unceremonious end. Any interruption to Verrio's career was slight, however, as England's land-owning elite, buoyed by the political settlement that accompanied the accession of William III and Mary II, set about refashioning their existing country seats, or building anew on an even grander scale where an existing property did not meet the new requirement for fashionable aristocratic splendor. Verrio made a significant contribution to the decorative program at Chatsworth, the newly remodeled country seat of the Duke of Devonshire (who had been instrumental in overthrowing the artist's former royal patron), before helping to transform the interior of Burghley for the Earl of Exeter, and completing private commissions at various other English

country houses: at Lowther Hall for Viscount Lonsdale, for example, and at Teddington House, the country seat of the fabulously wealthy financier Sir Charles Duncombe.¹⁴

Royal patronage resumed for Verrio toward the end of the century, this time under rather different circumstances at Hampton Court, where he worked for William III and, briefly, for Queen Anne, before blindness then death in 1707. Today, the partially decorated state apartments at Hampton Court, including the walls and ceiling of the King's Staircase, are probably the best-known survivals from the artist's prolific career in England. For the staircase, Verrio devised an imposing and intellectually demanding (if at times rather cumbersome) reflection on the nature and limits of earthly power, loosely based on a political satire by the fourth-century Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate, in which the collected Caesars of ancient Rome compete with Alexander the Great for the approval of the Gods. It is a remarkable scheme (suggestive of an even grander, unrealized project) and a daunting spectacle for any visitor climbing the difficult stairs toward the royal apartment above.¹⁵

Following not far behind Verrio was the French painter Louis Laguerre.¹⁶ As the son of the keeper of the royal menagerie at Versailles, Laguerre had grown up with Louis XIV's prodigious new palace taking shape around him. After a promising start at the *Académie*, under the artistic direction of Charles Le Brun, Laguerre left France around 1684 for England, where he first found employment working as an assistant to Verrio at Windsor. Laguerre soon established himself as a serious challenger to Verrio's dominance. By the end of the decade he had become the Duke of Devonshire's painter of choice at Chatsworth, and he went on to decorate some of the most prominent country houses in England, including a suite of rooms at Cannons, the ill-fated country seat of the Duke of Chandos, and a staircase at Petworth – complete with a portrait of the powerful Duchess of Somerset riding toward the landing on a triumphal chariot surrounded by a host of allegorical beauties. Laguerre also followed Verrio to Burghley, where he painted an imposing scheme in the dining room featuring scenes from the lives of Anthony and Cleopatra. But it is in the hall and state rooms at Chatsworth, and in the glorification of the military triumphs of the Duke of Marlborough at London's Marlborough House and in the saloon at Blenheim Palace, that Laguerre's contribution to the history of painting in England can be seen at its fullest.

Verrio's favor at the English court and Laguerre's popularity among a succession of influential aristocratic patrons encouraged a host of other foreign painters to travel to England from the Continent.¹⁷ Some stayed for a relatively short period, having been tempted across the Channel with the promise of a specific commission, after which they left to resume a career in France or Italy – perhaps picking up one or two other English patrons along the way. They included Charles de la Fosse, who headed a team of French artists and craftsmen in decorating the newly rebuilt Montagu House in 1686 (after a fire had destroyed the Duke of Montagu's earlier townhouse, including Verrio's recently completed painting), before returning to decorate the dome of Les Invalides in his native Paris. By

contrast, another of Montagu's artists, Louis Cheron, remained in England after completing an extensive decorative program on the ceilings of Boughton in Lincolnshire and went on to play a leading role in the emerging artists' academies of eighteenth-century London. Other visitors included a close-knit group of Venetian artists led by Sebastiano Ricci, who later became one of the most celebrated history painters in eighteenth-century Venice. Already a well-traveled and experienced painter, Ricci spent the best part of five years working in and around Westminster – most notably at Burlington House, where he painted four large Ovidian panels for the Earl of Burlington (all extant), and at the Earl of Portland's nearby townhouse. Sebastiano Ricci's arrival in England was preceded by his nephew and sometime collaborator Marco Ricci, and by his former pupil Antonio Pellegrini – both of whom traveled to England in 1708 at the behest of another influential patron, the Earl of Manchester. After working together at Manchester's London house, then for the Earl of Carlisle at Castle Howard, Pellegrini went on to decorate the chapel and staircase at Kimbolton Castle, Manchester's country seat, before leaving the country in 1713. Marco later rejoined his uncle at Chelsea Hospital, where the pair worked together on a *Resurrection* in the chapel before returning to Venice in 1716. Both Pellegrini and Sebastiano Ricci are said to have left the country after failing in their respective bids for the lucrative commission to decorate the dome of St Paul's Cathedral. That task ultimately fell to the English painter James Thornhill, to whom any discussion of decorative history painting in England must eventually turn.

Thornhill began his working life apprenticed to a specialist non-figurative painter, Thomas Highmore, a distant cousin whose regular employment among the nobility and for the royal household brought the young painter into contact with other artists and craftsmen, including Verrio and Laguerre.¹⁸ Thornhill's earliest independent commissions depended on a few individual patrons who, whether out of patriotism or necessity, were prepared to employ the services of a relatively inexperienced English painter over the more prestigious names from Italy and France. In 1707, Thornhill followed Verrio and Laguerre when he was chosen to decorate the west stairs and a saloon at Chatsworth (still the best place to see the work of all three artists under one roof). It marked the beginning of a 20-year period of unprecedented success, during which Thornhill established and nurtured a reputation as the only native painter capable of competing alongside the most prominent overseas artists for the most prestigious projects. Other aristocratic commissions followed: for the Marlboroughs at Blenheim, where he adorned the hall ceiling with a triumphal allegory in which the victorious Duke, dressed in Roman armor, presents a plan of the Battle of Blenheim to a grateful Britannia; and for the Earl of Oxford's new chapel at Wimpole – a more sober configuration that centers on a colorful *Adoration of the Magi*. Of equal importance to Thornhill's career were the schemes he devised for an increasingly wealthy and assertive gentry at various smaller country houses built around the turn of the eighteenth century – the best example of which can be found on the recently restored staircase at Hanbury Hall in Worcestershire, which centers on the life and

death of Achilles. But Thornhill's once-formidable reputation as England's most celebrated native artist rested, above all, on two projects on an altogether different scale. The first, in the great hall of the Royal Naval Hospital at Greenwich, survives as the eighteenth century's most complete visual manifestation of the idea and principles of the Protestant succession. Completed in three stages over nearly 20 years, Thornhill's work at Greenwich blends painting, politics, and entertainment in an extended allegory of England's recent royal past: from the Glorious Revolution to the inauguration of the Hanoverian dynasty in 1715, and beyond. The artist's second monumental project comprises a series of eight enormous biblical scenes painted with a muted palette of stone-like colors in the inner dome of St Paul's Cathedral. More expansive even than the painted hall at Greenwich, Thornhill's work at St Paul's remains the largest and arguably the most public painting of any kind produced in the eighteenth century. Following the completion of the main section of the dome in 1717, Thornhill had a claim to be the best-known English-born painter ever to have lived.¹⁹

The triumvirate of Verrio, Laguerre, and Thornhill was placed at the apex of three centuries of wall and ceiling painting in the first volume of Edward Croft-Murray's two-part *Decorative Painting in England 1537–1837*, published in the 1960s. It is striking that no full-length study of decorative history painting in England (or any substantial part of it) has appeared since then. Meanwhile, the study of British art more generally has changed beyond recognition. The past few decades have seen a healthy succession of well-attended exhibitions, scholarly essays, and lengthy monographs, all of which enable students of the period to explore other branches of painting and print culture in more sophisticated ways than ever before. It is now commonplace to interrogate the formal history of portraiture or landscape painting, for example, alongside the construction of historical categories of class, gender, and race; or to look at the emergence of a recognizably modern public for these and other, newer forms of portable art. By contrast, beyond the pages of *Country Life* magazine and the helpful guidebook literature that accompanies today's flourishing heritage industry, the painted interiors of the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries seem as unfamiliar and unfashionable as ever, apparently untouched by the current concerns of the discipline.²⁰ There are several reasons for this relative lack of attention, not least the fact that a great many painted schemes, including the majority of Verrio's work, have long since disappeared. Critical indifference toward decorative history painting in England has accompanied an equal lack of concern for its physical preservation, as a result of which a substantial amount of Croft-Murray's research was devoted to interiors that had been destroyed by fire, torn down by unsympathetic owners, or otherwise damaged beyond repair, often without visual record.

The critical misfortunes of this once-prestigious art form also highlight the extent to which our understanding of past cultures is influenced by subjective and often elusive notions of aesthetic value. The mysterious question of "quality" in art is one that, quite rightly, continues to exercise historians of art as much as it divides the critics, and it is not my intention here to dismantle or deny the

categories of "good" and "bad" painting; nor do I wish to reinvent Verrio or any of his followers as a forgotten "great artist." I am interested, however, in how such value judgments are formed, and in how they can intrude upon the historical assessment of art. The next section considers how the type of painting that Verrio helped to introduce into England, and which once commanded considerable prestige as it dominated the decoration of elite interiors for half a century, came to be regarded as culturally insignificant.

On Painted Ceilings

While Thornhill's place in the grand narrative of British art has been mediated by the novelty of his Englishness in an era otherwise dominated by foreign artists, the reputations of both Verrio and Laguerre have fared less well – above all, damned by association with the ill-conceived decoration of Timon's villa, the fictional country pile at the centre of Alexander Pope's *Epistle to Burlington* (1731). More specifically, it is Timon's imaginary chapel that is most often cited as justification for the exclusion of these two painters from serious art-historical consideration. In fact, one would be hard-pushed to find a modern reference to either artist without also encountering Pope's damning description of Timon's chapel as a place of broken music and indecent decoration, encapsulated in the following, familiar couplets:

On painted ceilings you devoutly stare,
Where sprawl the saints of Verrio, or Laguerre,
On gilded Clouds in fair expansion lie,
And bring all Paradise before your Eye.²¹

Pope's description of the overly elaborate and inappropriately erotic decoration of Timon's chapel (the viewer's devotions are inspired, the poet implies, by the sight of so many saints exposing themselves to all below as they "sprawl" across the ceiling) was so successful that before long the names Verrio and Laguerre were more closely associated with Timon's sprawling saints than with any of the schemes either artist had actually painted. In the meantime, the approving couplets of lesser poets who praised the bold strokes of "great Varrio's hand" were quickly forgotten.²²

Soon after its publication (by which time Verrio had been dead for almost a quarter of a century, Laguerre for a decade), the *Epistle to Burlington* assumed an authoritative status on matters of taste. Horace Walpole, one of the eighteenth century's most influential writers on art, was among the first to endorse Pope's caricature of "false taste" with his own mischievous assessment of Verrio's accomplishments. The Italian artist, he judged, had been "an excellent painter for the sorts of subjects on which he was employed;" in fact, he went on to suggest, Verrio was ideally suited to the decoration of ceilings and staircases, where "without

much invention, and with less taste, his exuberant pencil was ready at pouring out gods, goddesses, kings, emperors and triumphs, over those public surfaces on which the eye never rests long enough to criticise, and where one should be sorry to place the works of a better master.”²³ For one Victorian critic, representative of an age that had little sympathy for painted ceilings, the “gaudy colour, bad drawing, and senseless composition” of Verrio’s work was simply “execrable.” And in the twentieth century, in what remains one of the most widely read surveys of British painting, more than 50 years after its first edition, Ellis Waterhouse introduced Verrio without reserve as “one of the worst” painters in the whole history of British art. To this day, Verrio is generally considered a “cold and pedantic” painter, worthy of little more than a paragraph of any reader’s attention.²⁴ Few artists have been so roundly and so consistently disregarded by so many.²⁵

The sentiments of Alexander Pope, and others who have located Verrio’s painting on the wrong side of an on-going discourse of taste, had been articulated earlier in the eighteenth century by another writer on art, Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury. Shaftesbury is best remembered within the history of ideas as the author of *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, a weighty collection of philosophical letters and essays in which he advocated a society maintained by the polite interaction of like-minded, cultured individuals – a realm in which ethic and aesthetic considerations would find equal purpose in pursuit of a common good.²⁶ It was an aristocratic vision of society and culture, founded on an inherited belief in the moral authority of property and in the independence afforded by the ownership of land. Shaftesbury’s grandfather, the first Earl, had died in exile after leading the Whig opposition to Charles II and his Catholic brother (later James II) during the 1670s and 1680s; and his tutor as a young boy was the philosopher John Locke, whose subsequent writings provided an essential justification for the constitutional changes brought about by the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The actions and ideas of both men informed the philosopher-earl’s commitment to a Whiggish ideal of public virtue and politeness, alongside which his ideas on art and culture found meaning.

Those ideas found their fullest expression in a separate essay, first published in French in 1712, and in English the following year as *A Notion of the Historical Draught or Tablature of the Judgment of Hercules*.²⁷ In this essay Shaftesbury developed his earlier thoughts on the public purpose of art with a detailed explanation of the invention and composition of a single, exemplary painting, or “Historical Sketch”. He began by defining the terms of his argument:

Before we enter on the Examination of our Historical Sketch, it may be proper to remark that by the word *Tablature* (for which we have yet no name in *English*, besides the general one of *Picture*) we denote, according to the original word *Tabula*, a Work not only distinct from a mere *Portraiture*, but from all those wilder sorts of Painting which are in a manner absolute, and independent; such as the Paintings *in Fresco* upon the Walls, the Cielings [*sic*], the Stair-Cases, the Cupolo’s, and other remarkable Places either of Churches or Palaces.²⁸

The novelty of Shaftesbury's ideas for an English-speaking audience is suggested by the fact that there was at the time no established word precise enough to describe the particular kind of painting he had in mind – prompting the author's rather awkward use of the term "tablature," which he is able to define only by reference to other, more familiar sorts of painting that are excluded by the term. In distinguishing tablature from "mere *Portraiture*," Shaftesbury appealed to a well-established hierarchy of pictorial types, or genres, that had been formulated during the Renaissance and which valued the depiction of heroic and other significant actions from the classical, biblical, and mythological canon over the less poetic demands of contemporary face painting. The author's concern with what he then goes on to describe as "those wilder sorts of Painting" is rather different, however, as it focuses not on the choice of subject, but on the architectural scale and site-specific nature of such painting. Shaftesbury's passing reference to a "wilder sort" of painting might go unnoticed were it not for the variety of places that he begins to identify – the ceilings, staircases, and cupolas (of churches and palaces, no less) – as unsuited to the kind of high-minded things he has to say about art.

Shaftesbury is not alone in using the term "*Fresco*" loosely in this respect. True fresco, the standard technique for large-scale decorative painting in Renaissance Italy, whereby the artist worked directly onto fresh, wet plaster, had been known throughout Europe since the Middle Ages, but was rarely used north of the Alps – the alternative technique of applying distemper, a size-based paint, onto a dry ground of wood or plaster being better suited to the working conditions of a damp northern climate. From the sixteenth century onwards, oil gradually became the favored medium: either on wooden panels or, for more ambitious schemes, on canvas sections, both of which could be painted in the artist's workshop and placed *in situ* once completed. During the seventeenth century, as changes in building design gave rise to more expansive interiors uninterrupted by architectural molding, the use of oil paint applied directly to a dry, well-primed plaster wall or ceiling became the norm. It is this latter form of painted decoration, most closely associated in England at the time with the work of Antonio Verrio and the visual culture of the Restoration court, that Shaftesbury seems to have in mind when he describes something "absolute" and "independent" from tablature, or history painting proper. For Shaftesbury, the wholesale rejection of such painting was, it seems, politically expedient as well as aesthetically desirable.²⁹

The story that Shaftesbury chose as the subject for his notional history painting had been told by Prodicus and recounted by the Greek philosopher and historian Xenophon in the fourth century BC.³⁰ As the mythical hero Hercules wanders through the wilderness, contemplating how best to pursue the life that lay before him, he is accosted by two goddesses: one a figure of natural beauty and graceful demeanor, called Virtue; the other a figure of exaggerated beauty and affected manners, called Pleasure. The two goddesses address Hercules in turn, each attempting to persuade the young hero to follow their respective way of life. Hercules is thus confronted with a choice between a life of instant gratification

and sensual delight among the “crowds of beauties” promised by Pleasure, and an abstemious life of civic duty advocated by Virtue. Contemplating which moment in Xenophon’s story is rhetorically the most powerful – and which should therefore be chosen by the painter committed to a morally instructive art – Shaftesbury eventually settles on the moment when Virtue finally begins to gain the upper hand. At this critical juncture, the author declares, the hero is “wrought, agitated, and torn by contrary Passions.” He has admired the bodily charms of Pleasure, but now, absorbed by the impassioned rhetoric of Virtue, has begun to turn his attention to the higher thoughts demanded by a life devoted to the public good. He is, in other words, at the point of decision. What follows in Shaftesbury’s essay is a lengthy discussion of how, precisely, that moment could be represented most effectively: through the correct turn and manner of the hero’s gaze; in the “ascending posture” of Virtue (sword in hand and with one foot raised “in a sort of climbing Action,” as if leading the way); in the languid indifference displayed by the figure of Pleasure, and so on.

Despite his evident concern for the minutiae of artistic invention (a term used in the eighteenth century to denote the selection and initial pictorialization of an appropriate subject), Shaftesbury had no intention of becoming a painter himself, and he maintained a clear distinction between the lofty ideas of the philosopher-patron and the manual task of realizing those ideas on canvas by hiring an accomplished Italian painter, Paolo de Matteis, to execute the work on his behalf (Fig. 4.4).³¹

For Shaftesbury, the carefully choreographed vision of Hercules turning away from the sensual delights of Pleasure in order to follow the arduous but ultimately rewarding path of Virtue epitomized the instructive potential of art by encouraging the appropriately qualified viewer to do the same. Moreover, the very fact that this important moral lesson could be learned through an appreciation of the fine arts – rather than from a terrifying sermon or a turgid textbook – was integral to the author’s vision of a polite and civilized society in which cultural refinement and public virtue went hand in hand. So central were these ideas to Shaftesbury’s thinking that toward the end of his life he imagined another painting – a historical portrait featuring himself as a dying philosopher surrounded by exemplary works from antiquity and with a copy of his own essay on the *Judgment of Hercules* by his side. The correct forms of history painting and the proper depiction of Hercules’s crossroads encounter were, it seems, prominent in the Earl’s thoughts even as he contemplated his own death.³²

Few texts have had such a profound impact on the way that British art of the period has been viewed and understood. It has often been observed that ambitious eighteenth-century artists and writers on art in England faced a dilemma, described by one cultural historian as an “ineluctable paradox,” between the lofty aesthetic theories espoused by Shaftesbury on the one hand, and the rather more pedestrian demands of a contemporary art market that offered little scope for artists to produce anything other than portraits, or the occasional landscape



FIG. 4.4 Paolo de' Matteis, *The Judgment of Hercules*, 1712. Oil on canvas, 198×257 cm.

Source: University of Oxford, Ashmolean Museum.

“view,” on the other.³³ In recent decades, historians of British art have explored this paradox at length, revealing, for example, the inventiveness with which successive generations of face painters attempted to endow their living subjects with something like the philosophical gravitas of Shaftesbury’s *Hercules* in the hope of elevating their work above the category of “mere *Portraiture*.” Meanwhile, those “wilder sorts” of painting that do not lend themselves easily to a Shaftesburian moral gaze continue to be characterized as an outmoded, unsophisticated branch of visual culture. In this way, the third Earl’s ideas on art have continued to influence the value language and aesthetic priorities of modern art historians, even as those ideas have themselves become the subject of fruitful historical enquiry.

Returning to Burghley, it is not difficult to see that the riotous assembly that Verrio painted in the Earl of Exeter’s saloon is far removed from the very particular notion of history painting exemplified by Shaftesbury’s *Judgment of Hercules*, in which everything has its place and where each element contributes toward a definable, morally assured pictorial whole. Where Shaftesbury appeals to an ideal of art that was grounded in the humanist values of the Renaissance,

Verrio, it seems, defers to a rather different, less polite pictorial tradition, exemplified by Correggio's Ovidian scenes of the 1530s and, a century later, by the early erotic paintings of Nicolas Poussin. The pictorial consequences of these different attitudes are most apparent when considering Verrio's portrayal of Venus and Mars on the west wall at Burghley alongside the figure of Pleasure in Matteis's (that is, Shaftesbury's) painting. In both cases, the recumbent figures are shown surrounded by luxurious drapery, richly decorated tableware and flowers that, together with the soft exposed flesh and languid postures of the figures themselves, constitute a shared vocabulary of sensual fulfilment. For Shaftesbury, such details signaled "the effeminate, indolent, and amorous Passions" that, though essential to the narrative and therefore necessary for the picture, ought to be carefully marshaled by the painter to ensure that they do not become *too* appealing to the viewer. In Verrio's earlier painting, by contrast, there is no such moral imperative on the visitor. The discovery of Mars and Venus had been a popular subject for artists on the Continent since the sixteenth century, though it was typically realized on a much smaller scale. At Burghley, this usually private episode is removed from the intimacy of the picture cabinet and thrust into the relatively public arena of the saloon, where the visitor is encouraged at every turn to join with the likes of Bacchus and Pan and revel, not only in the uncensored eroticism of the scene, but also in the all-embracing luxury of the painted room as a whole.

We can go further, and suggest that Verrio presents the visitor with a range of contrasting responses: from the coyness of the blushing female characters who, on seeing Mars and Venus seem to become suddenly aware of their own nakedness, to the bawdy enthusiasm of their muscular male companions. Such a clearly gendered distinction between the assembled characters also encourages a reflection on the socially defined norms of behavior that informed the outward conduct of visitors of both sexes: the uninhibited role-play of Verrio's cast seems designed to exaggerate (though not necessarily to contradict) the conventional behavior of the room's real-life inhabitants. It is Verrio's unruliness in this respect that, for Shaftesbury, marked out the saloon at Burghley and other rooms conceived in the same spirit as a "wilder sort" of painting.

But it is not only the choice of subject and an undisguised delight in the pursuit of Pleasure that runs contrary to Shaftesbury's artistic ideal, but also the scheme's openness to a variety of contrasting points of view. True tablature, the Earl went on to explain, ought to comprise "a single Piece, comprehended in one View, and form'd according to one single Intelligence, Meaning, or Design" – a uniformity that he likened to the constituent parts of a natural body.³⁴ Whereas for Shaftesbury the moral purpose of painting was underpinned by the authoritative single-point perspective and inviolate picture plane of the framed image, for Verrio the multiple perspectives of a design that extends across several surfaces within a room, and from one room to the next, were integral to any meaning that a painted scheme might convey. Verrio's design thus spills, literally and metaphorically, beyond the limits of history painting embodied by Shaftesbury's *Hercules*.

Faced with these starkly contrasting attitudes to the forms and functions of history painting, is there reason to conclude that either one offers a more authentic representation of the art of the period than the other? Both works assume the kind of liberal education that would have enabled contemporary viewers to recognize the characters and subjects depicted (and thus to recognize that Ovid and Xenophon had come to represent two very different aspects of the classical tradition). Furthermore, neither the invention nor the execution of the decoration at Burghley betray any sign of being any less considered than Shaftesbury's *Hercules*; and there is nothing to suggest that Verrio's aristocratic patron, a well-traveled art collector and renowned virtuoso, was not fully aware of the nuances and ambiguities of the work he had commissioned. The saloon at Burghley was part of a larger project to remodel the building's interior, during which an Elizabethan long gallery was transformed into a fashionable state apartment – a series of richly decorated and increasingly formal rooms that also provided the setting for some of the finest easel painting, tapestry, sculpture, and furniture that the Earl and Countess had acquired during their extensive travels abroad.

I do not know if Shaftesbury ever visited Burghley, but if he did he must surely have looked with dismay on the painted saloon and the other equally exuberant rooms of the Earl of Exeter's state apartment. Verrio's celebration of the infidelities, jealousies, and voyeuristic pleasures of the gods is in every way the antithesis of what Shaftesbury thought good painting ought to be. And yet, while the *Hercules* essay articulates an ideal of art that presented few immediate opportunities for painters in England, the saloon at Burghley represents a form of history painting that, as we have seen, continued to flourish well into the eighteenth century, among the same political and cultural elite that Shaftesbury had sought to inspire. Clearly, any history of British art that aspires to take the work of Verrio and other decorative history painters seriously – to recognize the elaborately painted interiors of early modern England as something more than a wild aberration – must look beyond the normative categories of painting insisted upon by Shaftesbury and his followers.

Beyond the Baroque

One way in which the work of Verrio and his fellow decorative history painters has been imagined as part of a larger art-historical narrative is within the conceptual framework of the "baroque," a once-orthodox category that has been used to refer simultaneously to a style, a period, and a "sensibility," but which has always proved difficult to define. The baroque emerged as a distinctive mode of religious art in Rome toward the end of the sixteenth century: characterized by a preference for emotionally charged (and often violent) subjects, dramatic composition, and an exaggerated sense of light and color. More broadly, within the visual arts the term now typically invokes the playfulness and illusionism found in all manner of art produced during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, from the

most ostentatious church ceilings and altarpieces of Counter-reformation Rome to the *trompe l'oeil* trickery of Dutch still-life and interior scenes of the same period. Its use also extends beyond the realms of painting, sculpture, and the decorative arts to encompass equivalent formal qualities as they appear in architecture, garden design, music, theatre, and even poetry. In each case, an appeal to the baroque is usually accompanied by a profusion of adjectives: baroque art is invariably “magnificent,” “exuberant,” “theatrical,” and so on.

It need not concern us too much that the term itself was not in regular use until the nineteenth century; or that when first used its meaning was pejorative, identifying a perceived *distortion* of the art and values of the Renaissance – a departure from the classical norm. However, given such a broad remit, it is hardly surprising that the baroque remains a difficult and contested concept for cultural historians. Recent attempts to reconfigure the baroque as a “world style” that followed the oceanic trading routes of competing European powers to their colonial territories and beyond, have had both an enriching and problematizing effect.³⁵ On the one hand, the reinvention of the baroque as a fully international, even a historical, phenomenon reveals how pictorial and decorative conventions that become identified with a particular type of art are rarely confined by the geographical or temporal boundaries within which they first find meaning. On the other hand, it underlines the limitations of a history of art that defines itself around the always elusive notion of style. The attributes of any particular style may accrue powerful associations, but they are not in themselves meaningful when divorced from the historically specific social and political forces that many art historians today recognize as determining factors in the compelling relationship between art and the systems that produce it.

Even within Europe, the inconsistencies of the “baroque” become apparent when the term is used to describe art and visual culture produced in England and other post-Reformation territories, where the various institutions of state often defined themselves in contradistinction to the religious zeal and political absolutism that are generally understood to be the two driving forces of the baroque. Within such a history of styles, a protestant, English baroque can only ever be understood as a derivative, “watered form” of its Catholic, Continental equivalents, necessarily consigned to the margins within any national, or broader European history of art.³⁶ It might be more appropriate to think of the baroque as a concept that must itself be increasingly diluted the further it strays from its ideological origins amid the papal and ducal courts of seventeenth-century Rome.

As a proposition, the baroque remains a convenient term to describe much of the ostentatious, court-facing visual culture of the seventeenth century. Ultimately, however, such broad classifications reveal more about our continuing desire to categorize the art of the past according to preconceived notions of historical style than they ever will about the objects and images they purport to explain. To describe Verrio’s work at Burghley as baroque, for example, effectively brings to mind the dynamism, theatricality, and sensuality that strike the visitor immediately upon entering the room. It also identifies the artist and his patron with a

cosmopolitan aesthetic of power to which both clearly aspired. But it tells us little about how or why such an extravagant and otherworldly spectacle came to be regarded as an appropriate form of decoration for the saloon of an English nobleman's country house.

Such schemes invite a range of art-historical responses, a skeptical attitude toward hackneyed notions of good and bad painting, and a recognition (or, perhaps, rediscovery) of the potential for pictorial complexity, ambiguity, and contradiction. The appetite among artists and patrons for Ovidian subjects, exemplified in the saloon at Burghley, and the moral ambivalence that so often defined the mythical heroes and beauties of England's painted rooms, present opportunities for the further exploration of issues of gender and identity within the context of the English country house. More generally, the prevalence of allegory and mythology (which can often seem either impenetrable or superficial to modern eyes) presents challenges that the social history of art has yet to take fully on board. Equally, there is much to be discovered about the practical circumstances of such a collaborative enterprise. Verrio and other leading decorative history painters typically employed a number of specialist assistants, including flower painters, gilders, and dedicated painters of illusionistic architecture, all of whom depended in turn on the complementary skills of plasterers, joiners, wood-carvers, and other craftsmen. Quite how such workshops were recruited, trained, and organized, or how their combined skills found meaning as part of a broader grammar of elite decoration, constitute other, largely unexplored aspects of the history of art and architecture in England.³⁷

As well as investigating the painted interior and its role in the formation of social narratives of power and difference, or as a model of artistic production, or as a component of a rejuvenated notion of the baroque, the future study of decorative history painting might also consider the artistic aspirations of its protagonists, and the extent to which they were judged to have been met. Although such aspirations were rarely articulated in writing (and never, it seems, with the authority to rival Shaftesbury), they are everywhere apparent. For example, Verrio made a powerful claim for the intellectual standing of his work in the saloon at Burghley by introducing a female personification of Painting, a conventional allegorical allusion to the liberal status of the art, with a brush in one hand, a palette in the other and an unfinished picture of Mars and Venus posted to a nearby column. At the same time, the artist's inclusion of his own likeness on the east wall of the same room, stripped to the waist and kneeling among the heat and smoke of Vulcan's forge, drawing implements in hand, turns our attention to the considerable labor involved in painting on such a grand scale. With a characteristic playfulness, Verrio not only elevates himself to the exalted company of the Olympian gods, he also invites a reflection on the dual nature of his artistic identity: as a history painter versed in the rules and rhetoric of the ancient poets, and as a highly skilled craftsman, heading up a workshop that was capable of realizing his designs on an heroic scale. Together, these two figures represent a duality that both distinguishes and defines the "wilder sort" of painting.

Above all, perhaps, it is the site-specific nature of decorative history painting that deserves our attention. It is precisely its relevance to both the abstract, three-dimensional concerns of architecture and the pictorial interests of painting that helps to explain why the painted interior became such an important aspect of English visual culture at a time of intensive building activity, when architecture and its contents were enlisted as part of an on-going struggle for political and cultural authority at both an international and domestic level. The study of decorative history painting – in all its variety, from the chapel to the bedchamber – depends in equal measure on two branches of art history that have generally followed quite separate paths. Exploring where and how the histories of painting and architecture converge not only promises to throw new light on the decorated interiors of early modern England, it also presents an opportunity to reassess the historical development of the discipline as a whole.

Hercules on the Stairs

I would like to end with a short account of a little-known decorative scheme in the south of England. The painted staircase at Fetcham Park in Surrey is far removed from the canon of British art. Its origins and authorship are uncertain, its quality questionable; it is poorly documented and it cannot be exhibited in a gallery or sold at auction other than as part of the building in which it stands (which now serves as a suite of modern offices and conference center). For all of these reasons, the painting on the stairs at Fetcham Park is representative of a large body of decorative history painting in England.

The house of which the painting is a part is a relatively compact redbrick building, fairly typical of the type of smaller country house that was favored by a growing and increasingly visible section of the landed gentry at the beginning of the eighteenth century. It was built by William Talman for Arthur Moore, a wealthy businessman and Member of Parliament who had made a considerable fortune from investments in London's joint-stock companies during the 1690s. Moore acquired the estate around 1705, and over the next 20 years or so invested huge sums rebuilding the house, and extending and reshaping the surrounding parkland. It was toward the end of this period of activity (probably around 1718) that the staircase, hall, and downstairs parlor were decorated with a variety of mythological scenes and illusionistic architecture. The painting has been attributed, at least since the 1730s, to Louis Laguerre, although it has since been subject to some rather heavy-handed repainting, giving the figures on the stairs especially a coarseness that is difficult to reconcile with the artist's better-known work.³⁸ Nevertheless, there is no reason to suggest that either the subject or the overall composition of any of the painted surfaces has been altered significantly since they were painted almost 300 years ago.

The principal subject of the staircase, depicted on the landing wall, is immediately recognizable as the choice, or judgment, of Hercules – the mythical, moralizing

tale made famous by the third Earl of Shaftesbury in his influential essay on history painting. Framed by a simple arrangement of paired Ionic columns, the sight of Hercules deliberating between the contrasting figures of Pleasure and Virtue clearly invites a comparison with the painting that Paolo de Matteis had produced just a few years earlier (and which had subsequently been reproduced as an engraving to illustrate Shaftesbury's text).³⁹ In both images we encounter Hercules as a silent, "pondering Hero" at that decisive moment of decision, as Virtue, now confident of winning her cause, steps onwards and upwards as she guides Hercules toward the steep and winding path that lay ahead. Even where the two compositions differ, several of those differences can be explained by the variation that Shaftesbury granted the painter: for example, he indicates that Hercules may appear either standing, as in Matteis's composition, or seated, while the figure of Pleasure, whose lack of self-control is one of her defining characteristics, "may be drawn either *standing, leaning, sitting, or lying* [...] according to the Painter's Fancy."⁴⁰

Such a direct allusion to Shaftesbury's paradigmatic example of history painting was entirely in keeping with the broader display of virtue and good taste that Arthur Moore had been cultivating for a decade or more. His activities at Fetcham Park conformed to a well-established pattern of acquisition and cultural patronage through which upwardly mobile families established or consolidated their position as members of a local political elite. In an age when the ownership of a substantial quantity of land was still the clearest marker of an individual's social and political worth, nothing signaled an eighteenth-century gentleman's readiness to participate in the public affairs of the nation more clearly than a fashionable country house surrounded by a well-maintained estate. As part of such a display, the prominent inclusion of the *Judgment of Hercules* at Fetcham Park can be understood as a powerful pictorial affirmation of Moore's political qualifications and abilities. It is doubly significant then, that Moore should have chosen to identify with such a recognizable emblem of aristocratic taste and moral rectitude at a time when his own judgment had been brought into question in the most conspicuous of ways.⁴¹

Moore's conduct became the subject of official scrutiny in 1714, following a string of allegations of bribery and corruption – most damagingly over his role in the negotiation of a series of controversial commercial treaties with France and Spain. Political opponents accused him of betraying the public good for his own private gain by entering into a secret agreement with the King of Spain. Although the charges against him were never proven, Moore became embroiled in lengthy litigation from which his reputation would never recover. After losing his seat in Parliament in the general election of 1715, he retired to the country and turned his attention to the further improvement of Fetcham Park. Appearing in the wake of Moore's fall from office, the image on the staircase of Hercules, deliberating between the opposing forces of Pleasure and Virtue, assumed an additional significance: equating Moore's retreat from public life with the Stoic ideal of philosophical retirement, and even implying that the repeated accusations of his political enemies were simply another obstacle to be overcome on the long and winding path to Virtue.

If the image of Hercules at Fetcham Park had been contained within a frame and hung on a wall in Arthur Moore's hall or saloon, our investigation of the painting might end somewhere around here. However, we are compelled to continue looking, in more ways than one, by the painting's situation half way up the stairs. In fact, in order to continue our ascent of the staircase beyond the first landing, we must turn our back on Virtue and her cause and elect to follow the path of Pleasure. In this way, the decoration seems to undermine everything we might reasonably expect from *The Judgment of Hercules* by introducing a wholly un-Shaftesburian element of play to the "arduous and rocky" climb advocated by the austere-looking figure of Virtue. What is more, as the visitor turns to climb the second flight of stairs, a very different (though no less familiar) episode comes into view. At the top of the stairs, in an imaginative sequel to the sensual delights proffered by Pleasure below, we are invited to participate in the "discovery" of the adulterous lovers Venus and Mars, whose supine figures fill the available wall space of the upper landing. Any future enquiry that is prepared to look afresh at such extraordinary spaces: at the ceilings, the staircases, and all the other "remarkable Places" that have been overlooked ever since the Earl of Shaftesbury encouraged his readers to avert their gaze, will help to bring new light to the making and meaning of elite visual culture in early modern England, and contribute to a history of British art that is more varied, more surprising, and perhaps even a little wilder than before.

Notes

- 1 Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book 8; and Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book 4.
- 2 The extent of Verrio's career in England is detailed by Edward Croft-Murray (1962 and 1970) in *Decorative Painting in England 1537–1837*, 2 vols, London: Country Life, esp. vol. 1, 50–60 and 236–242. The manuscript archives at Burghley House are an unusually rich source of information on the artist's work at the house, at various stages, between 1687 and 1698.
- 3 The architectural history of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries has been relatively well documented, although few authors discuss the painted decoration of buildings in any detail. Still useful as a general introduction is John Summerson's (1993) *Architecture in England, 1530–1830*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press (ninth edition). See also Girouard, M. (1978) *Life in the English Country House: a Social and Architectural History*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press; and Worsley, G. (1995) *Classical Architecture in Britain: the Heroic Age*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press. More specific to the period covered here is Lees Milne, J. (1970) *English Country Houses: Baroque, 1685–1715*, London: Country Life.
- 4 The scholarly literature on Rubens is vast. For a useful introduction to the artist's work for the English court, see Donovan, F. (2004) *Rubens and England*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press. On Gentileschi, see Finaldi, G. (ed.) *Orazio Gentileschi at the Court of Charles I*, exh. cat., London: National Gallery; and Bold, J. (2000) *Greenwich: an Architectural History of the Royal Hospital for Seamen and the Queen's House*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press.

- 5 Croft-Murray (1962), 43–49.
- 6 John Evelyn, *Diary*, October 25, 1664. Evelyn's response was, it seems, a knowing allusion to Giorgio Vasari's well-known account of the reception of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*. Joseph Addison's *Resurrectio Deliniata*, in praise of Fuller's painting at Magdalen, was written in Latin and published in English translation by Edmund Curl (1718) as *The Resurrection*, London.
- 7 Colvin, H. M. (1974) *The Sheldonian Theatre and the Divinity School*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Saumarez Smith, C. (1983) "Wren and Sheldon," *Oxford Art Journal*, 6, 1, 45–50. Fuller's work is best represented today by a series of large easel paintings depicting the escape of Charles II after the Battle of Worcester, illuminated by David Solkin (1999) in "Isaac Fuller's *Escape of Charles II*: a Restoration tragedy-comedy," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 62, 199–240.
- 8 See, for example, Robert Whitehall, *Urania, or a description of the painting of the top of the theater at Oxon.*, London, 1669; and *A discription of the painting of the Theater in Oxford*, Oxford, 1673. Samuel Pepys recorded his impressions of Streater and his work during a visit to the artist's Westminster studio, on February 1, 1668/1669, where he met with Christopher Wren and others, and inspected the artist's work for the Sheldonian Theatre.
- 9 For a recent summary of the artist's career, see Brett, C. (2010) "Antonio Verrio (c. 1636–1707): his career and surviving work," *The British Art Journal*, 10, 3, 4–17.
- 10 For a glimpse at Verrio's career in France, see Barreau, J. (1998) "Antonio Verrio à l'hôtel Brûlart," *Revue de l'Art*, 122, 1, 64–71. Montagu subsequently employed the artist to decorate the staircase and saloon at Montagu House in Bloomsbury. The house was destroyed by fire in 1686, just three years after Verrio had completed his work, and was immediately rebuilt and decorated by a team of French artists that included Charles de la Fosse, Jacques Rousseau, and Jacques Parmentier. See Croft-Murray (1962), 239 and *passim*.
- 11 Vertue, G. (1932) "Notebooks," *Walpole Society*, 20 (Vertue II), 86 and 132. See also Croft-Murray (1962), 50–60.
- 12 See Colvin, H. M. (ed.) (1976) *The History of the King's Works*, vol. 5, 1660–1782, London: HMSO.
- 13 Bickham, G. (1742) *Deliciae Britannicae; or, the curiosities of Hampton-Court and Windsor-Castle, delineated*, London. For a fuller account of Verrio's work in the hall at Windsor, see Gibson, K. (1998) "The decoration of St. George's Hall, Windsor, for Charles II: 'too resplendent bright for subjects' eyes," *Apollo*, 147, 435, 30–40.
- 14 Verrio's work at Lowther Hall was destroyed by fire in 1718. Celia Fiennes, a candid observer of country house interiors, recorded the artist's work in the saloon (an assembly of the gods not unlike its equivalent at Burghley) as "exquisitely painted by the best hand in England." See Morris, C. (ed.) (1982) *The Illustrated Journeys of Celia Fiennes, 1685–c. 1712*, London and Sydney: Macdonald, 170–171.
- 15 For an engaging (if dated) iconographical analysis of Verrio's work for William III, see Wind, E. (1939–1940) "Julian the Apostate at Hampton Court," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 3, 127–37. Verrio's work at Hampton Court is reconsidered in detail by Brett Dolman (2010) in "Antonio Verrio (c. 1636–1707) and the royal image at Hampton Court" in *The British Art Journal*, 10, 3, 18–28.
- 16 See Croft-Murray (1962), esp. 61–68.

- 17 See Croft-Murray (1970), esp. 13–24.
- 18 See Croft-Murray (1962), esp. 69–78. Croft-Murray's account of Thornhill's career is largely based on the earlier, unpublished research of William Osmun (see Osmun, W. R. (1950) "A study of the work of Sir James Thornhill," unpublished PhD thesis, University of London).
- 19 See Johns, R. (2009) "'An air of grandeur & modesty': James Thornhill's painting in the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 42, 4, 501–527.
- 20 *Country Life* magazine has a prestigious history of recording photographically the interiors of England's grandest buildings. Today, the magazine and its picture library constitute an invaluable visual record of English painted interiors, including many that have since been destroyed. Associated publications by the magazine's former architectural editors include Henry Avray Tipping's (1929) *English Homes: Period 4, vol. 1, Late Stuart, 1649–1714*, London: Country Life; Lees Milne, J. (1970) *English Country Houses: Baroque, 1685–1715*, London: Country Life; and, more recently, Worsley, G. (2002) *England's Lost Houses from the Archives of Country Life*, London: Country Life.
- 21 Pope, A. (1731) *An epistle to the Right Honourable Richard Earl of Burlington*, London. See also Butt, J. (ed.) (1965) *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, London: Routledge. These couplets belong to a much longer and highly entertaining satirical portrait of Timon's villa and its surrounding parkland, against which the author goes on to define the rather different notion of classicism favored by his patron, the third Earl of Burlington.
- 22 See, for example, Tickell, T. (1707) *Oxford. A Poem. Inscrib'd to the Right Honourable the Lord Lonsdale*, London; and Manning, F. (1701) 'Tuddington-House' in *Poems upon Several Occasions*, London. Like Pope after them, both poets wrote with fulsome praise for the taste of their respective patrons.
- 23 Walpole, H. (1849) *Anecdotes of Painting in England*, London, 2, 467 (first published 1762).
- 24 See Dutton Cook, E. (1869) *Art in England*, London: Sampson, Low, Son, and Marston, 15–27; Waterhouse, E. (1994) *Painting in Britain 1530–1790*, fifth edition, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1994, 125–126; and, most recently, Vaughan, W. (2008) "Britain and Europe c.1600–c.1900," in D. Bindman (ed.) *The History of British Art 1600–1870*, London: Tate Gallery, 61.
- 25 The dearth of modern scholarship on Verrio's painting has been corrected somewhat by two recent publications, in Italian and French, the second of which accompanied an exhibition in Toulouse. See Di Giorgi, R. (2009) "*Couleur, couleur*" *Antonio Verrio un pittore in Europa tra Seicento e Settecento*, Florence: Edifir; and Hémery, A. (ed.) (2010) *Antonio Verrio. Chroniques d'un peintre italien voyageur (1636–1707)*, exh. cat., Toulouse: Musée des Augustins. See also Brett, C. (2010) "Antonio Verrio (c. 1636–1707): his career and surviving work" and Dolman, B. (2010) "Antonio Verrio (c. 1636–1707) and the royal image at Hampton Court" in *The British Art Journal*, 10, 3, 4–17 and 18–28.
- 26 See Klein, L. E. (ed.) (1999) *Shaftesbury, Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; and Klein, L. E. (1994) *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral Discourse and Cultural Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century England*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- 27 The best discussion of Shaftesbury's *Hercules* essay and its art-theoretical legacy in England can be found in John Barrell's (1986) influential study, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, esp. 1–33.
- 28 Ashley Cooper, A., third Earl of Shaftesbury (1713) *A Notion of the Historical Draught or Tablature of the Judgment of Hercules, According to Prodicus*, London, esp. 3–4.
- 29 Shaftesbury's political objection to Verrio's style of decorative history painting, may have assumed a further, personal dimension, as the grotesque figure of Faction, or Sedition, dispersing libels on the ceiling of St. George's Hall at Windsor was noted by early visitors for its likeness to the third Earl's defiant grandfather.
- 30 A new translation of Prodicus's story also formed the basis of a moral essay by Joseph Addison, published in the popular periodical *Tatler* in 1709 (no. 97).
- 31 Two finished versions of the painting and one oil sketch, survive. The larger of the two finished works (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford) is inscribed with Shaftesbury's name, not Matteis's. The manner of Shaftesbury's patronage is discussed by Sheila O'Connell (1988) in "Lord Shaftesbury in Naples: 1711–1713," *Walpole Society*, 54, esp. 149–158. The image was also engraved by Simon Gribelin to accompany the first English edition of the *Hercules* essay in 1713.
- 32 The proposed painting is described in a letter to Paolo de Matteis, who had executed *The Judgment of Hercules* the previous year, but Shaftesbury died before it could be painted. See Sweetman, J. E. (1956) "Shaftesbury's last commission," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 19, 1–2, 110–116.
- 33 Brewer, J. (1995) "Cultural production, consumption, and the place of the artist in eighteenth-century England," in B. Allen (ed.) *Towards a Modern Art World*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 17.
- 34 Ashley Cooper (1713), 4.
- 35 See, for example, Snodin, M. and Llewellyn, N. (eds) (2009) *Baroque 1620–1800: Style in the Age of Magnificence*, exh. cat., London: V&A Museum. The theoretical boundaries of the "baroque" are explored by a variety of authors in Hills, H. (ed.) (2011) *Rethinking the Baroque*, London: Ashgate.
- 36 Waterhouse (1995), 125. The most thorough and engaging attempt to define an English baroque remains Judith Hook's (1976) *The Baroque Age in England*, London: Thames and Hudson.
- 37 The history of interior decoration has been the subject of several important studies, although such scholarship has traditionally remained separate from the history of painting. Exceptional among them are Geoffrey Beard's (1981) *Craftsmen and Interior Decoration in England 1660–1820*, Edinburgh: John Bartholomew & Son; and Cornforth, J. (2004) *Early Georgian Interiors*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press.
- 38 The earliest known attribution of the Fetcham Park paintings to Laguerre appears in a conveyance of 1737 (Surrey History Centre K175/1/28), in which the house is described as "a beautiful building from the late Mr Tahlman consisting of many rooms on a floor, a large hall paved with marble, the staircase, saloon gallery and several other rooms finely painted by the late famous Laguerre particularly one wainscotted with right [?] Indian Japan." Information kindly supplied by Robert Simonson. See also *Notes and Queries*, April 18, 1877, 307; and Victoria County History (1911) *A History of the County of Surrey: Volume 3*, London, 284–290.

- 39 Like Shaftesbury and Matteis, the artist at Fetcham Park was evidently also familiar with other, earlier interpretations of the subject, including the *Choice of Hercules* that Annibale Carracci painted for the Palazzo Farnese in Rome in the 1590s.
- 40 Ashley Cooper (1713), 26.
- 41 Thompson, E. H. (2004) "Moore, Arthur (d. 1730)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (online edition, October 2008, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/19096>).

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Nineteenth-Century Art Institutions and Academies

Colin Trodd

If poor, you are made rich in a moment; for all is your own. You walk through the richest galleries and rooms furnished with the greatest treasures of the world, and are not asked questions. You feel the luxury of a proprietor, without the burden of property.¹

the coarsest calculations of money-getting and the most fastidious refinements of taste are intimately connected with each other ... taste ... belong[s] to the province of political economy.²

There are dark and dangerous places – swamps and pitfalls – in the social world which need bridging over... Art offers itself as a social bridge.³

The eminent cultural historian Raymond Williams once remarked that culture “is one of the two or three most complex words in the English language.”⁴ He made this wise observation in a highly influential publication, which was concerned with gathering together and defining the dominant terms of cultural and social expression. He wanted to show how culture is produced in and by practices that function as part of a repeatable and understandable language. Yet, rather strangely for a writer interested in the historical organization of culture, Williams never produced a detailed reading of the contribution of art academies and institutions to such processes.

How, then, can we rectify this omission? Well, we might start by looking at how British art academies, galleries, and organizations were discussed and defined by those cultural and social agents interested in their affairs and arrangements. By approaching these institutions as corporate bodies, physical situations, and interpretative networks we can begin to identify the particular conditions in which the nineteenth-century art world established, maintained, and circulated

cultural values and cultural perceptions. Specifically, in this context, we can see the art world in terms of rival social systems and processes, a set of concerns about the nature and character of national art institutions. For instance, just as successive Victorian commentators would approach and define art institutions through their capacity to outline programs of public service, so it should be noted that such models were increasingly important in the development of a systematic understanding of the function and significance of culture in its widest sense. In other words, culture was seen as educational, and the ability of art institutions to embody systems of useful knowledge became a pressing concern for government itself.

This leads to a broad distinction between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century perceptions of the cultural institution. In the earlier period, critics tended to see academies and other artistic bodies in isolation from each other. For instance, the Royal Academy (founded in 1768) was valued in terms of its capacity to act as a bridge between the practical world of art production and a series of general abstractions, such as “the public” and “national taste.” In opposition, the Victorian Royal Academy, like other cognate cultural institutions, such as the National Gallery (founded in 1824), the South Kensington Museum (founded in 1857, and renamed the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A) in 1899), the British Museum (founded in 1754), and the National Portrait Gallery (founded in 1856), were addressed and questioned according to the terms of a rather different agenda. Each was seen as a meeting point between two forces: the idea that culture should have a socially rooted mission, and the belief that this function must be understood in terms of the real actions and activities of professionals and audiences (artists, cultural managers, visitors, benefactors, and so on). When journalists, critics, theorists, civil servants, MPs, and successive governments made judgments of this kind, they were defining the national cultural world as a network of knowable and manageable elements. In this view, cultural analysts would approach different cultural institutions as structured bodies defined by common laws. That is, as the institutional realm was seen as an active, communicative, and measurable process comprising interlocking levels of experience and knowledge, so it offered the possibility of a general integration of different organizations into a cultural or governmental whole.

As to the many varied and competing factors that facilitate the transfer of different cultural institutions into a common cultural language, this chapter focuses on three. First, developments in the nature and scope of academic culture as a set of shifting relationships between institutional life, artistic practice, and associative activity. Second, the emergence of rival systems of valuation and investigation – what Williams called “different formations of energy and interest” – overlapping with the complexities and contradictions of culture, class, and education within a nascent liberal democracy.⁵ Finally, the identification of cultural institutions as physical sites of assembly, involving issues of individual bodily display and social interaction. Broadly speaking, these elements contributed to the cultural identity

of the period by establishing the conditions for participation in national cultural life. However, before we begin the process of examining these themes, it is worth reviewing the way in which nineteenth-century art academies and cultural institutions have been treated in recent critical literature.

Surprisingly, until relatively recently, few commentators on British art showed much interest in discussing the way in which late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century artists dealt with the transmission of artistic ideas through organized bodies of knowledge and instruction. Academies were treated as training organizations where artists encountered or developed those skills that enabled them to practice with the hope of becoming famous like Joshua Reynolds, David Wilkie, J. M. W. Turner and, somewhat later, John Everett Millais, Frederic Leighton, and G. F. Watts. For instance, one of the classic accounts of the subject, T. S. R. Boase's *English Art, 1800–1870*, offers little or no information concerning the production and circulation of models of art outlined by successive generations of artists.⁶ Accordingly, this book is of limited use to the modern student interested in debates and disputes involving major artist-theorists including Henry Fuseli, James Barry, John Opie, Henry Howard, B. R. Haydon, George Foggo, Charles Eastlake, or the Pre-Raphaelites.⁷ In fairness to Boase, it is worth noting that he belonged to a school of writing, still active today, in which the history of British painting is the history of its ability to overcome the centralized system of French art.⁸ From this perspective, British academies are made to contribute to the back story of artistic development: they provide one of the conditions in which artists are discussed and evaluated in relation to what are seen to be the more important issues of style, genre, and technique; they are not clogged, as in the case of the French system, by theoretical doctrine and dogma.⁹

Since the mid 1980s, Boase's internalized account of art history, where a select body of artists continue or enhance a body of artistic values through shared interests, has been questioned by a number of scholars of British painting. Here the contributions of John Barrell, Morris Eaves, and David Solkin have been particularly striking. Unlike earlier commentators, they put forward a series of close readings of key cultural texts and visual practices, which were mapped against the broader critical structures of thought prevalent in British society between the end of the eighteenth century and the middle of the nineteenth century. As a result, readers could see the connections and tensions between developments in different spheres of intellectual and social life; art institutions were perceived as critical spaces involved in the synthesis of ideas derived from a multiplicity of areas: aesthetics, politics, history, jurisprudence, economics, business, and so on.¹⁰

In essence, these interventions encouraged other scholars to engage with the full conceptual field of art rather than confining it to a narrow practical activity.¹¹ One immediate benefit of this method is that artworks are seen as networks of critical communication instead of isolated units of artistic production. Therefore, in what follows, the academy is treated as a set of interconnecting ideas and problems concerning the generation and governance of painting in this period. Such

complications indicate that art practice and production were symptomatic of a social world marked by the struggle, emergence, and consolidation of new conceptual patterns and initiatives. In sum, one of the chief aims of the essay is to examine how art institutions could be adapted, reformed, recreated, or imagined to respond to the unpredictable and disorganizing forces associated with certain aspects of modernity.

Valuation and Investigation at the Royal Academy

The Royal Academy is perhaps the best example of these interlocking processes, as was acknowledged by its many and varied advocates and detractors. The history of the Royal Academy can be approached in terms of the relationship between the need to form a centralized body of artistic knowledge and practice, and the desire to address a central art public by constructing a particular exhibition audience (Fig. 5.1). Just as the Royal Academy had to separate its members from a crowded art world full of different types of visual product, so it was necessary to distinguish



FIG. 5.1 George Scharf: Exhibition at the Royal Academy, London, watercolor, 1828, depicting the Great Room at Somerset House during the exhibition of 1828 where portraits by the President, Sir Thomas Lawrence, are exhibited and Benjamin Vulliamy's "Great Lamp" hangs in the center.

Source: The Art Archive/Museum of London.

its exhibits from the panoply of things associated with the dazzling pleasures of metropolitan life. In essence, it wanted to control art, and thus make itself fashionable, by resisting some of the more obvious signs of consumer fashion in Georgian and Victorian London.

We might use this need to identify the Royal Academy as a critical space forming “reflective” artists and viewers as the starting point for reviewing its historical development. Sir Joshua Reynolds, the first president of the Royal Academy, produced a series of important and influential *Discourses*, many of which acknowledged or addressed this double identity. In his first *Discourse* he calls the Royal Academy the ideal site for the cultivation of the “Polite Arts.” Tellingly, his introduction compels it to translate “opulence and power” into “elegance and refinement.”¹² What he means here is that art is more than visual enjoyment; it contributes to and helps realize a sense of human community by at once guiding and expressing civilizing values. It does this by cultivating and displaying objects that enable viewers to understand they share something in common: taste. Beyond the bustle and tumult of ordinary experience, he implies, the visitor to the Royal Academy experiences something more satisfying, settled and noble, something called judgment. Thus individual acts of judgment should be seen as public demonstrations of a principle leading to social and aesthetic harmony. By promoting the Polite Arts, the Royal Academy both dignifies and makes manifest the underlying logic of the “commercial nation;” by promoting the Royal Academy as the national body of the Polite Arts the state enforces a coherent and unified vision of cultural life.

Yet Reynoldsian academicism, which goes out of its way to present itself as a sensible educational system based on discoverable facts, norms, and experiences, can sound strangely romantic or other-worldly, almost mystical; this shift from the empirical to the metaphysical is most pronounced when Reynolds is obliged to deal with beauty, the ultimate source of art. He writes:

The Art which we profess has beauty for its object; this it is our business to discover and to express; but the beauty of which we are in quest is general and intellectual; it is an idea that subsists only in the mind; the sight never beheld it, nor has the hand expressed it: it is an idea residing in the breast of the artist, which he is always labouring to impart, and which he dies at last without imparting; but which he is yet so far able to communicate, as to raise the thoughts, and extend the views of the spectator; and which, by a succession of art, may be so far diffused, that its effects may extend themselves imperceptibly into publick benefits, and be among the means of bestowing on whole nations refinement of taste: which, if it does not lead directly to purity of manners, obviates at least their greatest depravation, by disentangling the mind from appetite, and conducting the thoughts through successive stages of excellence, till that contemplation of universal rectitude and harmony which began by Taste, may, as it is exalted and refined, conclude in Virtue.¹³

This gloriously convoluted passage begins by repeating a central doctrine of academic culture: the artist must interpret rather than copy nature. Reynolds goes

on to imagine that art is approachable and familiarizing, even when he is forced to note the elusiveness of its core identity. In part, the artist is like a pilgrim in search of redemptive, illuminating purity, and beauty is the obscure and unobtainable source of his quest. So, art is both a set of real material practices, and a kind of Holy Grail involving a life-long search for a lost source of knowledge. Ultimately, then, it is in the search for beauty that the value of art is found. In Reynolds's view, the artist is a type of saintly subject or engaged being who somehow intensifies the quality of reflective experience in society by becoming conscious of the intangible nature of beauty, and his non-encounter with the beautiful acts as a bridge between cultural "Taste" and social "Virtue."

Among the many strange relationships and tensions in Reynolds's vision is the conversion of artistic subjective sensibility into the currency of social experience: art is meant to refine and purify even when the artist is unable to locate the beauty that is the source of such values. In other words, he wants to believe the source of the aesthetic can be found in the real world at the moment that he declares it is part of the internal language of art. Yet the bigger picture here is the idea that art refines both artists and citizens, and thus contributes to the development of a settled national community. How this could be made to happen would continue to fascinate and frustrate subsequent artists, art critics, and cultural commentators.¹⁴

One of the main functions of the *Discourses* was to present the Royal Academy in terms of the organization and institutionalization of culture: it would bring together artists and audiences by acting as a polite space of interaction, and by promoting itself as a non-sectarian body. Following Reynolds, Barry and others asked if art progressed by talented individuals or by strong institutions. Somewhat later, Haydon and Foggo tended to see the Royal Academy as a self-marketing club rather than a proper national body. By the 1850s, art institutions were valued if they demonstrated commitment to connecting different skills, practices, and requirements – the professional needs of artists, the integrity of national art, the tastes of connoisseurs and collectors, and the educational aspirations of the wider social body.¹⁵

A main theme running through such pivotal readings of the history of British art from the period was the identification of appropriate forms of patronage. For most commentators, this involved the formation of general systems to support the emergence of a national school of art. Hence the panoply of inquiries, investigations, exposés reports, and commissions, of which the following are some of the most notable: James Barry's *An Inquiry into the Real and Imaginary Obstructions to the Acquisition of the Arts in England* (1775); Martin Archer Shee's *Rhymes on Art* (1806); Prince Hoare's *An Inquiry into the Requisite Cultivation and Present State of the Arts of Design in England* (1806); B. R. Haydon's *Some Enquiry into the Causes which have Obstructed the Advance of Historical Painting, for the Last Seventy Years in England* (1829); John Millingen's *Some Remarks on the State of Learning and the Fine Arts* (1831); George Foggo's *A Letter to Lord Brougham on the History and Character of the Royal Academy* (1835); Edward Edwards's *The Fine Arts in England, their State and Prospects*

Considered in Relative to National Education (1840); W. B. S. Taylor's *The Origin, Progress and Present Condition of the Fine Arts in Great Britain and Ireland* (1841); G. W. Yapp's *Art-Education at Home and Abroad* (1852); Thomas Skaife's *Exposé of the Royal Academy* (1854). Elsewhere, the Royal Academy was inspected in detail by the British state in the *Report of the Select Committee on Arts and their Connexion with Manufactures* (1836), the *Report from the Select Committee on Art Unions* (1845), and the *Report from the Commissioners on the Present Position of the Royal Academy in Relation to the Fine Arts* (1863). This list is by no means definitive, but it is representative. In most cases the value of the existing or reformed Royal Academy was calibrated in terms of its ability to improve national culture through the management of patronage, the organization of production, distribution, and consumption. As part of this creative process, the Victorian Royal Academy was assessed in relation to its commitment to an educational agenda, its ability to make itself transparent to external forces and powers through an acknowledgement of a popular art public outside and beyond its own historical or institutional audience.¹⁶

Near the end of the Victorian period some artist-theorists influenced by Reynolds began to address this problem of the relationship between the "advancement" of art and the "improvement" of a popular audience by making painting address the complex motives of human experience and cultural belief. For Watts and Leighton this search took the form of asserting the creative nature of individual expression. Both were aware of romantic models of art, particularly the Blakean notion that painting must commit itself to the realization of the cultural authority of the imagination, as well as broader anthropological debates where cultural development was defined as conflict and struggle. To be sure, these twin pressures resulted in a series of fascinating works in which the traditional academic pursuit of pictorial balance gave way to an interest in exploring different states or sites of experience through imposing, subject-centered compositions. Consequently, if the human form was refashioned to combine scale and delicacy, it became a colossus at once pictorially resolute yet physically vulnerable.

The association of the body with sensation instead of nature allowed artists to see the human form as a meeting place between different accounts of freedom, action, and identity. Such matters are particularly noticeable in Watts's *Hope* (1886) and Leighton's *Flaming June* (1895), both of which seem to exist in a universe of pictures, a special and unique chamber of art where the subject is at once self-absorbed and emotionally remote. Naturally, this strange combination of artifice and naturalism intrigued many of the more perceptive commentators of the period, such as Arthur Symonds, G. K. Chesterton, Laurence Binyon, and R. E. D. Sketchley, all of whom found in late Victorian "academicism" the immobilization of traditional academic notions of compositional order.¹⁷

Flaming June and *Hope* are concerned with questions of agency, the relationship of the world of the self to the external world. Specifically, both works make the body express the reality of organic processes, and both are more interested in exploring the nature of mental life than in repeating the Raphaelesque

tradition of treating painting as a relationship between volumetric forms and compositional motifs. Just as Watts transforms the classical body into a bundle of sensory-nervous energies, so Leighton treats the body as a magical solar entity. In fact, Watts can be distinguished from Leighton in that most of his figures are divorced from an environment of aesthetic pleasure; his images tend to preserve the unsettling realization of the origin of human value in the physical reality of life, and in this sense, their account of beauty echoes Reynolds's enigmatic statement cited earlier in this chapter.

Hope is a frail evocation of this process as Watts transforms the colossus into an agnostic subject who cannot represent her epithet. Instead of dominating her space, she is confined to the world of material phenomena, an environment unknowable beyond the realm of sensation and feeling. What is represented, then, is a vision of the world as the confrontation between consciousness and a pre-human or non-human system of forces. Tellingly, hope takes one of two forms. It is either a "scientific" belief that mental life originates in sensation, and that the body evolves by distancing itself from its physiological and neurological origin in pain; or, it is a "disciplinary" art, where the subject learns to become a self-governing agent by attempting to perfect a technique of hope in terms of bodily resistance to nature. In both cases, the work has a therapeutic goal rather than a narrative purpose as the restive, submissive subject hopes for a level of human agency beyond human biology. In sum, Watts makes his figure enact a central moral dilemma of modernity: the existential dread that the material life of the world does not promote or preserve the rationality of human values, and that such values are cultural rather than natural.

Social Values and Academic Norms

Watts and Leighton wanted to believe that they could contribute in the development of the cultural state; other artists and commentators were less convinced that the Royal Academy had ever fulfilled its self-appointed role as a national forum for the production of national art. Consequently, the belief that the health of art institutions indicated social well-being would be advocated by supporters of a range of organizations with cultural welfare or missionary aspirations, such as the National Gallery, the V&A, and more specialized bodies including the Society of Female Artists (SFA), the National Association for the Advancement of Art and its Application to Industry, the Century Guild, and the Art and Crafts Movement. Each of these bodies affirmed that academies or guilds were ideal places for the display or the production of artworks because they could be made to express the organic life of communal bodies.

The SFA is one of the most interesting associated bodies in mid-Victorian London. Although the archives of the Society do not survive, and so it is difficult to discuss its core identity, it showed little or no interest in using the popular press

to outline its aims and aspirations. The first exhibition (1858) was held in Oxford Street, where visitors were charged one shilling for admission and a further sixpence for the catalogue.¹⁸ These facts, together with reviews of the displays, suggest a passive version of the Royal Academy, a public outlet where professional ladies could sell their works in a controlled environment. Harriet Grote, who saw the expansion of the art world as a way of developing the national economy, founded the SFA. From her perspective, the SFA would legitimate women artists by making them professional producers of goods and services to the middle classes. The *Englishwoman's Review*, a sympathetic journal put this very neatly:

we could spend a good deal of money with great pleasure in purchasing pictures in the Female Artists' Exhibition. If we had a limited amount of money and wanted to buy pictures to decorate our drawing room we should go there to buy them. [The purpose is] to supply the public with what the public likes – i.e. cheap pictures.¹⁹

Yet many critics were less than convinced by such reasoning. Somewhat earlier William Hazlitt, the great romantic critic and essayist, defined art academies in terms of the general management of society into insidious “corporate bodies,” which are:

more corrupt and profligate than individuals, because they have more power to do mischief, and are less amenable to disgrace or punishment. They feel neither shame, remorse, gratitude, nor good-will. The principle of private or natural conscience is extinguished in each individual (we have no moral sense in the breasts of others), and nothing is considered but how the united efforts of the whole (released from idle scruples) may be best directed to the obtaining of political advantages and privileges to be shared as common spoil. Each member reaps the benefit, and lays the blame, if there is any, upon the rest... “Self-love and social” here look the same; and in consulting the interests of a particular class, which are also your own, there is even a show of public virtue.²⁰

This is at once subtle and incendiary, for Hazlitt sees such developments as a process of cultural advancement where self-managing bodies exercise arbitrary and absolute power. Academies are both units of power and blocking agents, and so they seek to determine how culture is produced and to provide its legitimating authority. Cultural advancement, it is implied, has become the medium by which fiscal privileges are pursued. Crucially, the final sentence implicates the reader in all this disagreeable activity, this assimilation of culture by commerce. Innovation, rather than beauty, is the solvent bringing together of producers and audiences in a society where trade and profit have become the ultimate and universal signs of prestige and progress. It is pointless to hanker for the return of a “pure” cultural landscape in which artists, audiences, and patrons meet as “free” individuals; now we are all involved in an entrepreneurial world where cultural life is an expression of monetary operations.²¹

Hazlitt was prophetic: he seized on the idea that, by making itself into a glamorous venue designed to attract fashionable audiences for the purpose of displaying and selling works of art, the Royal Academy could conflate issues concerning its own formal business with the general interests of art. Where Reynolds had imagined the Royal Academy as a place of aesthetic consensus, Hazlitt sees it in terms of cultural coercion. His reading, adapted by many later writers, forces us to confront a central tension in academic culture: in the Reynoldsian tradition the artist is supposed to be a “gentleman” devoted to the vindication of the civilizing qualities of the polite environment to which he belongs, but even the Royal Academy exhibition obliges him to compete with his fellow artists to attract the attention of consumers to his products. This division, where the artist is both cultural statesman and cultural salesman, is found in the very structure of academic discourse, and becomes increasingly evident in subsequent Victorian perceptions of the Royal Academy. There, too, supporters continued to see it enhancing the fine arts by acting as a national body, but an increasing number of critics dismissed it as a private artistic business in which the rhetoric of aesthetic value disguised the reality of a system where the individual art work was no more than a sensational form or common article of trade.²²

From at least the 1820s and 1830s, the Royal Academy was taken up by observers concerned with discussing and outlining the impact of wider social forces on the art world. As we have seen in the case of Hazlitt, of particular interest here was the attitude of the Royal Academy to a cultural realm increasingly subject to the rival pressures of artistic professionalism and the cultural market. On the one hand, the artist was a principled agent of elite knowledge designed to improve public taste; on the other hand, he was the purveyor of luxury goods (paintings) for affluent clients, private objects that could be translated into popular goods (reproductions of paintings) for a mass audience. This constant slippage between civic and corporate identities structured how representations were made for the Royal Academy, and, as such, dominated wider discussions of the purpose and nature of art as a human activity responding to changing social circumstances and fashions.²³

As these debates developed, they extended to include other institutions where art objects were produced, displayed, or sold. For instance, later in the nineteenth century, with the rise of the Arts and Crafts Movement, it became possible to argue for the expressive quality of the craft-based arts as against the mechanical and sterile nature of art supported by the Royal Academy. Hence Walter Crane, the designer, painter, and political activist, dismissed academic discourse as entrenched dogmatic belief.²⁴ In other contexts, as we have noted, female writers and artists argued that the SFA inspired women artists to become socially useful creators by extending the notion of the professional art realm.²⁵

This contrast between “productivist” citizenship (a progressive or reformist art world as a collection of self-governing and self-improving societies) and “corporatist” commercialism (a cultural world of central management presided over by the Royal Academy), became a key theme in Victorian art criticism. Supporters of

the Royal Academy retaliated by devising new ways of describing the nature of its exhibits. Thus some commentators presented modern culture as a condition of progressive informality where style was an extension of a complete social personality. Accordingly, in publications such as the *Art Journal*, the *Athenaeum*, and the *Magazine of Art*, all of which were generally sympathetic to the Royal Academy, the circulation of ideas linking artist and audience tended to be developed through notions of shared expressions of experience rather than specific principles of artistic composition and pictorial arrangement.²⁶ In this view, the essential feature of contemporary academic painting was its existence as useful and enjoyable information. Just as artist and spectator shared the same mental universe, so images crystallized common values and pleasures. This modification of associationist theory, where pleasure is generated by associated ideas arising from objects in the natural world, encouraged the view that cultural value occurred when artists deployed those socializing signs by which art became continuously productive and renewable to a body of interested participants. If the bond between artist and audience arose from the codification and the exchange of different emotions, some of which were richer in informational value than others, then the inventive artist operated as a kind of progressive and pragmatic cultural entrepreneur in constant search of fresh examples of common experience to align artwork and spectator.

When reading Victorian essays and reviews it seems as if the art world is a vast succession of possible incidents, topics, and episodes that might be shared by an audience in terms of common human feeling.²⁷ The critic Tom Taylor, drawn to the homely style of C. R. Leslie, saw in his work the possibility of a new type of popular and informal academic painting:

It is pleasant to me to think that so many of Leslie's pictures should have found a home among the mills of Lancashire and the smoking forges and grimy workshops of Birmingham. They are eminently calculated to counteract the ignobler influences of industrial occupation by their inborn refinement, their liberal element of loveliness, their sweet sentiment of nature, their literary associations, and their genial humour. I can speak from personal observation to the real appreciation of these pictures in such places, not on the part of their possessors only, but among the many, both masters and workmen, to whom these galleries are so liberally opened.²⁸

These, then, are some of the important conditions in which academic culture flourished, conditions where the display of subjects rich in feeling would be linked to the expression of a completed identity, a mirroring of social and artistic concerns unified through the coordination of pictorial character and emotional receptiveness.

Critics of this arrangement were not slow in identifying themselves; for, unlike the *Athenaeum* or the *Art Journal*, they could see in the association of feeling with value, the privatization of art. Unsurprisingly, John Ruskin supported this position in typically robust terms, arguing that there was no public for art, merely

a “bestial English mob” of consumers set on turning painting into an industrial practice; and so:

In the miserable competitive labour of finding new stimulus for the appetite – daily more gross – of this tyrannous mob, we may count as lost, beyond any hope, the artists who are dull, docile, or distressed enough to submit to its demands; and we count the dull and the distressed by myriads; – and among the docile many of the best intellects we possess. The few who have sense and strength to assert their own place and supremacy, are driven into discouraged disease by their isolation, like Turner and Blake.²⁹

In this view, the modern artist must struggle to resist any accommodation of artistic representation to what the poet Robert Browning called the banal “garniture” of daily life. Most fail, however. Consequently, in finding and forming a personal style or set of subjects, these painters become incorporated into structures of publicity, conditions of cultural life where personality would be no more than a technique of self-enhancement, a form of power mirroring the least public and critically desirable aspects of civil society. This results in a cultural landscape where the individual artist battles to become a strong “style” or “brand” as opposed to an authentic self.³⁰ But the consumer logic of this arrangement – where painters are obliged to become promoters of commonplace topics – forces many works to perish in the struggle to locate and define new categories of depiction, new subjects of representation. In a moment of anguished illumination, William Bell Scott, the artist, art teacher, collector, and poet, muses over the fate of “the vast collections of pictures fresh from the easels of the five hundred candidates for public favour,” and continues with these mordant observations:

A healthy love of out-of-door life we see in every English exhibition, an appreciation of the wooliness of sheep and the hairiness of dogs, the hardness of stone walls and the rosiness of children’s faces; and on the next canvas you find the same excellence, of execution only. If his work was vitalised by poetic insight, if it was endowed either with a recognisable motive or loveliness, it would stand out in the memory forever; but as things are, one of the wonders we hear it constantly expressed is, where all the pictures annually painted go to – into what infinite limbo they slide back from the light of the season in London.³¹

Other institutions, such as the National Portrait Gallery, dealt with the material reality of the swarming world of cultural things by identifying the cultural institution as a magical kingdom of objects, a place where visitors could see a spectacular version of the world itself reduced to a set of interconnected displays and identities. Equally, as the British Museum developed throughout the nineteenth century – particularly when it displayed Assyrian artifacts in the 1850s – such matters could be locked into a struggle between the idea of the *universal object* of classical culture and the idea of the *universal collection* as something transcending

the canonical values associated with “European” culture. In other words, with the appearance of a number of “exotic” objects, this particular art museum became less like an academy based on the idea of canonical forms and more like a natural history museum patterned by ideas of evolutionary growth, conflict or development.³² C. T. Newton, one of the great archaeologists of the period, and a leading curator at the BM, put this very neatly:

we cannot appreciate art aesthetically, unless we first learn to interpret its meaning and motive, and in order to do this we must study it historically... Museums should not merely charm and astonish the eye by the exhibition of marvels of art; they should, by the method of their arrangement, suggest to the mind the causes of such phenomena.³³

The British Museum had been constructed as a site for the production and circulation of knowledge concerning cultures, empires, and nations through the display of a vast army of antiquarian and ethnographic objects; it would make the past live again by revealing the patterns of consciousness and experience working their way into particular material forms. But what would happen when similar ideas were applied to objects of modern industrial design? How might common objects be grasped or classified in accordance with academic language and academic values? These were some of the questions raised when the V&A appeared on the mid-Victorian cultural landscape. Just as the V&A was the most educationally oriented of all “academies” of art, so its identity as an institutional space would be determined by its function as a social venue for the production and display of “useful” knowledge. However, unlike the British Museum, which had been devised to demonstrate the essential unity of classical culture, and then modified with the influx of non-classical exhibits, the V&A had come into being to acknowledge the eclectic nature of design culture.³⁴

Actually, the history of the V&A could be charted in terms of successive cultural reforms and critical inspections dealing with the balance between managerial and curatorial expertise, and the development of settled systems of acquisition and display. Of all the academies and art institutions in Victorian London, the V&A was most clearly associated with a missionary project; indeed, it was designed actively to promote better appreciation of material culture by making appropriate examples available to “popular” audiences. Originally, the V&A was perceived as a place where the applied arts could be studied and appreciated. Henry Cole, its first director, imagined it inaugurating a revolution in visual knowledge. He envisaged a new cultural empire combining some of the characteristics of the Royal Academy and National Gallery: the V&A would be an academy of knowledge with appropriate examples (reproductions or originals or photographs) of the industrial arts and craft objects; it would demonstrate how exposure to good design could enhance specific industrial and craft skills. He wanted to launch the V&A as a place of practical experience rather than aesthetic enlightenment, a valuable meeting place between historical and contemporary

artworkers designed to facilitate in the transfer of skill from the independent art world to the fully rationalized economic sphere.

Although it was precisely this limitation of the cultural institution to the development of consensus-based forms of knowledge and experience that would be questioned by other cultural managers at the V&A, Cole remained a key figure in the definition of the cultural institution as a place of critical rationality. He argued that in order to transform the art museum into an academy of popular instruction it would be necessary to collect a multiplicity of objects from different historical periods and artistic and national communities. The assembly of objects was a matter of producing a learning environment where “all classes might be induced to investigate those common principles of taste, which may be traced to the work of all the ages.”³⁵ In essence, Cole envisaged a modern art museum as a teaching machine, a vast stadium of knowledge based on the principle of understanding the common and functional qualities of diverse objects. His belief, based on the idea of “applying” art to industrial production by “improving” the visual richness of the workers’ experience, was supported and promoted nationally; soon other agencies came forward to propound the doctrine that the museum must be elevated from being an “unintelligible lounge for idlers” into an “impressive schoolroom for everyone.”³⁶ It is telling that such ideas had been developed in governmental circles from as early as the 1830s. Influenced by the writings of the Philosophical Radicals, many MPs and civil servants had seen in the development of public cultural institutions the opportunity of recreating or remodeling the experience of art as something leading to measurable and valuable outcomes. Such beliefs were popularized by leading public figures; in 1833 Harriet Martineau, a well-known liberal commentator, claimed that the “great objects government” must be “security” and the “advancement of the people.” Thus the “innocent amusements” of culture should be a policy priority in the development of the new industrial state.³⁷

Martineau’s argument was based on the widely shared perception of culture as a form of self-policing: it could act as a cheap, efficient, and productive form of public morality by weaning the masses from disorderly actions and practices. We find variations on this theme in accounts of cultural institutions as academies of citizenship. For instance, less than ten years after Martineau’s statement, the immensely popular writer Anna Jameson proclaimed:

A gallery like this – a national gallery – is not merely for the pleasure and civilization of our people, but also for their instruction in the value and significance of art. How far the history of the progress of painting is connected with the history of manners, morals and government, and above all with the history of our religion, might be exemplified visibly by a collection of specimens in painting.³⁸

Here connoisseurship – the appreciation of the art object as something precious, beautiful, and creative – gives way to a form of ethnographic study where the artwork is seen to provide evidence of how free subjects created themselves through shared codes of social, cultural, and political conduct.



FIG. 5.2 E. J. Brewtnall: *A Party of Working Men at the National Gallery, London*, engraving, 1870.

Source: © Illustrated London News Ltd/Mary Evans.

Later, another social liberal, George Godwin, the architect, chairman of the Art Union and editor of the influential *The Builder*, was equally direct:

Art should not be reserved as a mere accomplishment but [is] essential to the well-being of the state. It is not to be cultivated solely as a luxury for the few, but made to cheer, adorn and elevate the whole life of the whole people... [Thus] opening works of mind to the contemplation of the people will be found a powerful means of lessening such moral and intellectual differences as there may be between upper and lower orders, not by injuring one, but by improving the other. An acquaintance with works of art gives dignity and self esteem to the operative, a matter of no slight value as regards the stability of society, besides making him a better workman and furnishes him with a delight, independent of position, calculated to purify and exalt.³⁹

It follows that art is more than unalloyed private pleasure; it is socially valuable, and its social value can be determined in terms of its contribution to industrial manufacture and the wider public realm. Properly organized, the modern academy of art should become a microcosm of a model society, a meeting point between productive objects and productive citizens, a way of overcoming the dislocations of value and custom springing from the indirect relations of modern social and industrial life (Fig. 5.2).

These initiatives for the transformation of the art world into a vast academy of popular knowledge played a major role in the development of the Victorian art museum. Many commentators shared Cole's image of the art museum acting as the cultural arm of the techno-scientific state. However, this view did not go unchallenged. J. C. Robinson, a much more sophisticated thinker, but a far less ruthless career administrator, disagreed with Cole on many points. Robinson, a key figure in the early history of the V&A, was a Renaissance scholar with a particular interest in the ornamental arts and sculpture, as well as contemporary design. However, unlike Cole, who wanted to imagine the V&A as a vast machine devoted to the cult of usefulness, Robinson explained material culture from the position of an active connoisseur. Because Robinson aimed to construct a museum based on traditional principles of taste and judgment, he wanted the V&A to commit itself to specific objects of aesthetic merit rather than the display "typical" industrial products. To some extent, he imagined the V&A as an extension of the informality and intimacy of the connoisseurial collection (it is worth noting that similar ideas would be explored in the innovative exhibitions held by the Burlington Fine Arts Club in the 1870s and 1880s). Although, Robinson's drive to acquire original artifacts instead of reproductive specimens was criticized by Cole's supporters, Robinson rebuffed them because he was keen to stress the interplay between the fine and decorative arts. This was particularly noticeable in his account of the acquisition of historical sculpture for the V&A. He wrote:

The idea has gradually grown up, especially in this country, that it is scarcely the business of an artist-sculptor to concern himself with anything but the human figure, and as one result of this short-sighted view, when any architectural or ornamental accessories are required, an unfortunate want of power is too often manifested; whilst on the other hand, no ornamentist sculptors ... are likely to arise from amongst the ... skilled artizans, to whom ornamental sculpture has been virtually abandoned.⁴⁰

In essence, the divisions between Cole and Robinson should be understood to involve two competing visions of the nature, identity, and display of culture in a public setting. Both see the art museum as a cultural academy, a civic institution committed to the development of public life and private experience. However, if both wanted to imagine the V&A as a place where objects were connected together, and where such connections could encourage visitors to apply their experience to other situations, then they disagreed over the principle function of knowledge. Cole approached art as an issue of economic and social welfare: it made the industrial nation stronger because workers, technologists, and managers would visit the V&A. Robinson was more interested in something much closer to the Ruskinian ideal of creating a place of beauty from which individuals could establish meaningful cultural communities in the face of the instrumental and mechanical powers of modern life. Where he stressed the holistic nature of cultural skill as a way of overcoming the modern division between the fine and decorative

arts (an attitude shared by the proponents of what would come to be called the Arts and Crafts Movement), Cole was much more interested in making design accessible by stressing its social utility. Expressed in these terms, it is possible to see how this argument was part of a much wider debate about the identity and value of culture and the display of cultural objects. Therefore, Robinson's approach was essentially romantic: he wanted to imagine the possibility of collecting works that enabled the viewer to re-experience the creative energy of the original inventor. In opposition, Cole's approach was essentially utilitarian: he desired to develop a culture of display dedicated to improving the vision of the spectator by uniting pleasure and instruction. Needless to say, these models of cultural value were not developed in isolation; as the century progressed they would become locked into accounts of social conduct in public spaces.

The Institutional Body

Nineteenth-century cultural institutions, like other places of mass assembly within civil society, were subject to specific codes and practices concerning behavior, dress, and social performance. There were certain rituals governing how individuals appeared and acted in public. For instance, during its earliest years, access to the National Gallery was determined by the ability of the subject to write his or her name in an official log book, and all visitors were expected to bring with them a letter of recommendation from a person of standing within the community.⁴¹ Issues of dress and appearance were taken to provide immediate signs of social experience and identity: officials believed they could determine why a person was in a particular space by observing clothing and mannerisms, as well as monitoring general levels of enthusiasm.

In 1824, the young painter Samuel Palmer visited the Royal Academy annual exhibition with the 66-year-old William Blake; nearly 40 years later he informed Blake's Victorian biographer, Alexander Gilchrist, that they had been delighted by a number of the designs, particularly Thomas Wainwright's *Walton's Angler*.⁴² He went on to remark "while so many moments better worthy to remain are fled, the caprice of memory presents me with the image of Blake looking up at Wainwright's picture; Blake in his plain black suit and *rather* broad-brimmed, but not quakerish hat, standing so quietly among all the dressed-up, rustling, swelling people, and myself thinking 'How little you know *who* is among you!'"⁴³ There are two salient points here, both of which are immediately relevant to debates concerning the modeling of the artistic realm through representations of experience, respectability, and sensibility.

First, we are struck by the incongruity of the image of the "prophetic" Blake, for whom the only meaningful way of addressing an art audience was the production of what he called "Sublime Allegory" (visionary manifestations of his private mythologies or complex reworkings and conflations of biblical and classical

subjects), being drawn to Wainwright's ordinary subject.⁴⁴ Blake, we should note, saw the Royal Academy in Hazlittian terms: it was a mercenary and mercantile organization where the interests of historical and symbolic painting had been surrendered to soulless commercialism. In this respect, he produced a proto-version of the anti-Royal Academy discourse that became more widespread in the middle of the century, when critics of the Royal Academy attacked it as a corporate body caught between a monopoly and a market; and so, like William Bell Scott and Robert Browning, Blake marked the Royal Academy as a cultural factory devoted to the production of senseless things.

Why would Wainwright's painting, a commonplace subject taken from Izaak Walton's *The Compleat Angler* (1653), entrance him? After all, what could be less elevated than a genre subject of rustics enjoying the rudely quotidian pleasures of fishing for eel, pike, or carp? Yet Blake appears to have absolved Wainwright's image from what he saw as the debased and polluting features of Dutch subject painting, which is its most obvious point of cultural affiliation. In other words, Blake did not see Wainwright's painting in terms of the tainted currency of genre painting, the dominant medium of expression at the Royal Academy. Rather, like Ruskin's later characterization of the medieval mason as the embodiment of the symbolic or noble grotesque – the producer of a vivid culture fusing work and play in symbolic union – Blake perceives in Wainwright's image the integration of the imagination and the external world. In this coordination of play and mythos – the elevation of sensuous enjoyment to a condition of universal experience – Wainwright's modest subject points the way to a world beyond work by offering a vision of shared human pleasure and communal freedom. What Blake means by all this is that the viewer should go beyond looking at the external signs of the subjects in Wainwright's image to see the lineaments of spiritual liberty itself.

Blake's desire to see through the body to discover cultural meaning brings us to the second issue arising from Palmer's recollection, which draws attention to the difference between Blake and the audience assembled at the Royal Academy. Palmer seems to be on the point of imagining the collective body of the Royal Academy looking back at Blake and finding in him evidence of an alien identity. In this sumptuous place of fashion, Blake's clothing appears old-fashioned or eccentric. Palmer is clearly distinguishing between Blake as a working subject from what is a landscape of ritualized and formalized leisure. This is an important issue. From the moment of its inception, and continuing throughout the nineteenth century, supporters, patrons, and members of the Royal Academy dedicated themselves to protecting the professional world of art from the realm of manual labor. Hence the ceremonial and symbolic significance of the presidential discourses where high art was identified in complete opposition to popular culture; the elimination from the annual exhibition of works by reproductive craftsmen; the introduction and continuation of an entrance fee as a way of separating art lovers from the vulgar masses. These and other measures were designed to refine the Royal Academy's identity by selecting the producers and consumers it acknowledged as authentic members of what Reynolds called a polite cultural

community. It should come as no surprise, then, that Gilchrist's biography of Blake is full of telling details concerning Blake's material appearance. At one rather splendid social gathering Sir Thomas Lawrence, the then President of the Royal Academy, stares at Blake's workaday attire to indicate contempt for his status, appearance, and poverty.⁴⁵

Blake died three years after the opening of the National Gallery, and we have no record of what he made of it. Until 1838, when it moved to its current site at Trafalgar Square, the National Gallery was based in Pall Mall, a salubrious district populated by imposing town houses owned by members of the gentry and aristocracy. Yet the two issues so evident in Palmer's account of Blake's visit to the Royal Academy – the relationship between social experience and the identity of the cultural artifact, and the relationship between ordinary life and cultural display – were central to the public profile of the National Gallery throughout the rest of the century.⁴⁶

These matters became urgent concerns, particularly after the 1840s when successive agencies, bodies, and critics set out to study the social and cultural authority of the National Gallery. First, following the example of Ruskin, commentators became increasingly interested in discovering how the institution dealt with the reality of transmitting artistic knowledge to a mass audience. Ruskin had argued, in a compellingly direct fashion, that the history of art is the history of different forms of consciousness battling to articulate different forms of experience and knowledge. In his view, the beauties of Gothic and Venetian art arise from the collective lived experience of these specific cultures where beauty is threaded into the minute particulars of daily life; but, as he disliked Dutch art, he dismissed it as a symptom of a culture in which the love of beauty had been replaced by a general pursuit of material power. Thus he attends to the solid surface of a painting in order to see the molten soul at work behind it.⁴⁷ On another level, he mixes historicism and connoisseurship, the desire to make the gallery a vast chamber of different types of painting, and an academic or scholarly place where governing values are enshrined in canonical styles and schools. Subsequent writers tended to follow Ruskin by seeing the National Gallery as a medium for the translation of values into facts. In sum, it was perceived as a place where two important critical categories intersected: the historicist vision of the collection as a vast place of knowledge, and the connoisseurial notion of the individual object as a suspended moment in time.

Variations on Ruskin's account of the aesthetic and social value of the public art museum became increasingly popular in the second half of the century. The introduction to *The National Gallery Site Commission* (1857) includes this important observation:

The intelligent public of this country are daily becoming more alive to the truth ... that the arts ... cannot be properly studied or rightly appreciated by means of insulated specimens alone; that in order to understand ... great works ... it is necessary to contemplate the genius which produced them ... in the mode of its operation, in

its rise and progress, as well as in its perfection... In order, therefore, to render the ... National Gallery worthy of the name it bears, Your Committee think that the funds appropriated to the enlargement of the collection should be expended with a view, not merely of exhibiting to the public beautiful works of art but of instructing the people in the history of that art, and the age in which, and the men by whom, those works were produced.⁴⁸

Significantly, this adapts and provides an institutional context for Ruskin's assertion, delivered as evidence before this Committee, that "one of the main uses of Art at present is not so much as Art, but as teaching us the feelings of nations. History only tells us what they did; Art tells us their feelings and why they did it."⁴⁹ Other observers would insist on the broadening effect of collecting and displaying works in public; in the view of Lady Eastlake, the wife of Sir Charles Eastlake, President of the Royal Academy and Director of the National Gallery, "Works of Art must be treated as organic remains, subservient to some prevailing law, which it is the critic's task to find out and classify by a life of observation and comparison."⁵⁰

The social context for these pronouncements is worth stressing. During the 1840s the Government had begun to act on Sir Robert Peel's dictum that in a period of social distress and political tension the arts should function to cement the "bonds of union between richer and poorer orders of state."⁵¹ The most notable example of this policy was the Exhibition of Cartoons at Westminster Hall (1843). This state-sponsored competition was a direct outcome of recommendations made in the *Select Committee on Arts and Manufactures* (1835). Artists were encouraged to submit designs for the redecoration of the new Palace of Westminster, the biggest public art project in nineteenth-century Britain. This popular event generated a number of perceptive comments in the press. The most striking, published in the radical *The New Monthly Magazine*, dealt with the social chemistry of the crowd and the symbolic nature of the venue:

We seldom meet, oh Public, and now that you are permitted to enter a grand national exhibition upon a flooring of the finest velvet, prepared and lain down expressly for your use, believe us when we say we congratulate you and ourselves upon the event... You hardly know what to do with your working jacket – it looks so villainous you think amidst the finery of your neighbours. No you are wrong, very wrong dear Public – it is the noblest costume there!

Then the attention switches to the "real" focus of the event, the interplay between audience and exhibits:

It is a holiday for you, these ghastly unspeculative chalks, these dim, stony frescoes and bleary encaustics. It is a fine galantie-show, happy Public – so give free vent to your amazement and ecstasy, and return grin for grin, to all those ghastly slate-faced monstrosities that look so horribly at you from the walls.

Unlike Ruskin, who imagined different communities speaking to each other through the expression of common customs and codes of behavior, here the living body of the people stamps its presence by drawing attention to the relative weakness of pictorial images. Finally, the symbolic value of the event is revealed in the robust materialism of the congregation of subjects at once facing the writer and overcoming the formalized appearance of the displayed portraits:

The finest thing in the Hall is to see this easy-natured Public creeping through with hesitating step, and that profound air of thoughtfulness, natural to it under new circumstances. Frieze coats and woolen jackets; paper-cap and fur-caps; spotted calico gowns and silk shawls; thin, frail, genteel gauze handkerchiefs on sunburnt shoulders – worsted mittens and dim black bonnets all mixed up in “admired disorder,” There is hope for Art in this.⁵²

What is hoped for in the “hope for Art” is the appearance of a common or popular public as the universal guardian of culture; this expression of purpose is found in the physical struggle of bodies to communicate cultural membership through the development of a settled standpoint. Look closely at these ordinary folk, it is argued, and we begin to see the conditions in which modern culture might thwart allegorical forms by associating art with the gloriously muddled confusion of the human picture of life itself.

One of the issues hovering in the background of the unsigned article in *The New Monthly Magazine* is the organization of the space in which public art works are exhibited. Similar matters were discussed at the National Gallery, where the intimate scale of the original gallery site (J. J. Angerstein’s Pall Mall residence) had been replaced by the grander setting of the purpose-built gallery at Trafalgar Square. This relocation coincided with its identification as a place of popular leisure and education, and its reinvention as a site where mass instruction was as important as specialist art appreciation. Accordingly, by the mid-1850s, the physical scale of a large public art gallery was taken to offer a specific material context for learning. Where the private picture gallery might offer a sense of intimacy through the selection of décor, organization of the exhibits, and the size of the collection, a public gallery could inform and instruct by arranging paintings into historical systems and sequences, indicating the characteristics of, and affinities between, different schools of painting, and by providing captions or labels for all the exhibits.

This expansionist or encyclopedic model was soon threatened, however. Paradoxically, the transformation of the National Gallery into a national-popular place of rational recreation was taken to blur the difference between cultural and social experiences. So leading politicians would ask why the National Gallery had become attractive to the “idle and the unwashed,” those problematic types who used the building as a social space and “for other objects than of seeing the pictures.”⁵³ Elsewhere the National Gallery would be inspected and dissected by leading cultural managers for whom the fetid physicality of the crowd had become

more palpable than the aesthetic qualities of the paintings.⁵⁴ In both cases the National Gallery appears as a dazzling and disturbing social body rather than a useful and illuminating palace of art.

As we have seen throughout this essay, in the course of the nineteenth century academies, cultural bodies, and art museums battled to make themselves into durable, distinctive, and original places of knowledge and venues of value. All were asked to become impartial observers of their own actions, and many were defined as liberal communities expressing or extolling the needs of citizen-producers. In short, they were required to define themselves in terms of a new professional ethic. Yet, in at least two areas, this insistence on institutional legibility and transparency was deeply problematic. First, in a period when the painter was acknowledged by the state as a fully fledged public professional, many commentators and artists criticized the Royal Academy for its submission to predatory forces, the substitution of professional values to commercial imperatives.⁵⁵ Second, at a moment when the National Gallery was perceived as a place of popular entertainment and scholarly classification, its cultural managers became increasingly worried by the physical effect of the human body on the material life of the collection. In both cases, national institutions seemed threatened or vulnerable when they became most visible as examples of a national language of culture. On the one hand, commentators wanted cultural institutions to be efficient and settled communities, on the other hand, the very processes of fixing and securing the identity of such communal or participatory organizations generated cultural and social tensions. For both reasons, then, we are forced to realize that the history of the cultural institution is the history of a troublesome, unruly, and unpredictable concept.

Notes

- 1 Eagles, J. (1857) *Essays Contributed to Blackwood's Magazine*, Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 67, where he describes the Hampton Palace collection.
- 2 *Westminster Review*, July 1837, 121–122.
- 3 Godwin, G. (1859) *Town Swamps and Social Bridges*, London: Routledge, Warnes & Routledge, 9–10.
- 4 Williams, R. (1983) *Keywords: a Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, revised edition, London: Fontana Press, 11.
- 5 Williams (1983), 87.
- 6 Boase, T. S. R. (1959) *English Art*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- 7 For a fuller account of this tradition of artist-writers, see the introduction in Denis, R. and Trodd, C. (eds) (2000) *Art and the Academy in the Nineteenth Century*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1–11.
- 8 See Hermann, L. (2000) *Nineteenth-Century British Painting*, London: Giles de la Mare Publishers.
- 9 According to Henry Howard, the Professor of Painting at the Royal Academy, “The French school were seduced by their admiration of the antique about 50 years ago,

- into great pedantry and dryness; and, not being good colourists, lost sight of nature, and produced merely painted statues." Howard, H. (1848) *A Course of Lectures on Painting Delivered at the Royal Academy of Fine Art*, London: Henry G. Bohn, 80. Later, Sir Charles Eastlake, the President of the Royal Academy, warned students to avoid French academic painting, for it reduced "the theory of art to definite laws." Eastlake, C. (1854) *Discourse Delivered to Students of the Royal Academy*, London: William Clowes & Sons, 12–13.
- 10 See Barrell, J. (1986) *The Political Theory of Painting From Reynolds to Hazlitt*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press; Eaves, M. (1992) *The Counter-Arts Conspiracy*, Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press; and Solkin, D. (1993) *Painting for Money*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press.
 - 11 See, for instance, the essays in Allen, B. (ed.) (1995) *Towards a Modern Art World*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press; and Hemingway, A. and Vaughan, W. (eds) (1998) *Art in Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Some of Barrell's concerns had been pre-empted in Lawrence Lipking's (1970) *The Ordering of the Arts in Eighteenth-Century England*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
 - 12 Reynolds, J. (1959) *Discourses on Art*, R. R. Wark (ed.) New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 13. Henry Howard agreed with Reynolds: civilization generates Polite Arts of "elegance and refinement," thus counteracting "the grossness of mere sensuality." Henry Howard (1848)*es*, 5.
 - 13 Reynolds (1959), 171.
 - 14 Reynolds (1959), 15. All subsequent artist-theorists upheld such ideas: Barry, Fuseli, Howard, Haydon, and Eastlake defined painting as the combination of human expression (sensible and elevated values) and formal skills (the organization and clarification of units of visual design). Significantly, none of these figures were particularly interested in "narrative" as a separate category of expression.
 - 15 These and other matters are dealt with in greater detail in Barlow, P. and Trodd, C. (eds) (2000) *Governing Cultures: Art Institutions in Victorian London*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 1–28.
 - 16 See, for instance, Walter Thornbury, Turner's biographer, who develops a theme found in much of this literature, when he asks, "What did more good to English art than 20 pretentious and unjust academies was a King's patronage of West, the spread of engraving, and rise of middle-class purchasers." Thornbury, W. (1865) *Haunted London*, London: Hurst and Blackett, 80.
 - 17 These writers are examined in Trodd, C. and Brown, S. (eds) (2004) *Representations of Watts*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 1–28.
 - 18 See Gerrish Nunn, P. (1987) *Victorian Women Artists*, London: The Women's Press Ltd, 68–124.
 - 19 *Englishwomen's Review*, April 1868, 467.
 - 20 Hazlitt, W. (1931) "On corporate bodies," essay XXVII in P. P. Howe (ed.) *Table Talk: or, Original Essays, The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, New York: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd, vol. 8, 264.
 - 21 See Morris Eaves's *The Counter-Arts Conspiracy* (1992) for a particularly detailed and illuminating account of the debates arising from the perception of the commercialization of art.
 - 22 Early in the century, Martin Archer Shee, who would go on to become President of the Royal Academy between 1830 and 1850, went out of his way present the

business of the art world as a threat to the professional authority of artists; and so dealers “make the artist a manufacturer, and measure his work by the yard... The principle of trade, and the principle of the arts are ... incompatible.” Archer Shee, M. (1805) *Rhymes on Art*, 2nd edition, London: John Murray, xxi. This idea remained an important element of academic discourse; in 1885, the conservative *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (“The decline of art: The Royal Academy and the Grosvenor Gallery,” July, 1885, 25) bemoaned the state of modern culture where art is “something to be measured and weighed, as any other commercial commodity.”

- 23 For more details on this process see Hoock, H. (2003) *The King's Artists: The Royal Academy and the Politics of British Culture 1760–1840*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; and Trodd, C. (1997) “The authority of art: cultural criticism and the idea of the Royal Academy,” *Art History*, 20, 1, 3–23.
- 24 Walter Crane raged: “We have, of course, our [Royal] Academy, or as it ought to be called, guild of popular picture painters ... [but] it has never as a body, shown any large concept of art ... its influence in the main has been to encourage an enormous over-production of pictures every year.” (“The English revival of decorative art,” *Fortnightly Review*, July 1892, 815–816.) Mary Greensted (ed.) (2005) *An Anthology of the Arts and Crafts Movement*, Aldershot: Ashgate, provides a useful range of critical sources. For examples of this process by leading late Victorian critics, see James, H. [1887] (1956) “The picture season in London,” in J. L. Sweeney (ed.) *The Painter's Eye: Notes and Essays on the Pictorial Arts by Henry James*, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 130–151; Quilter, H. (1889) “The art of England,” *Universal Review*, Jan–April, 449–464; and George Moore's (1892) notice on the Royal Academy in *Fortnightly Review*, 829–830.
- 25 See Stephanie Brown and Sara Dodd, “The society of female artists and the song of the sisterhood,” in Barlow and Trodd (2000), 85–97.
- 26 See, for instance, the positive image of the Royal Academy in the notices of the Royal Academy and the Grosvenor Gallery in the *Magazine of Art*, 1879, 41–50.
- 27 The *Art Journal* claimed that “modern civilisation is but the aggregate of a series of progressions infinitely small in their individual steps; and its varieties are more or less accomplished, exactly in so far as they are an aggregation of the contributions of all times.” Just as painting progresses by integrating the “sentimental” and the “sensuous,” so modern artists and connoisseurs must recognize and reject the “morbid asceticism” of Gothic. See the *Art Journal*, September 1850, 269.
- 28 Taylor, T. (ed.) (1860) *Autobiographical Recollections of C.R. Leslie*, London: John Murray, vol. 2, xxi.
- 29 Ruskin, J. (1903–1912) “Ariadne Florentina,” in E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn (eds) *The Works of John Ruskin*, London: George Allen, vol. 22, 470. Ruskin made similar claims in his “Academy Notes” (1875): see vol. 14, 263.
- 30 See Statham, H. H. (1876) “Reflections at the RA,” *Fortnightly Review*, July–Dec, 60–73.
- 31 Bell Scott, W. (1878) *Blake's Etchings*, London: Chatto & Windus, 4. Much earlier, Henry Fuseli had made a similar point about the diminished scale of modern experience when he argued that in modern art “the ambition, activity, and spirit of public life is shrunk to the minute detail of domestic arrangements – everything that surrounds us tends to show us in private, is becoming snug, less, narrow, pretty and

- insignificant." See also Wornum, R. N. (ed.) (1830) *Lectures on Painting, by the Royal Academicians: Barry, Opie and Fuseli*, London: H. G. Bohn, 129.
- 32 See Bohrer, F. N. (1994) "The times and the spaces of history: representation, Assyria, and the British Museum," in D. J. Sherman and I. Rogoff (eds) *Museum Culture*, London: Routledge, 197–222.
 - 33 Select Committee on the National Gallery (1853), Appendix xii, 780–781.
 - 34 See the essays in Baker, M. and Richardson, B. (eds) (1999) *A Grand Design*, London: V&A Publications.
 - 35 *First Report of the Department of Practical Art* (1852) in British Parliamentary Papers, *Reports and Papers Relating to the State of the Head and Branch Schools of Design, 1850–53*, vol. iv, 2.
 - 36 *First Report* (1852), 30.
 - 37 *The Examiner* (1833), 806.
 - 38 Jameson, A. (1844) *Companion to the most Celebrated Private Galleries of Art in London*, London: Saunders and Otley, 13–14.
 - 39 *Art Union of London Committee Minutes*, Feb 10, 1861 and March 17, 1848, British Library MS 38868.
 - 40 Robinson, J. C. (1862) *Italian Sculpture of the Middle Ages and Period of the Revival in Art*, London: Chapman & Hall, viii–ix.
 - 41 Until the rise of professional cultural managers in the 1850s, the Trustees were the most powerful force at the National Gallery; this explains the social and cultural conservatism of the institution. Indeed Lord Farnborough, the first chairman of the Trustees, opined: "Among the accomplishments which peculiarly belong to the higher orders of society and which those in inferior stations would find great difficulty in attaining, is a taste for the liberal arts." Lord Farnborough (1826) *Short Remarks and Suggestions upon Improvements Now Carrying on or under Consideration*, London: Privately Printed, 2. Thomas Uwins, Royal Academician and Assistant Keeper at the National Gallery, was even more disdainful of popularist models of art and art appreciation: "Art," he claimed, "never flourishes except where the people are ruled by despotic power." Mrs Uwins (ed.) (1858) *A Memoir of Thomas Uwins*, London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans & Roberts, vol. 2, 284.
 - 42 The painting, which disappeared in the 1830s, is described thus in the catalogue of *The Exhibition of the Royal Academy* (1824): "The milk maid's song ... 'Come live with me and be my love ...'" It was a "A Large Painting, representing two Anglers and two Female Figures, one of the Anglers has presented a Fish to the Mother, and the Daughter is singing to him, whole Length Figures, in an Oak Frame." See Bentley, Jr, G. E. (2004) *Blake Records*, 2nd edn., New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 389.
 - 43 As reported in Gilchrist, A. (1863) *The Life of William Blake*, London: Macmillan, vol. 1, 278.
 - 44 Blake distinguishes between "Sublime Allegory," generated by and addressed to the "Intellectual Powers," and "Fable or Allegory," created by and addressed to the "corporeal intellect." The former is an attribute of the imagination; the latter a mechanism of moralizing judgment. See Blake's *Vision of the Last Judgement*, in Erdman, D. V. (ed.) (1988) *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, New York: Anchor Books, 544. It is possible that Blake saw Walton's *The Compleat Angler, or the Contemplative Man's Recreation*, which combines observations and reflections on

rural life with songs, verses, snippets of dialogue, maxims, as well as descriptions of fishes and rivers, in terms of the escape from formalized codes of academic art.

45 Bentley (2004), 334.

46 These matters are dealt with in more detail in my essay on the National Gallery in *Governing Cultures*, 29–43.

47 Ruskin (1857), 2437. Later the psychologist Havelock Ellis would attempt to read the National Portrait Gallery collection as a vast racial-biological chamber of human attributes and characteristics: see Ellis, H. (1901) “The Comparative Abilities of the Fair and the Dark,” *The Monthly Review*, August, 84–93.

48 *The National Gallery Site Commission* (1857), xvi.

49 *The National Gallery*, 2437.

50 Quoted by Steegman, J. (1970) *Victorian Taste*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 242.

51 *Hansard* (1833) xiv, 664.

52 *The New Monthly Magazine*, August, 1844, 53.

53 See the evidence presented by Sir Robert Peel and Lord John Russell (1853) in *Report of the Select Committee on the National Gallery*, 8186–8187.

54 The classic source here is Waagen, G. (1853) “Thoughts on the new building to be erected for the National Gallery,” *Art Journal*, 121–125.

55 The *Royal Commission* (1863) concluded that the best way of studying the operations of the Royal Academy would be to compare it with other professional bodies involved in national legislation and administration: see Trodd (1997), for further details.

Crossing the Boundary

British Art across Victorianism and Modernism

David Peters Corbett

“When did the Victorian period end?” is an issue of interest for anyone concerned with the nature and role of the visual arts in Britain in the years on either side of 1900. Historians have conventionally observed an absolute distinction between the half-decade when advanced British modernism, characterized by formal experimentation, flourished immediately prior to World War I, and everything that preceded it. But they have rarely attempted to make hard and fast distinctions between the Victorian and Edwardian art worlds – that is before and after the death of Queen Victoria and accession of Edward VII to the throne in 1901 (he reigned until 1910, when he was succeeded by George V) – so that in one important sense Victorian art appears to continue until the advent of modernism around 1910. This is the most obvious contender in the art-historical literature for the end of Victorianism but it is not without possible challenges. From one influential perspective at least, it is not at all clear to art historians that Victorianism and modernism should be sectioned off, taught separately, or imagined as distinct periods in culture in this way. For the scholarship on Manet and French impressionism, still the most extensive and influential body of writing on nineteenth-century art, modernism begins in the mid-nineteenth century. In the work of T. J. Clark, whose *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (1985) continues to serve as the interpretative touchstone, the standard of modernity in art is set by what was done in France from Courbet onwards, and Clark and his followers have provided the intellectual context necessary to understand impressionism as above all an innovative modern art, engaged with the characteristics of social modernity as its contemporaries experienced it, and concerned to give that experience a form.¹

Faced with this glamorous and powerful interpretation, it is difficult for art historians concerned with British art of the nineteenth and early twentieth



FIG. 6.1 G. F. Watts, *Physical Energy*, c.1883–1906.

Source: Watts Gallery; © Stelios Michael/Alamy.

centuries not to feel tempted by the possibility of a similar diagnosis. If an engagement with social modernity is the necessary characteristic of modernism in the visual arts, then surely Britain must have had such an art? Given the leading role of Britain in the Industrial Revolution and of British literary and intellectual culture in the expression of its consequences, ought it not to be the case that British art, too, can be reinterpreted as modernist? There is something to be said for this. Contrary to what one might suppose from the standard view of Victorian painting, many nineteenth-century visual artists were concerned to develop answers to the pressing question of what it would take for their art to become modern. “Every artist must paint what he sees, rather every artist must paint what is around him, can produce no great work unless he impress the character of his age upon his production,” wrote G. F. Watts, on the face of it an unlikely champion of modernity (Fig. 6.1).²

The ringing denunciations of the great nineteenth-century cultural commentators like Ruskin and Carlyle, skeptical of industrial capitalism and all its works, together with the explicit social role and sporadic social engagement propounded for the visual arts by painters such as Watts, reveal a clear consciousness of social modernity. From at least the pre-Raphaelites onwards, many British artists were striving to create a self-consciously modern art. But this is itself problematic, the identification of a vigorous awareness of the issue is not in itself sufficient to identify a modernism. When Oscar Wilde wrote in the

1890s that “the two things that every artist should avoid are modernity of form and modernity of subject-matter,” the point of the joke was that it had proved very difficult to say what either modern form or modern subject matter might be.³ The answers Victorian artists proposed were varied, often equivocal and uncertain, certainly of a sort unfamiliar to twenty-first century viewers brought up on definitions of modernism derived from the art of Manet and the impressionists. Nevertheless, there are connections here reaching from the mid-Victorian period to the heart of early twentieth century modernism. In this essay I examine the work and thought of the English art-historian, poet, and editor, Laurence Binyon and show that attention to this work can help us to discern how complex and interconnected are the relationships between the art of the late-nineteenth century and that of the radical, advanced, modernism of the years after 1910.

Binyon and the *Saturday Review*

Writing in the regular art column he contributed to the *Saturday Review* between 1906 and 1911, Laurence Binyon set out in detail his views on the health and prospects of contemporary art. According to his biographer, John Hatcher, Binyon, otherwise a poet and curator in the Print Room of the British Museum, became an art critic “by necessity not choice,” and for financial reasons.⁴ Whether willing or not, Binyon’s tenure at the *Saturday Review* gave him the opportunity to explore his ideas about the role of art and to develop them on a public stage with an educated audience in mind.⁵ It is partly for this reason that the public role of art occupied Binyon in one form or another regularly throughout his columns. But there were less contingent reasons, too, for the uncertain state of art and the possibilities for its recovery and return to health were central to Binyon’s understanding of the contemporary world. In common with many other late-Victorian and Edwardian intellectuals, Binyon was weighed down by a sense of the ultimate helplessness and triviality of art in the face of modern experience.⁶ It appeared to him a problematic and yet fundamental fact that “art in our time seems ... like an iridescent oil spread about on the surface of the muddy waters of our civilisation; it and life don’t mix.”⁷ Much of his thinking and writing over the years leading up to World War I were devoted to puzzling through the implications of that fact and to acting as an advocate for any art which seemed to him to possess the potential for change.

The following sections of this essay are about the diagnosis of contemporary art and culture Binyon put forward in these years. I consider the art he espoused and sought to explicate for his audience through his *Saturday Review* columns as well as the arguments he put forward in a series of important books on the art of China and Japan. I relate Binyon’s aesthetics to those of some of the other late-Romantic writers, artists, and thinkers who made up the intellectual and artistic circle around Charles Ricketts, and suggest that his views are helpfully understood through

such connections.⁸ For the fact is that Binyon and his fellow late-Romantics represent a crucial moment in the process of thinking through the role of art in modernized societies as it took place in turn-of-the-century Britain. By observing his responses to the advent of what is conventionally thought of as “modernism,” particularly in the form of Roger Fry’s 1910 “Post-Impressionists” show at the Grafton Gallery, we can see more clearly the operation of the pivotal moment where late-Victorian cultural pessimism with its attendant skepticism about the role and function of art turns toward the different claims for art made by British modernism.⁹ As a strong influence on the thinking of Ezra Pound and Vorticism, Binyon’s views have been identified as one channel whereby British culture maintained a continuity of response and understanding across a moment that is more conventionally seen as marking a significant cultural break.¹⁰ But, as the supporter of a range of art that the radical modernists rejected, from Ricketts himself to Augustus John, Philip Wilson Steer, and Charles Conder, Binyon also puts forward the arguments for a different aesthetic for the early twentieth century, in his hands no less “modern” or ambitious than that of the modernists but in fundamental ways distinct from the solutions they represent. Noting the claims made for this alternative modern aesthetic may help us to recast our own thoughts about the history and understanding of art in Britain during the years before World War I.

Binyon’s Theory of Art

The nineteenth century saw an escalating skepticism about the role and function of art. As its possible audiences grew and fragmented under the pressure of educational and social change, artists became increasingly marginal to those processes that were emerging as the core activities of their culture.¹¹ Where value is seen to lie primarily in commerce, financial gain, and material achievement, the values and meanings of the artwork rapidly come to seem irrelevant or self-indulgent. Once divorced from its earlier intimacy with Church and State, and once it was clear the aesthetic would not be embraced by the social institutions that replaced them, art came to seem beside the point, to have no natural function in society but to be an extraneous optional activity, a hobby, or even mere pretentious make-work for the socially unproductive.¹² Faced with such an unprepossessing role, art was increasingly theorized through its very irrelevance. It became a defiantly “autonomous” activity, hermetic and proudly incapable of appealing to any but small, marginal, or coterie audiences. Binyon’s thought was fundamentally conditioned by this inheritance. From the books on oriental art to his volumes of poetry and plays, his work in the years before World War I can be understood as a response to his powerful sense of art’s marginalization and as an attempt to imagine for the aesthetic a place that was neither mindlessly affirmative nor so specialized and remote as to be inaccessible to its audience.¹³ Above all, Binyon

was preoccupied in his response by what seemed to him the invidious gap sundering the public from the aesthetic.¹⁴ In his art criticism he castigates “those aesthetic Epicureans who regard pictures as a kind of sweetmeat only to be enjoyed by superior persons” and praises instead those who connect with the audience, who are “concerned with the artist’s import to humanity.”¹⁵ In the case of “the very greatest artists,” he says, they achieve their status because their “own satisfaction and that of the public coincide.”¹⁶ The desire to develop a mechanism through which these connections might be achieved, and the cultural gap closed, dominates Binyon’s understanding of art, and conditions the aesthetics he puts forward and his judgments on the artists he celebrates or rejects.

In pursuing these questions, Binyon’s diagnosis of contemporary culture chimes with what has been seen as the twentieth-century avant-garde’s preoccupation with the reintegration of art and life. According to commentators such as Peter Bürger and Andreas Huyssen, the marginalization of art that I have described elicited from artists in the avant-garde an “attempt to overcome the art/life dichotomy and make art productive in the transformation of everyday life.”¹⁷ Such a response to “the increasingly categorical separation of art from reality” is certainly already discernable in the thought of Binyon and the other artists, thinkers, and writers who made up the circle around Charles Ricketts.¹⁸ Ricketts, like Binyon, analyses the pressures of modernity on artistic practice in ways that are comparable to the subsequent diagnoses of avant-garde modernists – “the modern mind has had little hope, less trust, and no belief in art,” he wrote, “it has hugged other ideals,” those of materialism and the machine – and his survey of modern art and culture, written in response to Roger Fry’s 1910 *Post-Impressionists* show, is a prolonged defence of his desire to achieve “a closer contact between art and the business of life.”¹⁹

However, there are also significant differences between the way that the late-Romantic aesthetics of the Ricketts circle deals with this material and the way in which it is treated by the modernist avant-garde. The political aspects of avant-garde practice and aspiration, for instance, have no place for Binyon, although, as will become evident, he advances a view of contemporary society which is strongly critical and even oppositional. But, above all else, Binyon differs from the modernist avant-garde because he wishes to recuperate the aesthetic as a medium of understanding and redemption. For avant-garde modernists the trivialization of art in modern society and its appropriation by that society’s affirmative, official art brings the aesthetic into such disrepute that the only honest course is to repudiate it entirely and to redefine art without the aesthetic, a move conventionally symbolized for us by Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1913). Binyon, like Ricketts, does not imagine a situation in which the affirmative and trivializing role allotted to art requires such an abandonment of the aesthetic, a destruction of the “aura” of the artwork in order to reconstitute it as a critical intervention in social meaning.²⁰ On the contrary, the group to which Binyon belongs desires to preserve as of fundamental importance the “unique existence” of the work of art to serve as the

mechanism through which it can be reintegrated into reality.²¹ For them it is precisely the aesthetic affect of the work of art which, properly applied, will bring about the respiritualization of modern life and its redemption from the fallen condition of western modernity.

In raising the concept of the “aura” of a work of art, I am of course drawing on Walter Benjamin’s famous essay “The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction.” In general it has been the aura as a defining attribute of the unique physical presence of the artwork that has received most attention from the commentators. The aura is that sense of “authenticity and uniqueness that constitute[s] the work’s distance from life and that require[s] contemplation and immersion on the part of the spectator.”²² It defines the nature of the aesthetic through the work’s existence as a physical object with a “unique existence in time and space” (“WR,” 222), and it is this that is compromised and put under question in modernized societies and hence in the avant-garde response. It is not often observed, however, that Benjamin also makes an explicit connection between the “aura” and what he calls “tradition,” that is, the impact on the duration and circumstances of the work’s survival of “the history to which it was subject” (“WR,” 222). Thus “the authenticity of a thing,” the distillate of uniqueness that is its aura, “is the essence of all that is transmissible from the beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to the history which it has experienced” (“WR,” 223). This “contextual integration of art in tradition” (“WR,” 225) was at its height when art retained its primary ritual purpose, and always depends on a continuity of connection to “the location of its original use function” (“WR,” 226). If “the uniqueness of the work of art is inseparable from” its place “in the fabric of tradition” (“WR,” 225) in this way, the effect of the age of reproduction is to obliterate not only the aura but also any sense of the work’s connections to tradition. Thus “the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object” from the past of its own history and forms a part of the “tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind” (“WR,” 223).

The aura of the work, its aesthetic element, is therefore intimately linked in Benjamin to the circumstances of the work’s survival and also to its place within a continuity conceptualized as “tradition.” Such a reading of the aesthetic is helpful in considering Binyon’s views, because an idea of tradition and the continuity of theme, subject, and treatment are central to the ways in which Binyon imagines art to be powerful. The “uniqueness” or aura of the work of art is dependent on tradition because the aesthetics of the work, for Binyon, are the expression of a communal life that the artist shares with his fellow citizens. Tradition is the medium whereby this community is made available to articulation through the expressive possibilities of the artwork. This differs from Benjamin’s conception to the extent that it places its emphasis on the community rather than on the “life” of the individual object, a difference that reflects the contrast between late romantic and modernist thought that I have been discussing; it is the social role of the work of art as aesthetic object that signifies and that Binyon wishes to promote.

Unlike the modernists, Binyon has no doubt that it is through the power and authority of aesthetic value, the work's aesthetic individuality and expressiveness, that the fallen state of the contemporary world can be redeemed.

Art and Life

The most extended expression of Binyon's thinking about these issues is found in his writings on the art of China and Japan. There, Binyon develops a complex argument that depends on a number of intersecting themes. In his two books on the subject published before World War I, *Painting in the Far East* (1908) and *The Flight of the Dragon* (1911), he discusses the integration of art and life, explicating the intimate relationship, as he sees it, between art and its public in the east, and arguing for the importance of tradition and continuity in achieving that relationship. He proposes a theory of the aesthetics of the fine arts that relies on the concept of formal expressiveness he calls "rhythm," and connects this formal achievement up to both the communication of meaning and the power of the artist's perception. In doing so he advances a theory of art that provides for the direct community of artist and audience and a place for art as an activity which is central to its culture because of the expression of the spiritual meaning of its existence. In the *Saturday Review* columns, the same criteria are mobilized to discuss contemporary art in Britain and to recommend a renewal of the status and function of art on behalf of its culture. Modern society is corrupt and requires to be reintegrated with the spiritual significance of life and experience. In the end, this is a question "of a new temper, a new mental approach, a new valuation of the things that matter."²³

While making it clear that he does not wish to see any direct imitation of "beauties of pictorial convention alien to our own modes of vision," Binyon is unambiguous that eastern art can teach us, not through imitation but by example, "to regain clearness of mind, and dissolve some of the confusion and anarchy which undermine our art."²⁴ He argues that there is a distinction to be drawn between the role that art occupies in the west and in the historical cultures of China and Japan, a distinction that is very much in the latter's favor. In *Painting in the Far East* Binyon sets out this opposition between the two approaches to art and its significance.²⁵ He is highly critical of the turn taken by western culture and its visual art since the Renaissance.²⁶ For Binyon "at the heart" of contemporary life in the west lies "the havoc" which is "wrought by" its erroneous scale of values.²⁷ Modern western society is obsessed above all with a "scientific" materialism, those techniques of knowledge that aim for an instrumental understanding and manipulation of the physical world and that are expressed by its "machinery and commercialism."²⁸ In this hierarchy of significance it is matter and its control that are important, while the meaning of experience or the value of reflection and understanding for their own sake are denigrated or ignored. These "vile uses" are threatening to destroy western culture by repudiating or marginalizing the spiritual

truths which alone make life more than a mere mechanical routine of physical activity and response.²⁹ When the whole of quotidian life is saturated with the negative effects of this modernity, so that “there is so much gratuitous hideousness in our houses and surroundings, and life for so much of our population has been so joylessly dehumanised by modern industrial conditions” then the “scientific” view of the world utterly obscures its spiritual realities.³⁰ Faced with the “interminable rows of featureless houses and of their interiors,” with the negation of meaningful understanding of experience, or with the dominance of commerce and its values, the utility of modern western art seems profoundly called into question: “one cannot help crying ‘What a futility is our Art and all our talk about it’.”³¹

This anxiety is doubly powerful because the pervasive materialism of contemporary culture is intimately connected for Binyon to the “scientific” temper of western art itself. The dominant characteristic of this art in its major post-Renaissance traditions, its “root-concern,” is “imitation of Nature, or fidelity to Nature,” its version of the culture’s obsessive preoccupation with “scientific” knowledge (*PFE*, 11). This fascination with materialist mimesis in representation obscures the just end of art, which is the pursuit of “beauty” and spiritual understanding in the expression of life. Thus the spirit in which western art sets out “to conquer matter” is fundamentally wrongheaded, because it is “only in the victory of the spirit” that “art can prevail” (*PFE*, 273).

We fill a museum with fine works from divers countries, and place it in the midst of streets that desolate eye and heart, without an effort to make them part of the beauty we desire. Art is not an end in itself, but a means to beauty in life. This we forget. (*PFE*, 271–272)

Under these conditions Binyon believes that it is in the interrelationship of art and life that “our art to-day fails in Europe,” since it “tends more and more to be detached from the common life, to be dissociated from things of use, to become an affair of museums and exhibitions” (*PFE*, 271), that is, to be locked away outside those realities of modern-day life that press hardest on the experience of its citizens.

In contrast to the bankrupt “scientific” and imitative spirit that has “warped and weakened” western art, “the idea that art is the imitation of nature is unknown” in the east, “or known only as a despised and fugitive heresy” (*PFE*, 16, 72). This freedom from the distraction of mimesis allows the art of China and Japan “to create a beauty in the lives of men” (*PFE*, 273) through its expressive potential and thus to fulfill the true function of art, so that it becomes “a real experience to our souls” (*PFE*, 21). Importantly, this duty to realize spiritual realities on a culture’s behalf depends on a reciprocal relationship between art and its audience. It “is an effort for the public even more than for the painter,” and “implies a harmony between painter and spectator, which, alas! no painter can count on with us” (*PFE*, 274–275). Binyon depicts this ideal “harmony” of art and its public in his writings, building on arguments about the virtues of

tradition and continuity and about the true nature of originality which he makes at length. He imagines a situation in which artist and public will be in deep communion because they share fundamental experiences of a common life: “the artist satisfies the innate demands of the world simply by expressing the fullness of his own humanity.”³²

In this community, the presence of a living tradition that structures the character of a nation’s art plays a crucial role. For Binyon, tradition is one of the major strengths of the oriental cultures he studies:

It is a signal source of power to the Japanese that for them ... their nation with all its history, all its dead, all its past, is conceived of as one living and continuous presence, pervaded by one unextinguished spirit. ... Imagine the advantage for the artist for whom such living communication is already prepared between his public and what he seeks to portray; all his powers can then be concentrated on presenting his own idea of that image.³³

The artist “bred to such traditions” has “many advantages:”

It is a great gain for him that his subject belongs to his race, and therefore to mankind. It partakes of the universal; it has been sifted by the choice of many generations; it has struck root in the imagination of a people; and so at once he is set in touch with the mind of his public, and can play upon a hundred associations and indefinable emotions (*PFE*, 146–147).

The very fact that traditional subjects are on hand to be continually remade under new circumstances makes them more flexible, intimate, and available for new meanings than novel subjects can possibly be: “it is by the new and original treatment – original, because profoundly felt – of matter that is fundamentally familiar, that great art comes into being” (*PFE*, 149). Tradition links the artist to “the common life of his countrymen” because tradition is that life “crystallised and consecrated for long generations in chosen themes,” and thus gives his art “a cohesion, a solidarity, a human interest which prove an animating power and remove it far from triviality and shallowness” (*PFE*, 148). The success of Japanese ukiyo-e prints, for example, is attributed to the reliance that the artists who made them could place on inherited tradition. Released by this inheritance from the obligation to expend most of his effort in an attempt to mimic the appearance of the world, the artist “was free to invent new harmonies of line and colour on the old basis, and at the same time, within the given limits, to exercise his interest in life and character” (*PFE*, 269). This opened the productions of the painters to an intimate relationship with the essential life of their time: “what a public for a painter, one cannot help exclaiming, when the artist could count on his work meeting with minds so prepared, so receptive!” (*PFE*, 150). “You cannot detach one of these prints from the life that produced it; some tender filament or clinging root binds it to a nation’s living heart” (*PFE*, 271).

The shared experiences that are central to this account of art's ideal purpose and social function are expressed and articulated through a formal expressivity. This is what Binyon calls "rhythm," the manipulations of line, color, and form that the painter executes in depicting the realities of his common social experience. A successful work of art depends on this quality above all else: "for indeed it is not essential that the subject-matter should represent or be like anything in nature; only it must be alive with a rhythmic vitality of its own."³⁴ In traditional Chinese thought:

every work of art is thought of as an incarnation of the genius of rhythm, manifesting the living spirit of things with a clearer beauty and intenser power than the gross impediments of complex matter allow to be transmitted to our senses in the visible world around us. A picture is conceived as a sort of apparition from a more real world of essential life. (*PFE*, 11)

Rhythm in this sense resides above all in the union of meaning and expression, for "the intellectual appeal in art" cannot "be divorced from the sensuous or emotional appeal" (*PFE*, 21). Line, color, and the acknowledgement of their character and potential allow the artists of the east to pursue the single end of art: "they have sought to communicate life-giving ideas of beauty in a sensuous embodiment" (*PFE*, 17).

It is precisely this spiritual paring down of the realities of the physical world to expressivity that is necessary before art can acquire public meaning and fulfil the role of a civilized painting. The expression of the living spirit of the world in Chinese art, instinct with meaning and with common value, is praised because a spiritually meaningful art based on rhythm, "the foundation of all art," necessarily connects directly with the human needs and experiences of its natural audience, the whole of a culture or society. Hence "the unrivalled vitality of its schools and their importance in the life of the nation" (*PFE*, 56). Rhythm and the purity of eastern art's depiction of the visible world, its ambition "to communicate life-giving ideas of beauty in a sensuous embodiment," therefore hold a more than technical meaning for Binyon. It is a process of the transformation of the brute facts of existence into forms that speak directly to the life-world of the audience. It is for this reason that Binyon, looking at contemporary western art, espouses the pre-Raphaelite tradition and rejects that of impressionism:

The Pre-Raphaelites held to the main tradition of European painting... It is sometimes objected that their interests were too literary, that they sought inspiration from literature rather than from life. One becomes a little impatient of this false antithesis; for literature is a part of life, and a very living part of it. It is only through literature, after all, that each generation in turn becomes familiar with the great types of human history; and it was with typical figures that the Pre-Raphaelites sought to deal.³⁵

Against this connection to the heart of human life, impressionism offers only one aspect of experience: "the danger of the kind of painting which impressionism has brought into vogue is, on the contrary, that it substitutes for a world-interest a

merely personal interest.”³⁶ It is always the ability of art to connect to “potent human interests” in this way,³⁷ “the sense of life touched at a deeper level of emotion,”³⁸ that attracts Binyon.

It is out of the resistance of materials and the will to transform them that enduring beauty emerges. There must be pressure of life within the controlling outline, if the form is to be beautiful. Great art contains much life, and life is rooted in a hundred interests, emotions, and attractions, to be cut off from which drains out the blood of art.³⁹

The ultimate underpinning for such socially meaningful painting is, however, individual. The painter “follows his own instinct and paints his own dreams,” is not “intimidated or enslaved into accepting the world as it is, but makes his own world and peoples it with human forms transfigured into spiritual significance and purpose.”⁴⁰ Finally, it is “a question of the inner mind of the artist;” it is “a certain spirituality of temper ... which makes the difference.”⁴¹ Thus, in discussing Burne-Jones and his legacy, Binyon is clear that “an artist may be as remote as he likes, and his art all a dream, but the dream must be as compelling a reality in itself as the world of daily fact, or we are not interested.”⁴² From such a perspective what matters most is whether “the mood of the artist has shaped and dyed his material to most enduring beauty.”⁴³ Thus although Japanese artists “defy nature [and] shatter the world of appearances,” it is “by this very freedom and daring” that they “are able to force from their material, by the sharp contrast of bold conventional devices with expressive line-drawing, a deeper sense of life.”⁴⁴ The public “is justified in seeking for some real and fundamental relation between art and life.”⁴⁵

Since it is this reliance on the internal promptings of the artist’s psyche that allows him to communicate with his ideal public, this is the mechanism which Binyon proposes to relocate to modern Britain in order to counter, there, “that formidable inertia against which everyone has to contend who wants to stimulate the public interest in art as a matter of public concern.”⁴⁶ Thus Watts is praised for “his lifelong desire ... that London should have ... in its public places, works imposing in magnitude.”⁴⁷ These sculptural works, such as *Physical Energy* (c.1883–1906) (Fig. 6.1), are calculated to:

Redeem the name of art from the suspicion and half-contempt that hang about it ... [They were] works which, he believed, would by their energy and grandeur end by exerting no small effect, silently and by degrees, on the general taste and imagination.⁴⁸

The key words here are not only “exerting ... on the general taste,” but also “silently and by degrees.” Binyon’s art is relevant to the public and its experience but, faced with the plain indifference of contemporary culture to much if not quite all of the art he recommends, it can be imagined to work only through stealth and slowly. Once a proper art is in place and finally acknowledged by an audience educated and directed to its virtues and expressive qualities, the artist’s

capacity to reveal the world through perception, expressed in rhythm and within the enabling structure of tradition, will open and reveal experience to its citizens.

The axis of the ideal relationship Binyon proposes therefore involves both painter and public – indeed, it involves and presupposes the unity of the whole culture if it is to operate effectively. In essence, Binyon dreams of an accord between the artist and the audience that will bring together the fragmented and diverse aspects of modern society, “chaotic” and “anarchic” as they are, and express them as a single unity. The union of “intellectual” and “sensuous” is a means of expressing through the aesthetic the experience of the whole run of humanity, the folding into a communal understanding and public meaning of all the citizens and members of the experiential world of a society. By implication, this inclusiveness reaches out, too, to touch and pull inwards toward it the remainder of humanity who live outside that precise social world. Art made under ideal circumstances in China and Japan can speak across cultural and historical divides and provide a model for the vital achievement that the reformation of western aesthetics Binyon proposes is ambitious to bring about.

Such a goal could become authoritarian in some hands, but as Binyon imagines it this is not a prescriptive demand. He appears tolerant of the complexity of actual experience. He has no wish to constrain the conditions of life into specific channels, a delicacy that is an aspect of what Hatcher calls his ideological “liberal humanism.”⁴⁹ This may partly be because he imagines any desirable life to run naturally in those directions that he would himself recognize and endorse. But Binyon has a considerable fund of emotional sympathy, and the poems in the two volumes of *London Visions* (1896, 1898), for instance, do not denigrate difference when they observe it. The inhabitants of “squalid rooms,” startled in a burst of sunlight after rain in “A Storm,” are given a full humanity, so that:

the living wind with nearness breathes.
On weary faces of women of many cares;
They stand at their doors and watch with a soothed
spirit
The marvellous West asleep in endless light.

The lives of these slum women are as real, at least in intention, as the panorama opening out for the poet from the vantage point of “The Golden Gallery at Saint Paul’s” with its vision of the city’s “mapped immensity.”⁵⁰ London is as fully imaged in Deptford as it is in the commanding viewpoint from the Gallery. Insofar as Binyon’s theory of art’s function is also a politics, then, it is not an authoritarian one. But that is also its problem. Stranded by his humane tolerance on one side of the modernist political divide between the authoritarian and the liberal, Binyon has effectively to wait for the audience to come to art, and in the meantime to persuade, inform, educate, and enlighten through his writings. It is a noble position perhaps, but one not likely to be effective when the aim in view is the restructuring of the expressive possibilities of an entire culture. Its weakness

is evident when Binyon is driven at one moment to posit a necessary willingness on the part of the audience to follow good art once they are presented with it: “those who count are those who know what is good; and the mass of people, who do not know, are just as ready to be led to enjoy good art as bad.”⁵¹ This is, in its way, a telling moment. How was Binyon to hope these aims would be enacted? What were the chances that contemporary art, in one or other of what seemed to him its myriad forms, might rise to the occasion and fulfil the ambitions he had set for it? Scanning the field as art critic of the *Saturday Review*, Binyon did his best to identify the possibilities.

The New Art

Throughout the articles written for the *Saturday Review* there is a sense that Binyon is waiting for some necessary turn or change in the art of his day. He complains about the chaotic variety and lack of focus in contemporary production, “a restlessness and uncertainty of aim which make for weakness.”⁵² There is “no unifying force.”⁵³ Binyon would naturally like to see this force come from the artists of his own generation, and from the first he is supportive of a small group of artists drawn from the Ricketts’s circle. He reviews and praises Charles Shannon, Thomas Sturge Moore, as well as Ricketts himself, and consistently celebrates the work of Ricketts’s group of select modern artist-heroes – among them Alfred Stevens, G. F. Watts, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Puvis de Chavannes.⁵⁴ In addition he devotes a large amount of space to Charles Conder (who Ricketts also knew well), and favorably mentions William Rothenstein, Philip Wilson Steer, and others who were, at one time or another, on the edges of the Ricketts group.

These artists are not seen as preoccupied with hermetic or elite concerns, but as striving to connect with their publics, and Binyon responds most warmly when he can interpret their art through the lens that this provides. Watts and Stevens are “the two among all our artists who have had the genius and the energy for monumental work in the grand style.”⁵⁵ Stevens is “our greatest sculptor” and the Wellington Monument in St Paul’s his “masterpiece,” “already a classic; one of those complete and fruitful creations ... in the enrichment it will give to other minds in later generations and, through them, to other works of differing beauty.”⁵⁶ Ricketts himself is seen repeatedly as one of the artists whose work “is something very rare and new in English art,” and who can hence be a principal, leading that art into a new meaningfulness and saliency for the public. The qualities Binyon perceives in Ricketts’s work that will allow this to happen are those he derives from his analysis of oriental art.⁵⁷ It is an art that “lives by imagination,” with a “sense of drama which saturates” his “design, and is felt in his colour as well as in the movement of his figures.”⁵⁸ In addition, the expressive power of Ricketts’s work is connected intimately to the tradition. In 1907 Binyon repudiated the idea of “progress” in the arts and the “continual talk of ‘advance’” he heard around him.⁵⁹

Mr Ricketts and Mr Shannon are both sadly tainted with archaism... There are plenty of people who think that merely to paint the kind of subjects they choose to paint is a sort of retrograde movement, wrong in itself, especially as they paint in a manner that recalls the master of the past. Mr Ricketts paints the Good Samaritan, the Deposition, subjects which have been endlessly treated by generations of artists since the Middle Ages. Mr Shannon paints Wood Nymphs and the Infant Bacchus; and where is the place of these in modern life? It seems absurd to argue the point: but what a paltry conception of originality is entangled among all such objections.⁶⁰

Elsewhere, Shannon is praised again in a similar spirit. Shannon's ability in his "truly fresh and original" "conceptions" is of the intensity and strength of great literature. Although "observation" of the physical world "is there," he is also essentially imaginative. "Like all those in whom the rhythmic creative impulse is strong, he prefers to throw his stored-up observation of nature into imagined scenes ... The aim of his imaginative art being to communicate a mood through its creations, he has to control his material into a unity of both design and of atmosphere," a rare ability in which Shannon, unlike most of his contemporaries, succeeds. His works "will more and more be praised as time goes on." Paint-

ed with "absolute" sincerity and "inspiration," Shannon's pictures of "The Golden Age" (Fig. 6.2) are as meaningful to us in modern conditions as in the past: "what more perennial interest is there than the interest of all of us in Utopia, however and whenever fancied?"⁶¹ This is the reason that, more surprisingly on the face of it, Conder also receives considerable praise in similar terms.

Conder is an inspiring instance of what a painter could do who dared to ignore the tyrannical claims of realism and painted directly and joyously his own dreams and desires, choosing his own materials of expression and producing something such as no one else had produced, exhaling a perfume of the mind. Conder was wayward, limited, exquisite; but I wish that painters of more ample, serious, and central purpose had always a like freedom and independence of spirit.⁶²



FIG. 6.2 Charles Shannon: *The Bath of Venus*, oil on canvas, 1460×978 mm, 1898–1904. Source: © Tate, London 2011.

But Binyon's desire "to see English painting and sculpture filled with a breath of real life of the nation's mind" was not confined to artists formed in the nineteenth century.⁶³ Among the most recent generation of painters, Binyon is most struck in his *Saturday Review* columns by the work of Augustus John. As early as 1907, Binyon was praising John and Ricketts in consecutive sentences, Ricketts for "the gift of dramatic imagination" as manifested in *Don Juan and the Statue* (a subject he painted several times; Fig. 6.3), and John for the 1902 *Merikli* (Manchester City Galleries), which is said to be "difficult to match ... for vigour and intensity of colour, for line drawing and powerful design."⁶⁴ This capacity for design and organization fits John for a role in recasting "British art at the present day which is to a great extent wasted or dissipated for want of encouragement and direction," which should be provided by the "talent and energy" of young artists.⁶⁵ In 1909 he was defending John's experiments with simplification, including *The Way Down to the Sea* (1909–1911, private collection), exhibited at the New English Art Club (Fig. 6.4).⁶⁶ John's apparent renunciation "of his own skill" as draftsman is the fruit of his determination "not to acquiesce in the appearance of things, but to break it [his skill] up, resolve it into its elements, and remould it new." The



FIG. 6.3 Charles Ricketts: *Don Juan*, oil on canvas, 1162×959 mm, c.1911.

Source: © Tate, London 2011



FIG. 6.4 Augustus John: *The Way Down to the Sea*, 1909–1911, private collection.
 Source: Photo Richard Greenly Photography Ltd. © Care of the Bridgeman Art Library/
 The Estate of Augustus John.

paintings exhibited “attest beyond denial ... character, life, and rhythmic power.”⁶⁷ John is compared to John Singer Sargent, whose art is rejected as “quite null” beyond its “miraculous” executive skill,⁶⁸ and to Puvis de Chavannes, that “master of great spaces.”⁶⁹ Like him he is said to be “happiest with a house-painter’s materials and a blank wall,” addressing the public and the “nation.”

These criteria surface again in relation to John in Binyon’s powerful response to the advent of Roger Fry’s 1910 “Manet and the Post-Impressionists” exhibition at the Grafton Galleries. He quickly came to understand the art shown at the Grafton as the breaking up of the existing “chaotic” and unfocused reaction to prevailing cultural circumstances that he wished to see:

But undoubtedly at the back of his commotion there is something stirring, something fruitful... Posterity, I think, will discern in the art of our day a wave of dissatisfaction with itself, a stirring much deeper than any transplantable French fashion in painting. Perhaps, at bottom, it comes from a desire to recover something of the spirituality which modern art has forgotten in its search for “sensations of well-being” and realistic imitation. We crave for an art which shall be more profound,

more intense, more charged with essential spirit, more direct a communication between mind and mind.⁷⁰

While appreciating the “reaction” against the “mere optical sensation” of impressionism, which is “at bottom ... a movement in the right direction,” and praising a number of the exhibitors including Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Picasso, Binyon is not persuaded of their promise, not because of the intent behind their experimentation, but because “none of these Post-Impressionists seems to me strong enough to carry out the programme.”⁷¹ Cézanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin are all “more struggle than mastery,” so that “none of [their] paintings could hold a candle to the ‘Smiling Woman’ of Augustus John, which the Contemporary Art Society has, I am delighted to see, acquired for the nation.”⁷²

The coincidence of the opening of John’s exhibition “Provençal Studies and Other Works” at the Chenil Gallery while the “Post-Impressionists” show was still on, gave Binyon his chance to refine both the expression of his views about the art at the Grafton and his claims for John. John has “a perfect genius” as “a draughtsman:”

One can see the summary outline under the colour, which is brushed in with hasty decision, abruptly, with a hand contemptuous of suavity, scorning to caress or subtilise the pigment. Two dots will serve for eyes; modelling is disregarded, shadow scarcely used. Yet everything lives.⁷³

Thus, “unlike most of these Frenchmen, he has powers that are equal to his bent. He can simplify extravagantly, but the few lines are the right ones and not the wrong ones.”⁷⁴ John’s art is circumscribed, “limited, obsessed by a few types,” so that “his ideas are few... But in it there is a jet of elemental energy, something powerful and unaccountable, like life itself.”⁷⁵

Can an understanding of these views on contemporary western culture and the role and function of art in a healthy society help us to understand the character of the art itself? I have suggested elsewhere that Binyon’s theories had a significant impact on the evolving thought of modernists like Pound and Wyndham Lewis, but, although I continue to think that this is so, it is not my interest here.⁷⁶ My concern is rather with the importance of Binyon’s ideas for the assessment of non-modernist art in Britain, whether that of Ricketts and his circle or of those like Augustus John who were modern without taking on the radical ambition and extremism of avant-garde production and who are often consigned to the margins in accounts of the arrival of modernity in British art. How far do Binyon’s ideas illuminate John or Ricketts and how far too do they allow us to clarify their value as modern art?

One way of tackling such questions is to return to a point I made at the beginning of the chapter and to consider the contrast that Binyon’s continued devotion to the idea of the aesthetic as redemption makes with the negativity and suspicion about it in modernism. It is this, above all, that marks out the late-romantic thought of the Ricketts circle from the British avant-garde before 1914. As we have seen, there is a shared diagnosis of cultural need, yet the aesthetic continues to seem

persuasive for Binyon as a means of redemption for the ills of modern society in a way that seems impossible for avant-garde modernists. Binyon never has any doubt that it is through the “uniqueness” or “aura” of the work of art that the fallen state of the contemporary world can be redeemed. Central to that imagined redemption, the concept of a common tradition expresses how that process might operate in concert with the ideals of expressiveness he proposes in his books and periodical writings. Binyon’s praise of modern artists therefore responds either to attempts to achieve the same ambition, as is the case with Ricketts and Shannon whose painting explicitly connects itself to tradition in subject matter and technique, or to what appear to him to be particularly pungent or effective realizations of the aesthetic in art of a younger generation, “exhaling a perfume of the mind,” as he said of Conder.

And yet, Binyon’s interpretations have an over-insistent air about them, particularly when we consider his views on artists such as Conder or John. Binyon’s biographer notes how eccentric his praise of Ricketts – arguably a highly artificial and often wooden, if interesting, painter – must seem in retrospect; and something of the same response is no doubt inevitable for us now, reading his praise of Conder.⁷⁷ The achievement and character of Conder’s works seem not to fit the claims made for them. Where he deals with younger artists, Binyon might also seem inclined to force the facts. In the case of Augustus John, the painter’s deliberate marginalization of his executive powers and his experimentation in the Provençal pictures and elsewhere links him to the avant-garde. If Binyon is nonetheless able to value him, he is fundamentally different in this from Shannon or Ricketts.⁷⁸ Nonetheless, the emphasis on the expressive potential of color and form in John’s art of this period, his conjuring forth of images of sedulity and common human life in works like *The Mumpers* (1911–1913, Detroit Institute of the Arts) or *The Way Down to the Sea* (Fig. 6.4), and his combination of this with a conviction of the power of the aesthetic to operate in large-scale, public, but unique and self-consciously “auratic” paintings, are illuminated by Binyon’s late-Romantic aesthetics. John unites the ambition to produce public art with a humanity that appealed to Binyon’s liberal and tolerant world view. If there are thus justifications for Binyon’s conviction that John was a major artist in his tradition, there is nevertheless much special pleading in his defence of his art.⁷⁹ The fact is that Binyon’s attempt to open up his culture to the redemption he imagines art can provide is a precarious one. Although he uses the avenues of communication with a wide, although necessarily an educated, public open to him in these years his success was always unlikely because the public was already too fragmented to be reached by a single voice. The popular books and periodical publication that Binyon produced were aimed at a middle class, if aspirational, audience, and even then he believed they had to be carefully led before they could be brought to see where their aesthetic interests lay. Binyon strives to speak to a wide audience and to communicate and urge the importance of a social role on art. But for all that, and for all that so much of his art criticism and commentary

appeared in a non-specialized periodical, the tension between his utopian aesthetic of social renewal and his own situation as a denizen of Grub Street is itself a symptom of what he strives to overcome, a quintessentially modern problematic.

Binyon and Modernism

W. B. Yeats, reading Binyon's *Painting in the Far East* sometime around 1909, found himself newly convinced of the bankruptcy of the aestheticist doctrine of autonomous art: "I now see that the literary element in painting, the moral element in poetry, are the means whereby the two arts are accepted into the social order and become a part of life."⁸⁰ In his books on oriental art Binyon rejected the same doctrine and asserted that art has a duty and a purpose for society: "for the public, art is not an end in itself; it is a spiritual experience which is to enrich its life."⁸¹ This is a sympathetic and attractive proposition, but it is central to the problem of art in modernity that it is not so easily achieved. Binyon, convinced of the destructive nature of modern life, feels the difficulty of evolving an imaginative response that would not be irrelevant. The solutions he offers were not to prove attractive to the more brutal *realpolitik* that accompanied the advent of avant-garde modernism in Britain a few years later. His thought lacks the anti-humanism and anti-aesthetic of vorticism, with its acid color and violent repudiation of the spectator's pleasure, and Binyon's biographer rightly places him, in opposition to them, in the context of "the last generation that could speak without irony of 'the Spirit of Man'."⁸² Faced with the problem of communicating with his society, Binyon can only seek to persuade. Vorticism was not content with such a diplomatic role, and its texts do more than attempt to coax or win over their readers. But that distinction should not lead us to assume that vorticism represents the necessary, correct, response. Rather, attention to the concerns and ambitions for art that Binyon represents should encourage us in current attempts at "recalibrating the measure of modernity in art," as Michael Leja has recently put it in an innovative discussion of American art at the turn of the twentieth century.⁸³ The desire to preserve the auratic affect of art, its uniqueness, and its function as an aesthetic mechanism of contemplation and immersion for the viewer, and the continuing devotion to the possibilities of the tradition, sets Binyon and more broadly the Ricketts circle as a whole, apart from the generation of modernists who followed them in Britain. Such late-romantic ideas, even if not specifically espoused by artists such as John, Steer, or Conder, nonetheless possess a power to illuminate their works and their aesthetics. If we read Binyon aright we "recalibrate" the notion of a modern art in Britain before 1914 to encompass art that endeavors to address modern culture and to critically intervene in its values and processes, but which maintains that it is the purpose and function of aesthetics to undertake that task. The works of nineteenth-century artists like Watts and Stevens, or of

twentieth-century painters like John whose insufficiently modernist work is now unfashionable or problematic for art history, may be reinterpreted in this light. At a time when aesthetics and the power of art seem newly relevant to art historians, Binyon and his defence of art's importance suggest a history of modern art in Britain that is distinct from, and more nuanced than, the familiar account of the emergence of modernism.

Conclusion

Periodization, value, what we mean by “modernism,” and the question of the canon are all bound up together at this moment. A lot of what goes on in the name of art-historical enquiry into the years around 1910 does the modernists' work for them. That is, the claim that things did change – that human nature was somehow, whether metaphorically or actually, reshaped or that a kind of painting rose without influences or predecessors to reveal the character of modern life to its audience – is accepted or acted upon and academic study, because of its imperative to elucidate and explain the intention behind the acts and utterances of the subjects of its attention, ends up by confirming that reading of what occurred. I have tried to suggest that this is not the case and that it is not useful to imagine the world around 1910 purely through the eyes of those who participated in the ferment of contenting claims for modernist priority at the time. It is the presence of this period division, ultimately derived from the art-political interests of 1910, that enforces a selective historical blindness around the end of a cultural period, driving “modernists” and “Victorians” into historically incredible opposing camps and obscuring the realities of their relationships. Once we begin to open up the question of the periods with which we work and which we have inherited, often without the necessary distance, from earlier historians and from the political priorities of artists themselves, the whole conception of our history begins to need recasting.

Michael Baxandall once sardonically wrote that the role of the art historian is ostensive, that is, that what he or she does is laboriously to point out the obvious.⁸⁴ Perhaps periodization is a little like that in its ideal form: things are different in 1920 than in 1880. But to extrapolate from that the idea that one might be able to pinpoint the year when things changed would be an illusion. Things change and after a while are different; but at any one moment, at any one time or span of years, what we observe – or ought to – is process, continuity as much as difference. To insist that it is of any use to identify a point as the end of the Victorian age would be to fetishize and reify an abstraction that might be at best only briefly, locally, or provisionally useful. Periods are a heuristic tool, overly precise definitions are not possible and if insisted upon are misleading and distracting. The problem with the suggestion that there is a Victorian period and then a modern one, possibly or possibly not separated by an Edwardian period, is that it suggests absolute boundaries, for which we then hunt, when in reality at any one

moment to which we might wish to pay attention as historians there are continuities, changes, and nondescript states all in existence together.

The challenge is to write history that follows the unfolding of change, which does not strive to hurry the account towards the next “period,” but acknowledges this complexity of relationships obtaining at any one moment. In the case of the account we give of the “Victorian period” in Britain, the historiographical emphasis on the years 1910–1914 as a time of rupture with the past obscures, perhaps even denies, the deep connections into the Victorian past that were operative and indeed were crucial in the formation, self-understanding, and manifestation of much of British modernism. Perhaps what we need is a sort of micro-history, studies of moments and connections that are not dependent on the framing devices of periodization. The study of British art in the years on either side of 1900 is at a stage when it needs this type of close attention to the historical texture rather than works that are concerned to prove once again that everything changed in 1910 or that *Blast* was entirely sincere in its iconoclastic assertion of the redundancy of “1837–1900.”⁸⁵

None of this is to suggest that differences do not exist and that there is no historical change that can be observed on a macro-historical level. “Though most of us would acknowledge the continuities between Romanticism and Modernism,” writes Sanford Schwartz in his study of early literary modernism in England, “few of us would actually confuse a Romantic and a Modernist poem.”⁸⁶ There is no question of confusing Burne-Jones with Wyndham Lewis, or Dante Gabriel Rossetti with Vanessa Bell. But we need not to find that observation conclusive enough to forestall further enquiry. This is to a large extent a strategic move and not an assertion of some greater historical truth that will forever supplant the existing accounts. Periods may be necessary devices to allow us to conceptualize and manage historical change, but they are not always useful ones. At present, the historiography of British art studies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries demands a gentle demolition of our inherited views of when and how periods end, and a slow and nuanced approach to the reassembly of how we understand and approach the history of British art at an important moment. In the hands of scholars such as Lisa Tickner, Elizabeth Prettejohn, and Tim Barringer the character of Victorian art and its connections and continuities with what came after are becoming clearer.⁸⁷ We can return in due course to a determined effort to separate Victorianism from modernism, but before we do that we need to be sure we understand what connects them first.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- 1 Clark, T. J. (1985) *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers*, London: Thames & Hudson.
- 2 Watts, G. F. (nd) "The present conditions of art," in M. Watts, *George Frederick Watts: Annals*, New York: Hodder and Stoughton, vol. 3, 161.
- 3 Wilde, O. (1891) "The decay of lying," in *Intentions: The Decay of Lying, Pen, Pencil and Poison, The Critic as Artist, The Truth of Masks*, London: James R. Osgood, McIlvaine, 53.
- 4 Hatcher, J. (1995) *Laurence Binyon: Poet, Scholar of East and West*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 138. Binyon, who was without private means, depended for much of his career on literary and art-historical journalism to make up the shortfall between his stipend from the British Museum and the needs of a growing family. For accounts of Binyon's role as literary journalist see Hatcher, and Donald Davie (1976) "Ezra among the Edwardians," *Paideuma*, 5, 3–14.
- 5 The *Saturday Review* was aimed at an educated, but aspirational, middle class audience. In addition to articles and features on art and literature, it carried regular reports on parliament, political developments, and economics. A review of the advertisements over the period of Binyon's contributions reveals an emphasis on education, from schools to self-improvement, publications on the journal's major areas of interest, and middle class leisure.
- 6 Thomas Carlyle, Matthew Arnold, John Stuart Mill, and John Ruskin were among those who reacted to the marginalization of art in bourgeois culture by elaborating ideals of the social responsibility of the artist and work of art. See Holloway, J. (1953) *The Victorian Sage: Studies in Argument*, London: Macmillan.
- 7 Binyon, L. (1908) "Two ways of art," *Saturday Review*, 106, August 15, 200. Binyon is reviewing a book by his friend and fellow member of the circle around Charles Ricketts, Thomas Sturge Moore (1910) *Art and Life*, London: Methuen.
- 8 This was a loose grouping of writers, artists, and critics that included amongst its members in addition to Binyon, Thomas Sturge Moore, John Rothenstein, the aunt-niece partnership "Michael Field," and Oscar Wilde. See Delaney, J. G. P. (1990) *Charles Ricketts: a Biography*, Oxford: Clarendon; Hatcher (1995); and for an insider's account, Holmes, C. (1936) *Self and Partners (Mostly Self): Being the Reminiscences of Sir Charles Holmes*, London: Constable.
- 9 For a discussion see Peters Corbett, D. (1997) "'Make it new': Laurence Binyon, Pound and vorticism," *Paideuma*, 26, 2 and 3.
- 10 Corbett (1997) and *The World in Paint*. See also Getsy, D. (2004) *Body Doubles: Sculpture in Britain, 1877–1905*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press on this issue.
- 11 The summary that follows distills arguments from Bürger, P. (1984) *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw, Manchester: Manchester University Press, and Huyssen, A. (1986) *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism*, London: Macmillan.
- 12 In the classic accounts of critical theory on which I am drawing, academic art therefore found itself institutionalized as a vacuous "official art," a means of cultural legitimation for the aspirations of the new bourgeoisie. This reading of academic art misidentifies its potential for cultural sophistication and independence. See Prettejohn, E.

- (2000) "The modernism of Frederic Leighton" and Barlow, P. "Millais, Manet, Modernity," in D. Peters Corbett and L. Perry (eds) *English Art 1860–1914: Modern Artists and Identity*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- 13 Binyon regularly denigrates official academic art in his *Saturday Review*, see, for example, Binyon, L. (1908) "Public art and the Wellington Monument," *Saturday Review*, 105, February 15, 199–200; Binyon, L. (1909) "The McCulloch Collection," *Saturday Review*, 107, February 27, 267–268.
 - 14 Binyon takes Frederic Wedmore to task for cultivating an elitist spectator in his *Some of the Moderns* (Virtue: London, 1909), Binyon, L. (1909) "Our young painters and a critic," *Saturday Review*, 108, December 11, 726–727.
 - 15 Binyon, L. (1906) "Old masters and modern critics," *Saturday Review*, 102, December 29, 800. Binyon is reviewing Sturge Moore's *Correggio* (London: Duckworth, 1906).
 - 16 Binyon, L. (1907) "Artists and the public," *Saturday Review*, 103, May 25, 649.
 - 17 Huyssen (1986), 9.
 - 18 Huyssen (1986), 7.
 - 19 Ricketts, C. (1913) "A century of art," *Pages on Art*, London: Constable, 50, 47. See also the essay "Post-impressionism at the Grafton Gallery" in the same volume.
 - 20 See Walter Benjamin's (1970) essay, "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, London: Jonathan Cape. See also the discussion of Benjamin's idea and the avant-garde in Huyssen (1986), 10.
 - 21 Benjamin (1970) "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction" (hereafter "WR"), 222.
 - 22 Huyssen (1986), 10.
 - 23 Binyon, L. (1910) "E Pur Si Muove," *Saturday Review*, 110, December 31, 841.
 - 24 Binyon, L. ([1908] 1959) *Painting in the Far East: an Introduction to the History of Pictorial Art in Asia, Especially China and Japan*, 3rd edn., New York: Dover (hereafter PFE), 274.
 - 25 See also *The Art of Botticelli: an Essay in Pictorial Criticism* (London: Macmillan, 1913) and Binyon, L. (1911) *The Flight of the Dragon: an Essay on the Theory and Practice of Art in China and Japan, Based on Original Sources*, London: John Murray.
 - 26 For a fuller discussion of this aspect of Binyon's thought, see Corbett (1986).
 - 27 Binyon, L. (1910) "Arts and crafts and the twelve," *Saturday Review*, 109, January 22, 104.
 - 28 Binyon, "Arts and Crafts," 104.
 - 29 Binyon, L. (1908) "Two ways of art," *Saturday Review*, 106, August 15, 200.
 - 30 Binyon, L. (1907) "Romance and reality," *Saturday Review*, 104, December 21, 760.
 - 31 Binyon, L. (1907) "Chardin and Ruskin," *Saturday Review*, 103 March 30, 389.
 - 32 "Artists and the public," 649.
 - 33 Binyon, L. (1908) "Art and legend," *Saturday Review*, 105, January 18, 76.
 - 34 *The Flight of the Dragon*, 21.
 - 35 Binyon, L. (1908) "Reflections on two great movements," *Saturday Review*, 105, May 9, 590.
 - 36 Binyon, L. (1908) "Reflections on two great movements," *Saturday Review*, 105, May 9, 590.
 - 37 Binyon, L. (1908) "A great picture," *Saturday Review*, 105, June 20, 784.
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- 39 Binyon, L. (1908) "Whistler," *Saturday Review*, 106, November 7, 572.
- 40 Binyon, L. (1907) "Art and archaism," *Saturday Review*, 104, July 20, 75.
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- 42 Binyon, L. (1909) "Nostalgia," *Saturday Review*, 107, April 3, 429.
- 43 Binyon, "Art and archaism," 75.
- 44 Binyon, L. (1910) "Japanese masterpieces in London," *Saturday Review*, 109, May 28, 687.
- 45 Binyon, L. (1910) "Art and life," *Saturday Review*, 110, August 20, 229.
- 46 Binyon, L. (1908) "The decoration of the Palace of Westminster," *Saturday Review*, 105, March 14, 331.
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- 48 "The Wellington Monument," 200.
- 49 Hatcher (1995), 241.
- 50 Binyon, L. (1931) *Collected Poems of Laurence Binyon*, 2 vols, vol. 1, London Visions, Narrative Poems, Translations, London: Macmillan, 18, 11.
- 51 "The Wellington Monument," 200.
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- 54 See Ricketts, C. (1913) *Pages on Art*, London: Constable.
- 55 "The Wellington Monument," 200.
- 56 "The Wellington Monument," 200.
- 57 Binyon, L. (1909) "The international," *Saturday Review*, 107, February 6, 172.
- 58 Binyon, "The international," 172.
- 59 Binyon, "Art and archaism," 75.
- 60 Binyon, "Art and archaism," 75.
- 61 Binyon, L. (1907) "The golden age," *Saturday Review*, 103, January 12, 43.
- 62 Binyon, L. (1910) "Spirituality in art," *Saturday Review*, 109, February 5, 170.
- 63 "The McCulloch Collection," 268. Binyon also regularly praises Philip Wilson Steer among the younger artists.
- 64 Binyon, "Chardin and Ruskin," 389.
- 65 Binyon, "Decoration of the Palace of Westminster," 332.
- 66 Binyon does not identify the paintings by name, but *The Way Down to the Sea* was exhibited at the summer NEAC together with the *Portrait of William Nicholson* (1909, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge) and a series of studies.
- 67 Binyon, "The new English art club," 685.
- 68 Binyon, "The new English art club," 684. Elsewhere, John is related to the pre-Raphaelites in "mood" that is "vividly true and imaginative," Binyon, L. (1907) "Rubens, Delacroix and Mr John," *Saturday Review*, 104, December 7, 695.
- 69 Binyon, L. (1907) "The international society," *Saturday Review*, 103, February 2, 137.
- 70 Binyon, "E Pur Si Muove," 840.
- 71 Binyon, L. (1910) "Post-impressionists," *Saturday Review*, 110, November 12, 609.
- 72 Binyon, "Post-impressionists," 610. *Woman Smiling* (1908–1909, Tate).
- 73 Binyon, L. (1910) "Romney; Raeburn; Mr John," *Saturday Review*, 110, December 10, 747.
- 74 Binyon, "Romney; Raeburn; Mr John," 747.
- 75 Binyon, "Romney; Raeburn; Mr John," 747.
- 76 See Corbett (1986).

- 77 See Hatcher (1995), 141.
- 78 Binyon himself observes that John is suspicious of his own technical skill and that he seeks to suppress it in his works in order to cultivate a simplicity of vision conducive to the “rhythm” and clarity of design that Binyon values so highly, see “The new English art club,” 685.
- 79 I have benefited in this section from Ysanne Holt’s discussion of Binyon’s comments on John in “Modern idylls and English landscape.” See also Fraser Jenkins, D. (n.d.) “Slade School symbolism,” in *The Last Romantics: the Romantic Tradition in British Art*, exhib. cat., Barbican Art Gallery, London: Lund Humphries, 71–76. According to Jenkins, Binyon bought three drawings by John for the Print Room at the British Museum as early as 1906 (72).
- 80 Yeats, W. B. ([1955] 1980) *Autobiographies*, London: Macmillan, 490. There are many connections between the aesthetics and world view of Binyon and Yeats, echoes of the fact that Yeats was close to Ricketts and his circle.
- 81 Binyon, *The Flight of the Dragon*, 110.
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- 83 Leja, M. (2004) *Looking Askance: Skepticism and American Art from Eakins to Duchamp*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 15.
- 84 Baxandall, M. (1985) *Patterns of Intention: on the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- 85 *Blast* 1 (London, 1914), 18.
- 86 Schwartz, S. (1985) *The Matrix of Modernism: Pound, Eliot and Early Twentieth Century Thought*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 8.
- 87 See Tickner, L. (2000) *Modern Life and Modern Subjects: British Art in the Early Twentieth Century*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press; Prettejohn, E. (1999) “Out of the nineteenth century: Roger Fry’s early art criticism 1900–1906,” in C. Green (ed.) *Art Made Modern: Roger Fry’s Vision of Art*, London: Merrell Holburton; Barringer, T. (2005) *Men at Work: Art and Labour in Victorian Britain*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

British Pop Art and the High/Low Divide

Simon Faulkner

Introduction

Studying British pop art raises questions about relationships between artistic agency, art institutions, and what has conventionally been defined as the high/low cultural divide. The dominant account of British pop art articulated in a number of catalogue and monographic texts places emphasis upon the choices of British pop artists to trawl the field of popular culture¹ for novel subject matter and in the process assert their relative independence from established cultural hierarchies. Defined in these terms the status of the pop artist as a cultural agent depends on his or her ability to partially step out of the institutionally defined space of art. This conception of pop art involves a reworking of the idea of the avant-garde artist who breaks the rules to break new ground. It is characteristic of this kind of avant-gardist discourse that aspects of conventionality are made to masquerade as rebellion. The point to stress here is that pop art was produced and circulated within a standard fine art context defined by a set of institutional frames and practices. pop art departed from convention only in certain ways and even then, only to a certain degree. The important question raised by these observations is: how might we develop an understanding of the pop artist as a cultural agent that adequately describes the relationship between the innovative content of pop art and its institutional context? To answer this question we need to think of pop art as not so much a rebellion against established good taste as much as a practice developed within the field of possibilities defined by the complex network of institutions, discourses, and practices usually called the art world. In this sense the agency of the pop artist was enabled, rather than restricted, by their use of existing artistic resources and by their position within particular kinds of artistic social space.

As Jim Collins has observed, the artistic appropriation of the comic book and the advertisement only creates a “scandal” within the space of fine art.² Thus pop art requires the high/low divide – and as part of this, the divide between fine art and popular culture – for its acts of appropriation to be read as a challenge to cultural propriety. Consequently pop art reproduces the high/low binary as it contests it.³ Making these observations does not invalidate pop art, or bring into question the creativity of the artists involved, rather it calls for a nuanced understanding of the significance of what these artists achieved. Such an understanding of pop art would have to describe the new relationships between painting and examples of popular culture forged by these artists, while at the same time maintaining a sense of the institutional differences between these two areas of the field of cultural production. This dual focus on content and institutional location necessitates an emphasis on the paintings themselves as the point of mediation between the imagery of popular culture and its relocation within the domain of fine art. This approach also requires a reorientation of the notion of artistic agency articulated in relation to pop art toward the production of complex artworks rather than the simple selection of source material. The following discussion explores relationships between the high/low divide, art institutions, artistic agency, and examples of British pop art with the aim of understanding how the practice of painting functioned as a means of representing popular culture during the early 1960s. How was it that painting, as a long-standing cultural form, was an adequate means of encompassing the rapidly changing world of contemporary popular culture? Why use painting at all? To address these questions, it is necessary to look at the continuing status of painting as a powerful representational form within the context of the art world and at the specific approaches to painting adopted by the pop artists under consideration.

Revisiting the Cultural Continuum

One starting point for the examination of these issues is the writing of British critic Lawrence Alloway, who made an important contribution to the development of the critical discourse around pop art and is often credited with inventing the term in his 1958 article “The arts and the mass media.”⁴ However the potential for his writings to provide us with the beginnings of a theoretical framework within which to understand the institutionally framed status of the pop artist as a cultural agent has yet to be fully explored. What is significant about his writing is that while he criticized established evaluative discourses that elevated “high” culture above other forms of cultural production, he also consistently asserted the difference between the arts and popular culture, and between the pop art and its popular cultural referents in particular. In his essay “The development of British Pop,” from 1966, Alloway observed, “Pop Art has been linked to mass communication in facetious ways ... references to the mass media in Pop Art have

been made the pretext for completely identifying the source with its adaptation,” and for seeing “Pop artists as identical to their sources.”⁵ This tendency was to be opposed because “an image in Pop Art is in a new context” and because “the mass media are more complex and less inert than this view presupposes.”⁶ The relationship between pop art and its sources was complicated. Not only did the re-presentation of images derived from popular culture in paintings involve a process of translation from one medium into another, but a radical change in their significance through their cultural translocation. This translocation involved a shift from contexts defined by the productive structures and sites of consumption that defined the field of popular culture to the institutional sites of fine art and their attendant evaluative discourses. At the same time, for all its pictorial sophistication, pop art could not adequately represent the shifting relationships between popular culture and its audiences. If anything, pop art tended to freeze the dynamics of popular culture as an image, rendering it relatively inert. As Alloway put it, through pop art the complexity of popular culture was shrunk to “an iconography of signs and objects.”⁷ Though as will be seen, this did not stop British pop artists attempting to encapsulate the dynamics of popular culture through their work.

Alloway’s maintenance of a clear distinction between popular culture and pop art did not contradict his novel conception of culture as a horizontal “continuum” rather than a “pyramid.”⁸ Here culture was understood as “what a society does”⁹ as opposed to being a term reserved for elite cultural practices – a definition that was close to Raymond Williams’ contemporaneous understanding of culture as a “particular way of life.”¹⁰ Both Alloway and Williams understood the arts and popular culture as part of “society’s communication system.”¹¹ But this did not mean that they were understood to be the same thing. In “The arts and the mass media,” from 1958, Alloway is quite clear that the fine arts and popular culture are separate but equal, declaring that the “new role for the fine arts is to be one of the possible forms of communication in an expanding framework that also includes the mass arts.”¹² Similarly in his article “Pop Art: the words,” published in 1968, he refers to the attitudes of members of the Independent Group that met at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London during the mid-1950s to discuss relationships between art and popular culture, stating that: “Advertising, color photography and color reproduction, (big screen) films, (early English) TV, automobile styling were regarded on equal terms with the fine arts; not the same, but equally interesting.”¹³ Art and popular culture were to be approached with the same interpretive tools, namely iconography¹⁴ and anthropology,¹⁵ but they were still different kinds of cultural production.

Reflecting on his paintings from the late 1950s, Richard Hamilton has suggested that Alloway’s notion of the “fine/pop art continuum” (here “pop art” means popular culture) precluded the mixing of different cultural practices. Thus he commented: “The heresy was to pull things out from one point along the continuum and drop them in at another, then stir well – the fine/pop soup

alternative.”¹⁶ This statement implies that it was a straightforward matter of choice on the part of the artist to mix the fine and the popular, and in the process engage in a localized disassembling of the cultural hierarchy. Taking Hamilton’s painting *\$he* (1958–1961), for example, the persuasiveness of this proposition might be considered. It is true that the iconic and stylistic content of this work is derived from contexts beyond the field of fine art. A number of elements that Hamilton focuses on in his “exposition” of the painting can be identified: the fridge motifs derived from advertising, the apron/dress back taken from a photograph of the actress and model Vikky Dougan, the airbrushed breasts, the combination of toaster and vacuum cleaner imagery, both originating in advertising material, and the winking plastic eye.¹⁷ Through the combination of these elements the painting is a little soup-like, yet this does not stop it from being a painting. *\$he* represents a change in content, but not a change in basic fine art practices; there is no significant disassembling of relationships between different cultural forms located at different institutionally framed points of the cultural continuum. Hamilton describes his painting as “a search for what is epic in everyday objects and everyday attitudes.”¹⁸ But this search was a thoroughly artistic one, making Hamilton’s soup metaphor inappropriate. Elements from one point in the continuum were certainly dropped in at another, but there seems to have been no significant stirring beyond that which occurs on the picture plane. The argument presented here is that, whether Hamilton liked it or not, the possibility of stirring, or not stirring in the sense of changing more structural and institutionalized cultural practices and relations was out of his hands. His agency as an artist only stretched so far. Again, this is not stated to devalue what he achieved, rather it is aimed at a more appropriate framing of his act of creative agency.

Artistic Agency and the High/Low Divide

This discussion of the pop artist as agent can be continued through a brief detour into recent art historical debates over artistic agency, followed by a longer discussion of the relevance of this issue to the relationship between pop art and the high/low divide. During the past three decades the founding of art history upon notions of “individual human agency” has been exposed to a critique of the notion of the artist as the isolated originator of artistic meaning.¹⁹ Revisionist discussions of artistic production argued that artists have agency, but not in the idealized form suggested by the cliché of the creative genius. It is against this mythic construction of the artist that artistic practices have been redefined as modes of material facture and representation that occur within complex cultural contexts, involving institutional structures and implicit codes of practice, meaning generation, and evaluation. Focusing on art as a representational practice – involving the active production of new meanings from existing cultural codes and conventions – undermines the idea of originality upon which many histories of modern art have been premised. Originality can no longer be understood as the creation of

something originating solely from within the artist, instead it is seen as the reworking of existing cultural materials into a novel configuration. This is never repetition, but at the same time it cannot be a complete break with what has come before. The artist has agency in that he or she works with these existing materials, often combining them with forms from other areas of social and cultural practice, but the artist is also not the originator of the conditions under which this activity takes place.²⁰ Whatever artistic agency is, it is enmeshed with the institutional structures of art. This is not to ascribe agency to these structures, rather it is to argue that agency cannot occur without them. As Judith Butler has observed: “Conditions do not ‘act’ in the way that individual agents do, but no agent acts without them. They are presupposed in what we do.”²¹ In what follows, discussion will be premised upon the understanding that institutional structures do not determine individual artistic production, but rather set limits, exert pressures, and define the cultural terrain upon which specific artistic practices are developed. We can think about artistic institutions in this context in relation to Herbert Lindenberger’s representation of literary institutions as “a set of Chinese boxes, each one smaller than and contained within the other.”²² The largest box might be thought of in terms of what Christa and Peter Bürger have called “the institution of art;”²³ specifically what Peter Bürger describes as “the productive and distributive apparatus and also ... the ideas of art that prevail at a given time and that determine the reception of works.”²⁴ Here artistic institutions are defined at the scale of the overall institutional structure of art, a structure demarcated by an epochal concept of art. This concept of art may be contested in different ways, but nevertheless defines the conceptual terrain upon which art is thought, produced, viewed, collected, and used in different ways. Within this large box exist the smaller boxes defined by particular institutional forms – the art school, the gallery, the art magazine – and their specific manifestations, in a British context, as the Royal College of Art, the Tate Gallery, and *The Studio*. At an even smaller scale, we have the boxes of specific mediums and genres of art practice, which are given concrete form through the work of individual artists. This mapping of the institutions of art as a set of boxes of decreasing size is crude and will not allow us to explain the specificities of individual artistic practices, let alone a particular work of art, yet it enables us to take in the wider context within which these practices and works gained a generic value, and within which the practice of painting as a generic form carried cultural authority and prestige.

In the preceding discussion it was noted that evaluation defines an element of the institutional contexts that enable artistic agency. Here evaluation is understood to include the changing rules of thumb by which artistic practices are evaluated by artists, teachers, critics, and curators within the art world, but also the structures of value that position the category of fine art as part of the high cultural sphere in relation to other areas of the cultural field. When people fashion themselves as artists and attempt to produce art, their activities are necessarily framed by the honorific category of “art” and by the institutions and discourses that maintain this category. This is also the case when these people attempt to contest

the limits of this category. Barbara Herrnstein Smith has convincingly argued that all value is radically contingent, being the result of the human interests and of the historical contexts within which these values are produced.²⁵ There is no way to ground value in universals, however the historian of cultural value must be alert to the ways that sincere-fictions of absolute value are generated under particular conditions. The binary categories of high and low are an example of this kind of evaluative sincere-fiction in that they have been established over a long period of time to serve particular social interests and have become integral to certain ways of thinking about, making, and consuming culture linked to processes of identity formation. To call the high/low divide a sincere-fiction is to suggest its axiological frailty, but also its social influence.

The categories of high and low do not refer to unified spheres of culture that are separated from each other, rather they demarcate loosely grouped sets of institutions, practices, and audiences, constituting what Lawrence Levine has termed “cultural territories”²⁶ that are only cohered in a purist form within evaluative discourse itself. This suggests that a distinction needs to be made between the ideal of elevated “high” culture and the manifest institutional structures and social effects of those cultural practices conventionally subsumed under the heading “high.” However, the ideal cannot be separated from the institutions that produced it, for it is through the articulation of this ideal that the material effects of high cultural ideology are produced.²⁷ This also suggests that there is a difference between high and low in terms of the relationships between these different terms and the domains of culture they are meant to denote. The ideal of high culture has an integral relationship to the institutional structure onto which it is mapped. Whereas there is no integral relationship between the notion of low culture and the cultural forms and institutions the term is meant to describe, simply because the category of low culture is a product of the institutions associated with high culture. What we are dealing with when we consider the high/low divide is therefore a powerful evaluative discourse produced within the institutions that define the worlds of fine art, classical music, literature, and higher education, amongst others. This discourse hierarchizes culture in relation to differences between certain kinds of cultural forms and tastes that are roughly related to positions within the order of class society. This also means that the pejorative category of low culture needs to be distinguished from what is defined in this essay as popular culture.

As cultural production became more industrialized, the arts were separated off – both spatially and in terms of evaluation – from cultural forms consumed by large groups of people. The arts were given sanctuary in their institutional havens of the art museum and conservatoire, and defined as paragons not only of cultural excellence, but also of humanist values and civilized order in general. At the same time the arts were discursively separated from commerce and set up as a “court of human appeal” against economic, industrial, and instrumental concerns.²⁸ As Raymond Williams observed, “Aesthetic Man” was set up against “Economic Man.”²⁹ From the perspective of those who constructed themselves as evaluative

subjects within high cultural discourse, those cultural forms defined as low were understood to embody characteristics that were the opposites of “good” culture – they were produced on a large rather than restricted scale, for profit rather than in the service of higher human and aesthetic values, and to satisfy ordinary needs rather than concerns that transcended the everyday material world. As Williams put it:

So powerful has been the tendency to exclude art from serious practical consideration that, in a natural mood of defence, the claim that art is special and extraordinary has been urgent and even desperate; even to question this produces reactions of extreme violence, from those who are convinced that they are the sole defenders of art in a hostile world.³⁰

Such conceptions of art as “high” culture were linked to understandings of artistic agency, in that the artist was conceived as a special kind of person who engages in special kinds of “creative” activity in search of “imaginative truth.”³¹

Although the authority of the high/low divide in Britain was at its height in the late nineteenth century, it continued to be of significance into the mid-twentieth century. The distinction between high and low was sustained in the postwar period through the Arts Council and the BBC’s “Third Programme” in the spirit of a kind of cultural welfare. Influential intellectuals such as T. S. Eliot also argued for the need to maintain such a cultural hierarchy, stating in his *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture*, published in 1948, that a proper democratic society would be one in which cultural responsibility would be distributed in terms of “a continuous gradation of cultural levels,” with people in the upper levels “representing a more conscious culture and a greater specialisation of culture.”³² This is not to propose that the field of British culture remained the same between the late nineteenth century and the 1940s. As Williams suggests, there was a certain defensiveness in Eliot’s discussion of democratic culture and toward what Williams described elsewhere as the establishment of the “methods and attitudes of capitalist business” at the heart of contemporary communications and cultural production.³³ High culture seemed to be fighting a losing battle against popular culture and in the process was being transformed into another area of mass mediated consumerism to the extent that Richard Hoggart observed in the early 1960s that: “Culture has become a thing for display not for exploration; a presentation not a challenge. It has become a thing to be consumed, like the latest cocktail biscuit.”³⁴ With a far less negative attitude toward cultural change, Alloway argued in his 1959 essay “The Long Front of Culture,” that a new “aesthetics of plenty” stands in opposition to a “very strong tradition which dramatizes the arts as the possession of an elite.” The defenders of this tradition, the “keepers of the flame,” had attempted to secure a concept of culture restricted to particular forms and consumers, but “mass production techniques, applied to accurately repeatable words, pictures and music, have resulted in an expendable multitude of signs and symbols.”³⁵ Under these conditions, the role of the humanist guardian of the high

cultural tradition was “clearly limited to swaying other humanists and not to steering society.”³⁶ Alloway was of the opinion that “old-hat-aesthetics”³⁷ needed to be replaced by new conceptions of cultural value that could engage with the mass media as a genuine cultural manifestation of contemporary society. However, as suggested earlier, Alloway’s call for a “long front of culture” needs to be interpreted alongside the distinctions he made between cultural practices located at different points along the cultural continuum. It should also be added that Alloway’s proposition of a post-“old-hat-aesthetics” axiology in some ways misrepresented his own position as someone who worked within the high cultural space of the art world and the hold the high/low divide continued to have on that world. It has been argued that Richard Hamilton’s retrospective observations about his paintings from the late 1950s lifted them out of their artistic context in a rather idealistic way. A similar observation could be made about the context within which Alloway produced and disseminated his criticism.

British Pop Art in the Early 1960s

The paradox of pop art is that the pop artist asserts his or her creative individualism through the appropriation of mass produced images and objects – the very forms that signify the loss of individualism within humanist discourses on subjectivity. As Alloway observed, what distinguished pop art from popular culture was the authorial intention of the artist, involving the selection and transformation of popular imagery into art.³⁸ The “author effect” constructed by conventional understandings of pop art is therefore defined against as well as in relation to popular culture. It is certainly true that the British pop artists produced novel images by referring to popular culture; however, the preceding discussion of agency and the high/low divide suggests that we cannot take conventional notions of the authorial freedom linked to pop art at face value.

A common approach to pop art in Britain is to establish a causal relationship between the social backgrounds of the artists – usually working or lower middle class – and their choice of subject matter. The suggestion being that they choose their subjects because of their prior experiences as consumers of popular culture. Writing about Peter Phillips, Marco Livingstone observes that the painter’s images and formal methods “were derived straight from the formative experiences of his teenage years, entailing not only his technical training and artistic influences but also the youthful working-class enthusiasms to which he referred so openly in his pictures.”³⁹ Although, Phillips’ artistic training is recognized here, this factor in his development is equaled, if not dominated, by his experience as an “ordinary” cultural consumer. Such accounts imply that if the choices of these artists over their subject matter were at all determined, this is by social factors external to specialist artistic institutions. Implicitly assumed is that the pop artist is an agent who is relatively free from the influence of conventional cultural values and institutions. This freedom is defined by their ability to move between, or exist inbetween the cultural

spheres of high and low. This has been particularly important when it comes to the discussion of Phillips and Peter Blake, who have often been taken to have a straightforward relationship to their popular subjects that is unmediated by any established notions of aesthetic value. What is assumed is that it was possible for these artists to opt out of the evaluative hierarchy defined by the high/low divide, while conversely retaining their honorific status as artists.

In his statement for the catalogue of “The New Generation: 1964” exhibition, Phillips asserted what he believed to be his uncomplicated and non-intellectual engagement with popular culture, observing:

My awareness of machines, advertising, and mass communication is not probably in the same sense as an older generation that’s been without these factors: I’ve been conditioned by them and grew up with it all and use it without a second thought. I wouldn’t analyse these images in a way that an artist of an older generation might. I’ve lived with them since I can remember and so it’s natural to use them without thinking.⁴⁰

This statement has been used to define the general concerns of those painters who studied at the Royal College Art in the early 1960s, sometimes defined as the “second generation” of British pop artists: Derek Boshier, Pauline Boty, Patrick Caulfield, David Hockney, R. B. Kitaj, and Peter Phillips. Nigel Whiteley quotes it to encapsulate a “change in aesthetic intention” within British pop art during the early 1960s.⁴¹ Alex Seago echoes Whiteley’s claim that these artists “could enjoy popular culture without the need to intellectualise”⁴² in his book about the Royal College of Art, *Burning the Box of Beautiful Things*. Both Whiteley and Seago refer to Alloway’s criticism of Peter Phillips for “taking pop literally” and treating it “the way teenagers do” in his 1962 article “Pop art since 1949”.⁴³ Alloway’s position was that Phillips had failed to recognize that pop art was “an episode, a thread, in a general tradition of iconographical art”⁴⁴ and as a result had identified his work too much with its sources. For Whiteley and Seago, Alloway’s argument is a sign that the older critic was perhaps out of touch with new developments within the field of culture. Their concern is with how changes outside of the art world were impacting upon young artists. Again, what we can identify is a sense that the key factor in the development of British pop art was external to the art world.

Peter Blake has often been discussed in terms of his direct approach to his subject matter. Robert Melville stated in 1962: “His work is a declaration of his interests, intransigent to the point of naïvety.”⁴⁵ Similarly, Michael Compton observed in 1983: “Blake is an artist whose work seems to spring in the most direct way from his interests and affections.”⁴⁶ Blake has also been described as a painter who is a “fan,” thus in 1960 Alloway declared: “Blake works as a fan;”⁴⁷ a declaration reworked by Roger Coleman in the catalogue for Blake’s first retrospective in 1969 and repeated by Natalie Rudd as the last sentence in her 2003 monograph on the artist.⁴⁸ As a “fan”, Blake is meant to be someone who takes

an uncomplicated pleasure in the subjects of his paintings. His approach to popular imagery is presumed to be “natural,” because Blake and his subjects “have simply grown up together.”⁴⁹ What these comments imply is that the relationship between Blake’s paintings and their subject matter somehow exists outside of the evaluative discourses and institutional structures that frame the category of “art.” What this displays is a denial of the institutional contexts within which pop art is made and in which it gains meaning, for without the high/low divide the idea of pop art itself would make no sense. The phrase pop art implicitly recognizes the high/low divide as a condition for the existence of those artworks it describes. Here “pop” and “art” are conjoined, but their oppositional origins remain. Yet critical and art historical discourse around pop art has often suppressed the way that its meaning rests upon the cultural hierarchy in favor of the notion that the relationship between the pop artist and his or her subject matter is one defined by individual artistic interests.

What is ignored in these approaches to Phillips and Blake is their location within the art world. We might ask the question: if the direct enjoyment of media culture was of primary importance for these artists, then why be an artist at all, why make paintings of these experiences? What is lacking in such interpretations is a sense of the importance these artists placed on the practice of painting as a means of representing their social experience. This ascription of value to painting was part and parcel of being part of the art world, of being within a context where there was a social agreement that painting was important as a means of picturing the world. Relevant here is the specific pictorial mode through which many of the British pop art paintings of the early 1960s were constructed: the “flat-bed picture plane” defined by Leo Steinberg as the “characteristic picture plane” of the 1960s.⁵⁰ According to Steinberg a shift occurred within painting after 1950, involving a reorientation from the simulation of “vertical fields” consonant with human vision to the simulation of “opaque flatbed horizontals.”⁵¹ For Steinberg, this is particularly the case with the “Combines” and silkscreen works of Robert Rauschenberg produced between the mid-1950s and mid-1960s. The analogues of paintings were now surfaces such as “tabletops, studio floors, charts, [and] bulletin boards.” Flatbed paintings might be viewed vertically, but were imaginatively horizontal as “receptor” surfaces upon which images could be arranged.⁵² This flatbed approach enabled the British pop artists to renew the representational authority of painting. Phillips used the flatbed approach to construct paintings such as *Motorpsycho/Tiger* (1961–1962) by assembling different motifs – the head of a motorbike rider, an enlarged motorbike decal, elements of a motorbike engine, a pattern referencing either the visual paraphernalia of motorbike subcultures or contemporary abstract art, or both – on the literal surface of the painting. Rather than constituting some direct relationship to the popular, these paintings were sophisticated modes of picturing that involved the mobilization of a complex knowledge of current art. Phillips gained this knowledge through his art school experience, as well as through a range of other encounters with art in galleries, magazines, and through discussions with other artists. That is, Phillips

became the painter he was by visiting, existing within, and positioning himself in relation to various institutional sites and frameworks. However sincere his enjoyments, Phillips' claim to have an unmediated relationship with contemporary popular culture through his work was in fact part of a rhetoric that staked his claim to avant-garde status and a sense of difference from his predecessors within the art world.

It might also be suggested that in Phillips' paintings the flatbed approach was used to signify the idea of directness of experience. This point also applies to Blake's painting *Girls and their Hero* (1959–1962) that is divided into three horizontal sections: the top section defines a shallow recessive space in which are pictured four Elvis Presley fans, while the bottom two sections are full of images of the star arranged on a table top that is pictured as if seen from above, and on pin-boards leant against the legs of the table. This strategy of arranging images of Elvis on pictured surfaces analogous to the literal surface of the painting not only allows for the presentation of the visual culture of the pop music world, but also the representation of the way that fans felt they had a kind of access to the star through these images. Directness is a represented theme of the painting as opposed to an embodied quality that has somehow been transferred to it through the fan-like enthusiasm of the artist. Again what needs to be emphasized is the status of Blake as an artist and as someone who has experienced a process of socialization within the art world. Roger Coleman was therefore ill-advised when he stated in 1969 that Blake's "period as an art student did not change or modify the direction of his thought or weaken his ability to remain himself, it simply enabled him to develop and refine his skills for saying what he already wanted to say."⁵³ The implication of this is that there is an unchanged continuity between Blake's pre-art world experience of popular culture and his representation of it through painting as if the category of "art" and its discursive and institutional structures, let alone the experience of learning specific painterly conventions and applying them in practice, meant nothing.

Derek Boshier and Richard Smith

The preceding discussion of paintings by Phillips and Blake has emphasized the need to treat such works of pop art as representations of the experience of popular culture and thus as distinct from these experiences despite the apparent directness of the iconic relationships presented by the paintings to their popular cultural referents. The following section will reinforce this approach through the close examination of works by Derek Boshier and Richard Smith; in particular, paintings produced by Boshier in 1962 while still a graduate student at the Royal College of Art, and works shown by Richard Smith at the Kasmin Gallery in London in November 1963. Both artists worked with an understanding of painting as a unique means of examining new forms of popular culture. Such understandings of painting as a powerful means of representing contemporary popular culture

need to be linked to wider conceptions of painting as a cultural tradition, the legitimacy of which was reinforced by various institutionally embedded practices of teaching, collecting, display, and artwriting. The British pop artists might have resisted their association with this tradition at times,⁵⁴ yet this did not mean that their work was not located within it by the very fact that they made paintings. For Boshier and Smith, painting was an expressive and affective medium, but also a “way of seeing” that allowed them different kinds of insight into popular culture. In Boshier’s case a play on relationships between literal flatness and implied depth within his work allowed him to explore issues of psychological manipulation in advertising. For Smith, painting was envisaged as a means of separating the popular cultural medium from its message and focusing attention on the generic visual phenomena produced by popular culture. In their different ways both artists adopted a conventional artistic stance through which painting was a means of seeing beyond the “surface” of the everyday. Such understandings of pop art painting reinforced the longstanding and thoroughly institutionalized notion of the artist as a person who could see and feel with greater depth than other people.

Boshier’s paintings from 1962 combine different motifs and effects, mixing the flatbed approach with seemingly expressive brushstrokes, and with an almost surrealistic attitude toward the representation of contemporary society. These paintings have been placed within the category of pop art because of Boshier’s general concern with the mass media, but they contain no straightforward celebration of popular culture and Americanization as in many works by Hamilton and Blake, nor do they involve the exploration or exploitation of the spectacularization of women, as in works by Jones, Phillips, Boty, and Anthony Donaldson. Amongst these artists, Boshier stands out because his 1962 paintings attempt to represent what he perceived to be the negative effects of the proliferation of media images and consumerism, and as such, are the only examples of British pop art that present a politicized approach to popular culture. As Boshier observed, he “got interested in advertising through politics.”⁵⁵ This interest was of a limited nature, being derived from reading American books on the social influence of the mass media, including Marshall McLuhan’s *The Mechanical Bride* (1951), Vance Packard’s *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957), and Daniel Boorstin’s *The Image* (1962).⁵⁶ Although these texts were quite widely read, Boshier is the only artist who developed paintings from the ideas they contained.

One opening for the interpretation of Boshier’s 1962 paintings is his short statement in the catalogue for the group exhibition “Image in Progress” held at the Grabowski Gallery:

The figure, features in my paintings as a symbol of “self-identification”. It represents me (us), the spectator, participant, player, or cog in the wheel – the amorphous “us”. The figures are placed in, against, or become part of a background, being manipulated, within “happenings”. These happenings reflect on the ironic, ambiguous, satirical, and the instability of situations. The figures are a self-reflection in a visual, yet ambiguous psychoanalysis.⁵⁷



FIG. 7.1 Derek Boshier: *The Identi-Kit Man*, oil on canvas, 1830×1832 mm, 1962.
Source: © Derek Boshier and Tate, London 2011.

The “us” in this statement defines a collective susceptible to the influences of the mass media and the forces of Americanization.⁵⁸ The figures in the paintings thus function as generic humans who are subject to and part of what J. B. Priestley termed “the Admass.”⁵⁹ The use of the term “me (us)” articulates Boshier’s understanding that the paintings represented his own situation as well as that of the collective and thus involved “self-identification.”⁶⁰ This concern with relationships between the mass media and the collective “spectator, participant, player, or cog in the wheel” was linked to practices of psychological manipulation in the contemporary media. Boshier defines these acts of manipulation as embodied in his paintings as “happenings.” Smith also used this term in 1962 to describe Boshier’s paintings, making a link to the performance based Happenings recently developed in the USA by artists such as Claes Oldenburg.⁶¹ Through the notion of the “happening” the paintings are understood by Boshier as pictorial equivalents to interactions between spectators and media images – kinds of Admass event involving participation, like the audience participation of the new artistic Happenings, but also psychological persuasion.

This subject can be explored in detail by concentrating on Boshier’s painting *The Identi-Kit Man* (Fig. 7.1). Much of this relatively large canvas is covered in

brushstrokes of light toned washy paint that run diagonally from the top left to the bottom right. Arranged on this ground are three giant green toothbrushes brushing a central humanoid figure with two limbs of striped toothpaste painted in white and red impasto. The torso and detached head are also painted in thick white paint, which, like the red and white stripes, stands out against the thinner paint of the ground. Black lines define the edges of the figure, the toothpaste limbs, the brushes, and also delineate a number of jigsaw puzzle pieces, one of which contains the central figure. Another small white jigsaw piece appears to have become detached from the lower body of the figure leaving a hole through which the ground of the painting can be seen. The white jigsaw piece is connected to the eye of the figure by a straight black line. Also notable are a number of tiny schematic figures falling from the larger figure. How might this complex configuration be interpreted in relation to Boshier's "Image in Progress" statement and his concerns with psychology and the mass media? Packard's book *The Hidden Persuaders* with its focus on the psychological manipulation of people by the media is of particular importance for answering this question. The premise of the book is that the need on the part of American corporations to create new consumer markets and differentiate increasingly similar brands has led to the development of a new set of manipulative selling strategies, involving psychological techniques such as the "depth interview" and the "depth study."⁶² These techniques, performed by people Packard calls the "depth persuaders" and "depth probers"⁶³ – the "depth men" of another of Boshier's 1962 paintings entitled *So Ad Men Became Depth Men* – seek to discover the subconscious desires and fears of consumers so that advertisements can be constructed to maximum effect by establishing the right "psychological hook."⁶⁴ According to Packard these developments were being extended to other aspects of American social life, for example into the world of politics,⁶⁵ and constituted a "Big Brother"-like invasion of the privacy of the mind⁶⁶ heralding an era of manipulated conformity and "group think."⁶⁷ This condition was also spreading beyond the USA, leading Packard to state in the preface to the British edition of his book, that "no one anywhere can be sure nowadays that he is not being worked upon by the depth persuaders."⁶⁸ It is this situation that appears to be the subject of *The Identi-Kit Man*. The main figure in the painting is pictured experiencing processes of manipulation, disintegration, and transformation. The figure is the "spectator" of the mass media, indicated by the sight line from the eye to the jigsaw piece, who looks upon his own manipulation.⁶⁹

Other aspects of the painting also fit with ideas presented in *The Hidden Persuaders*. The idea of the "identi-kit man," while referring to the recent British use of the police identikit,⁷⁰ also suggests the manufacture of identity in line with Packard's discussion of the corporate production of "custom-built men" and "team players."⁷¹ The motif of the jigsaw also suggests construction and manipulation while indicating entrapment through the location of the main figure within the giant jigsaw piece. The helplessness of the members of the Admass is also implied by the tiny falling figures. The toothpaste pictured in the painting – meant

to denote the “Stripe” brand marketed in the USA by Unilever⁷² – also involves resonances with Packard’s book. Although the manufacturers made therapeutic claims for the red stripe that was added to the white paste as it was squeezed from the tube, its primary function was as a means of differentiating the product from other brands. It was this visual differentiation that probably attracted Boshier to this subject. The toothpaste is both product and promotional image at the same time. The combination of toothpaste and figure in the painting suggests the psychological conflation of the consumer/spectator with the product/image. Through the process of psychological manipulation the identity of the consumer becomes enmeshed with the manipulative process and with the commodity and its promotional images.

Having discussed certain figurative elements of the *The Identi-Kit Man*, this discussion of Boshier’s representation of Packard’s ideas can be extended by examining how these motifs function in relation to the painterly ground of the work. As Boshier observes in his statement, the figures in his paintings “are placed in, against, or become part of a background,” suggesting a certain ambiguity in terms of figure/ground relationships. The ground of *The Identi-Kit Man* is also ambiguous: it is emphatically flat, yet the rough brushstrokes create a kind of “atmosphere” around the figure and other objects. Thus the ground of the painting is both flat in line with contemporary understanding of “advanced” painting and the flatbed approach, while also being something into which motifs can disappear. The toothbrushes and the figure of the identi-kit man, with his toothpaste limbs, clearly lie “against” the ground, yet the large jigsaw piece containing the figure, the smaller jigsaw piece at the top right, and the small falling figures are all merely black outlines painted over the ground so that they seem to be “in” it. In addition to this, there is a figure drawn in black outline but over-painted with the ground that is barely visible behind the main figure and a jigsaw piece that is almost entirely obscured by over-painting to the right of the handle of the toothbrush at the top of the painting. These over-painted elements may be the traces of an earlier state of the painting, but their partial visibility enhances the sense that the ground is a kind of atmospheric fog that figures can “become part of.” In light of Boshier’s interest in psychological manipulation derived from *The Hidden Persuaders*, it is appropriate to consider these different figure/ground relationships in *The Identi-Kit Man* in relation to Packard’s ideas about the “new language of depth”⁷³ used by the advertising and public relations industries. This link to Packard suggests that the ground is an integral aspect of the “happening” presented by the painting and that the painterly “atmosphere” into which certain elements are disappearing functions as a metaphor for the “psychological depth” at which the manipulation of consumers and citizens occurs within the new advertising and public relations environment. The representation of this idea of psychological depth within the painting works through a contrast between the “surface” images painted in thick impasto, on the one hand, and the motifs that are within or going into the atmospheric ground and thus “beneath the surface of conscious life,”⁷⁴ on the other. The striped toothpaste limbs of the identi-kit man

relate the subject of the painting to branding strategies that formed part of the surface world of commodity aesthetics. Yet in the context of the overall painting these surface effects are also part of a submerged world of psychological forces. Thus the painting distinguishes surface from depth, while at the same time implicating the two. In the era of the “depth men” surface is depth. The advertising images that seem to be persuading the consumer at a conscious level are also understood to be working on the subconscious. What this suggests is that the toothpaste stripes might refer to the “Stripe” toothpaste brand, to something highly visible in the everyday consumerist world, but they are also part of the subconscious construction of the identi-kit man whose sense of self cannot be distinguished from the brand. The pictorial interplay between figure and brand, and between painterly surface and depth, enables Boshier to represent what he perceived to be a complex contemporary condition in which he was implicated, hence his observation that the figures in his paintings “are a self-reflection in a visual, yet ambiguous psychoanalysis.” This sense of ambiguity is powerfully embodied in the pictorial structure of *The Identi-Kit Man*, alongside a surreal sense of powerlessness in the face of the contemporary media.

Richard Smith was also interested in the mass media, especially modes of promotion linked to consumerism. Paintings such as *Revlon* (1961), *Billboard* (1961), *Flip Top* (1962), and *Product* (1962) refer to branding, promotional technologies, products, and product packaging. These elements of the consumerist and media landscape were addressed more subtly than in Boshier’s work. In Smith’s paintings there are no dramas of manipulation, yet the media remains his primary focus, making him equally appropriate to the canon of pop art. However, Smith has an ambiguous position within this category. On the one hand, it has been suggested by David Mellor that Smith’s work exists on a “borderline” between high and low culture.⁷⁵ On the other, Bryan Robertson has stressed that Smith’s paintings are entirely separate from their reference material and that Smith has “about as much connection with pop art as Bonnard has with kitchen appliances or bathroom fixtures.”⁷⁶ According to Robertson, Smith “purified” consumerist imagery, using it as a pretext for a kind of abstraction. A view also adopted by Barbara Rose when she suggested that Smith used popular culture “as a point of departure for pure abstraction.”⁷⁷ Smith’s work has therefore been taken to both destabilize the divide between fine art and popular culture and reinforce this boundary. How might the contradiction between these two interpretations be addressed? In line with the argument made so far in this chapter, it is appropriate to support Robertson’s contention that Smith’s work needs to be distinguished from the popular imagery it appropriated and not to adopt Mellor’s suggestion that Smith’s work exists on the borderline between the high and the low. In relation to the latter it might be asked: what is the nature of this borderline position? Does it involve a space defined by an institutional and discursive context, or does it merely reside iconically on the surface of the canvas through the painterly re-presentation of popular imagery? If the answer is the latter, then Smith’s paintings simply present imagery derived from the field of popular culture

within a high cultural context and thus not at a borderline at all. Having stated this, Robertson's attempt to cut Smith's paintings off from their popular cultural source material is also problematic. To solve this dilemma, it might be suggested that Smith's paintings are neither significant transgressions of the high/low divide nor attempts to produce forms of abstraction that just happen to have their starting point in the field of popular culture. Instead, Smith's paintings are attempts to utilize the tropes of contemporary abstraction as a means of representing specific aspects of popular culture.

Smith's practice between 1960 and 1963 involved an approach to popular culture that concentrated upon the techniques of the mass media rather than on specific media images. This was attested both in Smith's own statements and in criticism at the time. Smith wrote in 1963, "I paint about communication," and that: "My interest is not in the message so much as the method."⁷⁸ Smith was also concerned with the increasing mediation of reality by mass produced visual imagery, thus he observed in 1966 that he saw "fruit as fruit photographed rather than set out in reality on a greengrocer's stall."⁷⁹ Such preoccupations with medium seem to distinguish Smith's paintings from the apparent focus on the overt content of popular culture in the work of Blake and Phillips, though as has been suggested, Blake was also interested in the ways that pictorial strategies could be used to represent the visual relationships of fandom. Smith's concentration on the medium over the message might therefore provide us with an extreme example of what was a wider, though under-discussed, aspect of British pop art concerned with the generic forms and mechanisms of popular culture. This is clearly something important to Hamilton's work with his concern to combine different pictorial conventions and visual techniques derived from popular culture in his paintings.⁸⁰ Discussing Smith's paintings can allow us to focus on the ways that pop art was about using the practice of painting as a kind of meta-language to examine the modes of an increasingly image-based everyday life. Smith's apparent abstraction of media imagery therefore highlights the painterly nature of pop art in a comparable though different way to Boshier. What Robertson identifies as the purification of popular cultural imagery in Smith's work is therefore better understood as a more extensive application of the potential for "advanced" painting practices developed out of postwar abstraction to re-present contemporary visual culture. If other artists adopted the flatbed approach to organize the imagery on the surface of the obligatory "flat" painting, Smith took up the challenge of recent abstraction more fully. His concern was to find a way to adapt the formal resources presented by wider developments in postwar European and American art to the task of constructing adequate pictorial equivalents to what he saw as the core elements of contemporary mass-mediated experience.

In a short review of the 1963 Kasmin Gallery exhibition, an anonymous writer for the London-based fashion magazine *Vogue* was particularly perceptive about Smith's work, suggesting in terms reminiscent of Marx's analysis of "The fetishism of the commodity and its secret",⁸¹ that the artist addressed consumer goods and attendant imagery by revealing "their mysteries and concealments."⁸² Yet

what was “concealed” was not the labor involved in the production of commodities or some hidden act of persuasion. The “mysteries” that Smith’s paintings were meant to reveal were the underlying aesthetic structures, scopic relationships, and visual technologies related to consumer products and media images. The way that Smith schematized the forms of product packaging, dislocated colors from their original contexts, and painted generic box forms, suggested to Robertson and Rose that he was engaging in a process of pure abstraction. But this interpretation was only half right. Smith was engaging in a process of abstraction, but not with the aim of removing the visual phenomena of the world into an imagined space of aesthetic autonomy. Rather Smith was concerned with using processes of relative abstraction to reveal something of the vernacular visual world. The aim was to get closer to the everyday world – to visually penetrate its surface – rather than remove oneself from it. Painting always involves a process of distancing and abstraction from its subject matter, but here distance was exactly what enabled a condensation of the visual order of popular culture.

In an article entitled “Trailer,” written in 1963, Smith asked the question: “Can how something is communicated be divorced from what is being communicated, and can it be divorced from who it is being communicated to?”⁸³ What this suggests is that Smith clearly saw his paintings as separated from their subject matter, including the audiences of popular culture. He viewed his work as being firmly located within the space of fine art and thus at a point in the cultural continuum from which he could re-present the phenomena presented by the mass media to a different audience. His intention was not art free of reference, but work able to “re-process” and “re-communicate”⁸⁴ the communications of popular culture in a different context. What we have in Smith’s work is precisely the kind of relationship that was structural to pop art: a relationship involving the representation of popular cultural forms in the context of high art. The critical tendency to treat Smith’s paintings as abstractions was a virtual inversion of the tendency to treat more apparently literal forms of pop art as somehow synonymous with their reference material. One tendency pushed art as far away from popular culture as it could, while the other tried to push art, at least partially, into the field of popular culture. What was avoided through both critical strategies is precisely what has been argued in this essay, that fundamental to pop art was the use of the practice of painting to address and represent popular culture and that such acts of representation found their logic, meaning, and cultural authority within the institutional network that defined the art world.

Smith displayed eight pieces at the Kasmin Gallery in late 1963 that were part of a larger body of work produced that year. Most of the works in the exhibition involved some form of extension of the conventional two-dimensional painting, though strictly speaking *Re-Place* was a freestanding sculpture, only a small part of which was attached to the gallery wall. The other works involved either a combination of a wall-mounted canvas and three-dimensional extension into the gallery space (*Surfacing*, *Piano*, *Gift Wrap*), or an extension of the canvas to create an unconventional two-dimensional form (*Fleetwood*, *Pagoda*, *Staggerly*). The

exception was *Lonely Surfer*, which was a portrait format rectangular canvas. All of the works in the exhibition, in one way or another, addressed the modes of the mass media, or presented metaphors for current ideas within the advertising and entertainment industries about relationships between mass media forms and their audiences. In particular cases, motifs derived from product packaging or directly related to products were present (the cigarette packets in *Gift Wrap* and *Staggerly*, and the circles denoting the ends of cigarettes in *Piano*), but in most of the works the relationship to the media and consumerist culture was represented through the format of the work rather than through specific appropriated imagery.

The painting *Fleetwood* entails two interlinked elements: a rectangular canvas upon which are depicted a series of roughly rendered isometric boxes that diminish in size, one inside the next, and a six-sided “shaped” – meaning not a square or a rectangle – extension of this rectangle that defines a further box in isometric projection. In this “shaped” element of the work the box is literally the shape of the canvas. This shape replicates the shape of the boxes depicted within the lower rectangular canvas. The theme of the work in terms of its relationship to consumer culture is the box as packaging and image. Smith articulated this point in 1966:

The carton is an incessant theme in present-day civilization: shops are full of boxes and you see these before you see the goods; they practically stand in for the goods... Everything comes in boxes: you buy boxes when you are shopping... The box is your image of the product.⁸⁵

For Smith, the box is a crucial element of and symbol for consumer culture. The way that the isometric boxes are presented as both depicted forms contained by the rectangular canvas and as a form defined by the “shaped” support of the painting is itself meant to embody and symbolize the ways that boxes project images for products by standing in for them. This pictorial configuration was enabled by the combination of Smith’s existing painting practice with the “shaped” canvas recently developed by Frank Stella, amongst others, as part of contemporary abstractionist practice. Smith’s engagement with the theme of the box within consumer culture was therefore thoroughly enmeshed with a concern with contemporary developments in painting and with how novel pictorial strategies could enable the development of an adequate means of representing contemporary cultural phenomena.

In the works involving a three-dimensional extension, ideas about media presentation and projection were literalized in a different way to the “shaped” aspect of *Fleetwood*, with three-dimensional forms confronting the spectator within non-pictorial space and potentially demanding different relationships between the beholder and the work of art. This three-dimensional projection from the conventional picture plane suggests Smith’s sense of the social impact of the mass media and the ways in which media practices encouraged a shift in consciousness on the part of the consumer, something that linked Smith’s work however generally to that of Boshier. The three-dimensional “box” attached to the rectangular

canvas in *Surfacing* projects out toward the viewer, presenting the “ultimate ‘close-up’” of the painted form in Barbara Rose’s words.⁸⁶ The painting literally “surfaces” out of the two-dimensional canvas, with the form painted on the two-dimensional rectangle being continued on the three-dimensional box. The relationship between the work and its title also suggests that *Surfacing* is concerned with both the way that boxes stand in as a kind of surface image for products and perhaps more reflexively the way that the practice of painting can bring to the surface the underlying aesthetics of consumerist communications. As with *Fleetwood*, this work appears to make reference to contemporary abstract painting, specifically to certain paintings by Kenneth Noland involving chevrons. Understood in these terms the “surfacing” presented by the work involves a complex interplay between the surface of the work as an equivalent for media spectacle and at the same time its underlying aesthetic armature, and this surface as a citation of “advanced” painting. In this way an abstractionist motif becomes the means of symbolizing consumerist experience. Here the agency of the artist is not only framed by the fine art context, but involves an overt and creative reworking of existing artistic practices.

Conclusion

The very existence of pop art suggests that there is no clear dividing line between high and popular culture outside of idealizations of the high/low divide, and that the boundaries that this ideal attempted to secure between Levine’s “cultural territories” were often transgressed in one way or another. Nevertheless, the example of British pop art also suggests that it is necessary to be careful about what these transgressions amounted to. For one thing, as noted earlier, for a boundary to be transgressed it must continue to have some sort of existence and import. Being careful in this way is a matter of taking into account the institutional conditions of painting as an art form and as a consequence accounting for its position within a matrix of cultural value, yet it is more importantly a matter of attending to what examples of British pop art painting amount to as paintings as opposed to anything else. This also means that the agency of the British pop artists was inextricably enmeshed with that changing but consistently honorific tradition called painting. A brushstroke in a painting by Boshier or Smith was the product of a specific process of painterly application and of the painter’s understanding of the relationship between particular kinds of painterly marks and meaning. Such a brushstroke would mean specific things for particular art world denizens – other artists, dealers, critics, curators, and aficionados of contemporary art – who might recognize it as a sign of contemporariness in art, or of other things, such as expressiveness, “action,” and the value of emphasizing the flatness of the painting, or perhaps as some kind of equivalent to the affective qualities of mass media forms. Yet this brushstroke and every other brushstroke in all the paintings produced by Boshier and Smith during the early 1960s also implicitly carried the connotative

weight of painting as an institutionally maintained tradition. The point is that to represent images and products that exist within the field of popular culture in a painting is to figuratively transfer them into an evaluative regime in which painting not only refers to its ostensive subjects or to the connotations of contemporary painting practice, but to the generic value of painting – a value that is maintained by all the institutions of art. Thus the relocation of popular cultural motifs into paintings involves a continuing iconic connection to popular culture, but also the imbrication of these motifs within the tradition of painting and the artistic institutions with which it is enmeshed. The agency of the pop artist and the representational power of pop art are to be identified at this complex point of intersection between iconic referents found in the field of popular culture, individual painterly practices, the tradition of painting, and the institutional structures that maintain this tradition both as a canon of great works and as a changing set of painterly and representational strategies.

Notes

- 1 It should be noted that the phrase “popular culture” is used as a convenient catch-all category for a wide range of cultural practices without assuming that it defines anything other than a collective distinction from those cultural forms conventionally defined as high culture. The historical nature of the high/low cultural divide remains a matter for research and debate. See Frow, J. (1995) *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 60–88.
- 2 Collins, J. (1991) “Appropriating like *krazy*: from pop art to meta-pop,” in J. Naremore and P. Brantlinger (eds) *Modernity and Mass Culture*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 209.
- 3 Collins (1991), 221.
- 4 See Kalina, R. (2006) “Critical commentary: imagining the present,” in R. Kalina (ed.) *Imagining the Present: Context, Content, and the Role of the Critic. Essays by Lawrence Alloway*, London and New York: Routledge, 2. See also Livingstone, M. (1990) *Pop Art: a Continuing History*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 33. These attributions follow Alloway’s own claims in his writing to have invented the term pop art. See Alloway, L. (1966) “The development of British pop,” in L. R. Lippard (ed.) *Pop Art*, London: Thames and Hudson, 27; Alloway, L. (2006) “Pop art: the words,” in R. Kalina (ed.) *Imagining the Present: Context, Content, and the Role of the Critic. Essays by Lawrence Alloway*, London and New York: Routledge, 147–150.
- 5 Alloway, “The development of British pop,” 27.
- 6 Alloway, “The development of British pop,” 27.
- 7 Alloway, “Pop art: the words,” 148.
- 8 Alloway, L. ([1959] 2006) “The long front of culture,” in R. Kalina (ed.) *Imagining the Present: Context, Content, and the Role of the Critic. Essays by Lawrence Alloway*, London and New York: Routledge, 61.
- 9 Alloway, “The long front of culture,” 61.
- 10 Williams, R. (1961) *The Long Revolution*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 57.
- 11 Alloway, “The long front of culture,” 62.

- 12 Alloway, L. (2006) "The arts and the mass media," in R. Kalina (ed.) *Imagining the Present: Context, Content, and the Role of the Critic. Essays by Lawrence Alloway*, London and New York: Routledge, 58.
- 13 Alloway, "Pop art: the words," 147.
- 14 See Alloway, L. (2006) "'Pop art' since 1949," in R. Kalina (ed.) *Imagining the Present: Context, Content, and the Role of the Critic. Essays by Lawrence Alloway*, London and New York: Routledge, 85; Kalina, R. (2006) "Critical commentary: imagining the present," in R. Kalina (ed.) *Imagining the Present: Context, Content, and the Role of the Critic. Essays by Lawrence Alloway*, London and New York: Routledge, 15–16, 19, 24.
- 15 See Alloway, "Pop art: the words," 148; Alloway, L. ([1971] 2006) "Anthropology and art criticism", in R. Kalina (ed.), 171–176.
- 16 Hamilton, R. (1983) *Collected Words: 1953–1982*, London: Thames and Hudson, 31.
- 17 Hamilton (1983) "An exposition of *\$he*," in R. Hamilton, *Collected Words: 1953–1982*, London: Thames and Hudson, 35–38.
- 18 Hamilton, "An exposition of *\$he*," 37.
- 19 Pollock, G. (1996) "Agency and the avant-garde: studies in authorship and history by way of Van Gogh," in F. Orton and G. Pollock, *Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 316.
- 20 See Baxandall, M. (1985) *Patterns of Intention: on the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 41–73.
- 21 Butler, J. (2004) *Precarious Life: the Powers of Mourning and Violence*, London and New York: Verso, 11.
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- 60 In 1962 Boshier alluded to the self-referential nature of his paintings: "I feel happier if I can identify myself with a situation." Whittet, G. S. (1962) "Two new imagists at the Grabowski," *The Studio*, 835, XIV, 194.
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- 62 Packard, V. (1961) *The Hidden Persuaders*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 38 and 81.
- 63 Packard (1961), 9 and 15.
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- 65 See Packard (1961), 149–164.
- 66 Packard (1961), 12, 190, 193.
- 67 Packard (1961), 165.
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- 69 This element of the painting might also relate to Packard's discussion of the design of "deep-impact" product packaging which involved "ocular or eye-movement tests to show how the consumer's eye will travel over the package on the shelf." Packard (1961), 95.
- 70 The metropolitan police first used the Identikit developed in the USA to solve the murder of Elsie Batten in March 1961. An Identikit portrait of the assailant was produced from the statements of witnesses and printed in the press, leading to his arrest. Retrieved from www.met.police.uk/history on September 4, 2012.
- 71 Packard (1961), 13 and 165–176. Packard's discussion of the psychological training of middle class children in *The Status Seekers*, might also be relevant here. Packard, V. (1961) *The Status Seekers*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 198–203.
- 72 Marco Livingstone wrongly identifies the toothpaste brand as "Signal." See Livingstone (1990), 104. The same mistake is made in the Tate Gallery catalogue of new acquisitions for the period between 1970 and 1972. This is quoted in *Derek Boshier: Selected Drawings: 1960–1982*, unpaginated. "Signal" was the name given to the "Stripe" toothpaste brand when it began to be marketed in Europe and the UK in 1965.
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- 77 Rose, B. (1963) "New York letter," *Art International*, VII/325, 65.
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- 80 See Hamilton, "An exposition of She," 38.
- 81 See Marx, K. (1994) "Capital Volume One (selections)," in L. H. Simon (ed.) *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 230–243.
- 82 *Vogue*, November 1963, 5.
- 83 Smith (1963), 29.
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When Attitudes Became Formless

Art and Antagonism in the 1960s

Jo Applin

In 1966, British artist John Latham borrowed a copy of American critic Clement Greenberg's seminal book *Art and Culture* from the library at St. Martins' School of Art in London. Latham was lecturing at St. Martins' part-time and, at a party, invited a group of his students to join him in a "chew-in," during which the participants set about tearing the pages from the book and chewing them up, enacting an aggressive attack on the materiality of the text, but more importantly, providing a visceral critique of Greenberg's theory of modernism. Latham took the resulting pulp and distilled it into a clear liquid over the course of several months. He then returned the "book," in its altered state, to the library. Ultimately, Latham's act cost him more than an overdue library fine: his conceptual assault on Greenberg's writing was condemned as vandalism of college property, and his teaching contract was not renewed.

Greenberg's writing championed American modernist painting, particularly abstract expressionism, which since the late 1940s had been established as the foremost idiom of advanced artistic practice. Consequently it was the major artistic form with which the younger generation of artists had to contend. The large-scale paintings by artists including Franz Kline, Mark Rothko, and Jackson Pollock consisted of surfaces covered with drips, stains, pours, and puddles of paint, creating blanket fields of color. Due in no small part to Greenberg's influence, abstract expressionism gained rapid critical and commercial success, and to this day is represented strongly in the modern collections of institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. Somewhat ironically, Latham's work, titled, after Greenberg's book, *Still and Chew/Art and Culture* (1966–1969), is now displayed as a series of glass phials stored in a small display box with a copy of Greenberg's book in the collection of MoMA – historically the institution that is most

closely associated with the model of modernism Latham had comprehensively rejected by chewing it up and spitting it out. The title itself conjures up a relation of action and inaction, of painterly stillness and bodily exertion that might read also as a comment on abstract expressionism as it was defined by modernist criticism.

This chapter is about how the artwork became subject to a range of formal and conceptual pressures in London during the 1960s. I focus on the British art scene's fraught encounter with American modernism, in particular the institutional channels through which the main tenets of that model of modernism were disseminated. I begin with a look at the arrival and reception of American modernism in London and the ways in which the new, large abstract paintings impacted upon the younger generation of British artists then at art school, and the various ways and means through which they negotiated a relationship with that model of painterly abstraction, grandiosity, and monumental scale. The institutional framework through which those ideas were circulated will be tracked from the studio practice as it began to take shape under the direction of Anthony Caro at St. Martin's in central London, before moving across town to explore the development of a distinctive brand of British pop art that was being produced at the same time by a group of students at the Royal College of Art. What I hope to make clear is the extent to which institutional frameworks, from commercial art galleries to art schools, were central to the development of the British modernist school of art, albeit one comprising a number of schisms and divergent practices. In fact it is the antagonistic nature of those exchanges between America and Britain that governed much artistic output during this period, and it is on this aspect that I will focus. Finally, I will look at how the London art scene staged an assault on both the dominance of the monumental modernist work of art and also on the very status of the object of art itself; first, through a consideration of the various events surrounding the international "Destruction in Art Symposium" series of events that took place in London in 1966; and second, through a discussion of another international event, the conceptual exhibition "When Attitudes Became Form," held at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London, in 1969.¹

My intention is certainly not to describe the British art scene as simply a watered down version or weak imitation of American modernism – far from it. Throughout the 1960s, artists in both Britain and America moved away from monolithic abstract painting toward a radical reconfiguration of the object as variously bodily, performative, contingent, and even destructive; enacting, that is, an assault on the very *idea* of art. The artists I discuss also articulated, in different ways, a combative relationship to their American peers that was marked not by what Harold Bloom, in his famous account of artistic influence termed "anxiety," but by antagonism, and a deliberately subversive and dynamic encounter with the main tenets of modernist practice.² While in retrospect, Latham's gesture of eating Greenberg's words and distilling them to their essence seems more a canonizing than iconoclastic gesture, it makes clear the hostile relationship that the younger

generation of British artists imagined themselves as locked into with those artists celebrated in Greenberg's model of modernism.

Art and Culture was the title of a collection of Greenberg's art criticism that was published in New York in 1961. Included in this volume were many of his most polemic and important essays including "Avant-garde and kitsch," "The plight of culture," "The new sculpture," "The crisis in the easel picture" and "American-type painting." It was through *Art and Culture* that Greenberg's formalist strictures governing the modernist work of art were first made readily accessible to artists and students based outside of New York, a city that had quickly established itself as the international center of the avant-garde after the end of World War II. Greenberg's theories were set out most programmatically in his 1960 essay titled "Modernist painting," in which a formalist account of the history of painting is offered. "Modernist painting" developed out of an earlier argument by Greenberg published in 1939 in *Partisan Review* called "Avant-garde and kitsch," in which he argued that for its own sake, art must be protected from serving the interests of the bourgeoisie (although he does acknowledge the invisible link between art and external forces, what he called the "golden umbilical cord" connecting artists to the art market).³

Some 20 years after "Avant-garde and kitsch," and a certain relaxation of his previously politically charged polemics, Greenberg instead insisted that art attend carefully to its own condition as painting. Greenberg argued that art had to do away with figurative description and the traditional notion that painting should function as a mirror on the world reflecting scenes structured according to the dissembling rhetoric of the classical tradition, employing categories such as perspective, scale, and narrative. Painting now, in order to protect its status *as* painting, needed to adhere to its own rules and formal properties. Greenberg famously defined the essence of modernism as "the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself – not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence."⁴

By the time of writing "Modernist painting" Greenberg had turned his attentions away from literature and a somewhat broad notion of "the arts" in general to focus on painting. It is worth noting at this point that interestingly, sculpture gets pretty short shrift at Greenberg's hands, with very few sculptors passing muster under his strict modernist paradigm of opticality. For Greenberg painting must shake off all extraneous elements not essential and specific to the medium of painting itself, a kind of purging that would ultimately lead to something like a "pure" and protected or "entrenched" position, precisely the modernist "essence" lampooned by Latham. As well as supporting American painters such as Pollock, Greenberg also championed the later abstraction of European artists such as Piet Mondrian and the early cubist paintings by Picasso and Braque as early instances of a modernist drive toward a mode of painting that addressed itself not only to its own material properties as painting, but to the flat, two-dimensional support of its surface.

Opticality and “the Eye/Body” Problem

One year prior to Latham’s “chew-in” at St. Martin’s, British artist Bridget Riley had been included in MoMA’s large-scale “Op Art” group exhibition “The Responsive Eye,” a show that included works by an international range of artists including the Venezuelan Rafael Soto and the Belgian artist Pol Bury. One of Riley’s famous black and white abstract paintings was selected to adorn the cover of the accompanying catalogue.⁵ This show is now considered to be the first major “op art” exhibition, and although Riley was later to reject the “op art” label, her dazzling geometric patterns, with their striking repetition of forms in skewed checkerboard formations, remain some of the memorable icons of the era.

The effect of Riley’s paintings is disorienting, although apparently achieved through deceptively simple means, by painting alternative sections in black and white. Paintings such as *Hesitate* from 1964 seem to undulate and move, shimmering before the eyes. They are slippery objects to gain a firm hold of, as they generate an optical experience that seems to both ape, yet also exceed, the visual encounter offered by their abstract expressionist counterparts. Unlike Jackson Pollock’s paint-splattered, poured, and puckered canvases or Mark Rothko’s layered and stained paintings, Riley’s abstraction does not sit still and arrest our attention. Her paintings do not offer a contemplative mode of viewing, and nor do they slowly reveal themselves as, say, paintings by either Rothko or Pollock are often described as doing. Riley’s op art generates an active mode of viewing that affects both the eye and the body, and involves the spectator in an encounter that is closer to a visceral, physical assault than Formalist “opticality.”⁶

Such an account of Riley’s work as “assaulting” the viewer is not as far-fetched as it might sound. Contemporary press reviews of *The Responsive Eye* wondered about the potentially harmful impact Riley’s paintings might have (as one reviewer put it in 1965, “I think I’m going to be sick”).⁷ It is interesting that this concern had not been previously voiced about the work of earlier abstraction, much of which figured equally violent or aggressive imagery and processes of production; just think of Pollock hurling paint at the canvas pinned to the floor, or Clifford Still’s jagged painterly slashes that seem to tear the canvas surface. The set of terms that developed out of these exchanges between British and North American art in the 1960s took, in Riley’s case, a decidedly aggressive, violent, and bodily turn, seemingly pitched against the celebratory and grandiose abstraction of her male modernist peers.

Writing in the early 1960s, modernist critic and art-historian Michael Fried emphasized the purely “optical” aspect of the abstract painting of the next generation of American abstract painters working in the years just after the height of abstract expressionism. Fried built on Greenberg’s claims, arguing that what distinguished modernist painting was the way in which it succeeded in addressing “eyesight alone.”⁸ While Greenberg’s theories found their postwar apogee works by Pollock of the late 1940s and 1950s (Pollock died in 1956), Fried championed the second generation of color-field abstractionists, focusing on Kenneth Noland’s

target and chevron paintings, Morris Louis' poured stained "veils," and Jules Olitski's paint-soaked canvases. In these works, perspective, scale, and narrative were replaced with a mode of abstract painting that literally let the paint seep into and stain the canvas, so that support and surface became one and the same.

In April 1963, the Kasmin Gallery held the first solo exhibition of Kenneth Noland's abstract paintings. Kasmin quickly established itself as an important venue, hosting exhibitions by a range of British artists as well as promoting the work of American modernist painters such as Noland ("Clem's boys," as Kasmin put it) and introducing their work to the London art scene.⁹ The gallery was located in a newly constructed building boasting high white walls, with the lighting provided by a series of electrically controlled louvers in the ceiling windows. This was a pristine white cube designed specifically with the viewing of modernist large-scale paintings in mind, a curatorial strategy that was by this time already recognized as the ideal institutional viewing environment for such works.¹⁰ Unlike the disorienting effect of Riley's geometric abstraction, Noland's targets and chevrons, painted in bright primary colors and soaked directly into the canvas offered a more stable and autonomous point of view. For Fried in particular, this work offered a viewpoint cut off from the everyday, ordinary mode of looking that other objects in the world (and other kinds of painting) allowed. Fried's argument, in which he presses the aspect of the "optical" further than even Greenberg had done, is a highly compelling one. For our purposes here, what is important to register is the extent to which, for the modernist account, the body *did not matter*. Modernist criticism was concerned only with the visual effect of paintings and the way in which they registered optically for the viewer, with no sense of how they might physically locate the viewer, or whether they might in fact disorient the spectator, as Riley had done, with the visual effects of her work exceeding the purely optical to physically impact upon the spectator, causing dizziness and even nausea.

Another way of putting this would be to say that the body is repressed in the modernist account, a kind of "blind spot" in its narrative that privileges only the visual effect of works of art.¹¹ The physical, lived encounter with the work of art that takes place over time, and which is experienced by real, physical bodies, was excluded in Greenberg and Fried's accounts. Riley's work dramatizes precisely this failure, which was later expanded upon by minimalist artists working in New York via their employment of industrially produced and serially repeated units of wood, metal, polystyrene, and bricks. Of course, Greenberg and Fried did not actually think that we see works of art as though disembodied floating eyes. The point for them is that the best works of art address themselves to vision alone – that is what makes painting a distinct category. The phenomenological encounter with an object that three-dimensional works of art necessitated was fundamentally different from, opposed to, even, the kind of experience modernist painting purportedly offers. Greenberg and Fried were, needless to say, extremely critical of minimalist art and in 1967 both published now-famous essays attacking minimalist objects that, for them, simply did not register as works of art.¹²

While Noland's show at Kasmin was an important exhibition for introducing the new abstract painting to the contemporary art scene, this was not the first time London had been exposed to American modernism. In 1956 the work of Pollock and Rothko had been included in the show "Modern Art in the United States" at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, a venue that quickly established itself as important in the dissemination of contemporary American art. Two years later London hosted a retrospective of Pollock's work, and in 1959 he was a key figure in Tate's "New American Painting." These shows had a powerful impact on the younger generation of artists trying to carve out an artistic identity in Britain. Throughout the 1960s there were a number of exhibitions in London devoted to abstract expressionism: Mark Rothko, Mark Tobey, Philip Guston, Franz Kline, and Robert Motherwell each had solo shows at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1961, 1962, 1963, 1964, and 1966, respectively, and Arshile Gorky had a retrospective at the Tate Gallery in 1965.

In 1960 the small but influential exhibition "Situation" opened at the Royal Society of British Artists (RBA) Galleries, an exhibition of hard-edged geometric and color-field paintings by British artists that signaled a period of intense and productive exchange and dialogue between artists based in Britain and America. The remit of the show was explicit – works included were to be "abstract [...] and not less than 30 square feet."¹³ Artists in the show included Bernard Cohen, Robyn Denny, Gordon House, Henry Mundy, William Turnbull, and Gillian Ayres. Of all the works included in this exhibition, Ayres' abstract canvases were the most expressive and perhaps also closer to an earlier model of abstraction than works by others in the show that were related more to the second generation of geometric or color-field painters such as Noland and Louis. There were two more "Situation" shows, one called "New London Situation" held at the Marlborough commercial gallery in 1961 and the other, "Situation," an Arts Council exhibition that opened in 1962.

Roger Coleman, the curator of "Situation," made explicit the relationship of the show to the autonomous, self-referential nature of the works, placing them in close dialogue with Greenberg's modernism. He also, however, highlighted the ways in which the scale of the works generated a "situation." This term lent the works an environmental aspect that suggested the artists' physical relationship to the process of making the painting and also, importantly, the way in which the spectator becomes included within that environment in a physical, embodied way. This shift toward thinking about the art work as a "situation" was to become key for the new generation of sculptors in Britain, who became interested in how "all-over" optical affect could map onto an expanded field of vision that included not only the viewer's body, as Riley's work had done, but also the entirety of the room. This spatial turn became a mainstay of contemporary practice by the mid-1960s and accompanied the emergence of a minimalist aesthetic. It is to the three-dimensional object that I now turn, as I pay attention to what Alex Potts has recently termed the "phenomenological turn" art took during the 1960s, which we might consider a decidedly *bodily* turn.¹⁴

Art, Objecthood, and Modernist Sculpture

When the young British sculptor Anthony Caro returned from a visit to America in 1960, one of the first works he made was the painted steel sculpture *Twenty-Four Hours* (Fig. 8.1), a deceptively evocative title for a work consisting of three pieces of metal cut into flat geometric shapes, welded together and placed directly on the floor. *Twenty-Four Hours* is an abstract object consisting of a circle and two parallelograms of different proportions, standing at just under 1.5 meters high and just over 2 meters long. Although the work can be seen from all angles, with each new position opening up an alternative aspect, *Twenty-Four Hours* ultimately sets out to hold our attention frontally. We stand in front of the work as we would in front of a painting, with each of the flat metal shapes overlapping one another in an inert yet oddly charged encounter. For Fried, who became friendly with Caro while on a study fellowship as a graduate student in England between 1961 and 1962, Caro's work appeared to "float," providing a sculptural equivalent for the optical mode of abstract painting of Noland, Morris Louis, and Olitski that Fried was endorsing at that time.¹⁵

Prior to Caro's trip to the USA he had worked as an assistant to Henry Moore. During that time Caro absorbed Moore's lessons of figurative sculpture, truth

to materials, modeling in clay and casting in bronze. By 1960, however, Moore was considered something of an establishment dinosaur by Caro and his peers. Moore stood, in the eyes of the new generation of sculptors, for a kind of sculpture that was too outdated in terms of both ideas and choice of materials. His large, monolithic mother and child semi-abstract stone and bronze figures, his reclining nudes, and even his post-surrealist, biomorphic forms spoke of an earlier moment and set of concerns that would simply no longer do.¹⁶ The importance of Moore as an international figure at this time, however, cannot be underestimated – his public monuments adorned plazas in front of many civic and private buildings in Britain and America. In fact, alongside the impact of American



FIG. 8.1 Anthony Caro: *Twenty Four Hours*, painted steel, 1384×2235×838 mm, 1960, Tate, London.

Source: Photo: Barford Sculptures Ltd.

modernism on British art students in the early 1960s, and the series of transatlantic exchanges that were taking place between British and American artists, the legacy of Moore was also something all British sculptors had to contend with in what was to become a vividly charged Oedipal battle, as the younger generation began to dismantle the principles of modernist sculptural practice.

In America, Caro was exposed to a very different set of compositional strategies than those offered him by Moore's generation. Instead he turned to the early avant-garde work of the Russian constructivists, which had been reformulated in the hands of modernist sculptors such as David Smith, who was one of the few sculptors Greenberg actively championed, calling him in 1956 "the best sculptor of his generation."¹⁷ Smith's large welded metal sculptures generated an experience for the viewer that, for Greenberg, amounted to the three-dimensional equivalent of the painterly abstraction of modernist painting – the welded strips and geometric lines figuring as a kind of drawing in space. In America, Caro also met abstract expressionist painter Helen Frankenthaler (another early favorite of Greenberg) as well as Noland and Olitski. Caro clearly paid careful attention to the words of Greenberg whom he had met previously in London, when Greenberg had advised Caro to abandon his old, traditional ways of working to develop works such as *Twenty-Four Hours*. Caro later said that the lessons he learnt from American modernism were as much indebted to painting as sculpture. In an interview with Phyllis Tuchman in 1980, Caro claimed that it was "better to go to painting than to old sculpture because it gave one ideas about what to do but no direct instructions on how to do it."¹⁸ The point here is not that we should read Caro's works as "painterly," as if he simply transcribed two dimensions into three, but rather that for Caro, it seemed impossible at that time to imagine the "old sculpture" in a context that spoke to artists' contemporary concerns. Caro needed modernist painting as a way out of the trajectory Moore's work offered; to break with the "old sculpture" was only possible through the "ideas" the new painting offered.

Caro's use of industrial materials such as steel, and his rejection of humanistic sculptural practice quickly established him at the forefront of advanced art in both Britain and America. Just before Fried left England, Caro asked him to write the essay for his forthcoming exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, to be held between September and October 1963. A version of the essay was also published in that month's *Art International*, securing an international reputation for Caro's work.¹⁹ Along with the work of David Smith, Caro's abstract metal sculptures signaled a radical shift, as the younger generation began to move away from the model of sculptural form and "direct carving" they had inherited from artists such as Barbara Hepworth, Ben Nicholson, and Moore. "I'm not interested in monuments," Caro told critic Lawrence Alloway in 1961. "I'm fed up with objects on pedestals. I'd like to break down the graspability of sculpture."²⁰ In this statement Caro voices a concern shared with others in his peer group, both in the USA and in Britain. By moving away from a monumental format and scale, as well as breaking down the boundaries of what precisely a "sculpture" could be,

these artists began to draw not only upon alternative modes of modernist abstract construction and composition, but also upon “low” forms of popular culture.

Pop Goes London: Transatlantic Exchange and the Anxiety of Influence

While Caro and his peers and students looked to the field of “high” art, such as the abstract sculptures by Smith, another group of London-based artists at the Royal College of Art (RCA), were also engaged in a dialogue with American art, although in this instance it was to the emerging pop art scene, typified by the screen prints and paintings of Andy Warhol, James Rosenquist, and Roy Lichtenstein that mimicked the appearance of comic strips, magazines and advertising, and other recognizable images culled from mass culture. Artists at the RCA were also looking at the work of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, whose work in the mid-1950s in New York had similarly sought to critique the abstract grandiosity of Pollock’s generation through the introduction of stenciled text, numbers, and pasted paper and clothing into their abstract color-field works and collage-like “combines,” as Rauschenberg called his assemblages.²¹

At the RCA a group of artists began to develop their own brand of British pop art, with home-grown cultural referents – Typhoo tea or the Beatles – replacing brash, all-American icons such as Campbell’s Soup and Cadillac cars. Peter Blake’s paintings and collages in particular addressed the peculiarities of British pop, revelling in its provinciality, and its decidedly non-American subject matter. Blake did however make explicit reference to his North American peers, for example in his *The First Real Target* (1961) in which he teasingly pays homage to Jasper John’s famous series of encaustic and collage target paintings, and through which Blake plays upon the assumption that all artists look first to America for inspiration and influence. Blake’s is a somewhat ambivalent, if humorous riposte to the purported “originators” of pop art, and a self-conscious exploration of the “anxiety of influence” runs through Blake’s engagement with American pop at this time. In a painting of the young Blake, we see the artist with his jacket adorned with badges featuring Elvis Presley, Pepsi-Cola, and a Union Jack flag. *Self-Portrait with Badges* (1961) signals an amateurish form of adoration and respect, casting the relationship between America and Britain in somewhat uneven terms. The element of fandom, however, is not meant to be wholly tongue-in-cheek, as it is an aspect of Blake’s work we see repeated not only in the “target” painting but also in the album cover he designed for the Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Heart’s Club Band* in 1967 in which he, along with his dealer Robert Fraser and the Beatles, selected a range of cardboard cut-outs of famous (and not so famous) figures, which were grouped around the fab four.

The references to contemporary culture that began to saturate paintings by David Hockney and Blake as well as female artist Pauline Boty signaled a clear

affiliation with their American peers, although the level of ambivalence contained within those acts of homage varied. Hockney first visited America in the summer of 1961 while still a student at the RCA. After his successful show at the Kasmin Gallery in 1963, Hockney returned to America and visited Los Angeles. "I began to paint the physical look of the place,"²² he later recalled, a look that encompassed not only the bright pastel colors and images of the west coast but also the gay scene in LA with which he was equally enamored. When asked what it was he loved about America, Hockney wryly noted "It's the exact opposite of Bradford."²³ Blake employed a very "British" recognition of American popular culture from the perspective of the denim-clad Elvis-loving "fan," while the seductive pastel colors of Hockney's Los Angeles-influenced pool paintings, and Boty's complex paintings, which incorporated imagery appropriated from contemporary magazine pictures of, for example, Marilyn Monroe, interspersed with panels of primary colors, geometric slashes, and abstract patterns were more enthralled by the formal opportunities offered to them by American pop.

Boty's engagement with the politics of gender in works such as *The Only Blonde in the World* (1963) challenged the sexist representation of women that was the stock in trade of her male pop art peers, particularly in America (for example the paintings by Tom Wesselman, but also, closer to home, work by Allen Jones). Boty's use of abstraction and primary colors on her large-scale canvases bridged a divide between her brand of "pop" and the cool autonomy of the abstract painters associated with the "Situation" group. As well as providing a counter to the work of her male colleagues, Boty's work also acknowledges and incorporates many of its themes, privileging at all times the contested, yet constantly represented, status of the body, personified for Boty in the figure of Monroe, as on the one hand "object" and on the other as embodied, sexualized, and sentient (in Monroe's case "tragic") subject.²⁴

Boty's pop incorporates wide areas of consumer society, from magazine pin-ups, advertising, media, and celebrity, which it pieces back together as so many fragments, collaged, glued, broken down, and reassembled. Key to Boty's fragmented slices of everyday life and contemporary consumer desire is an awareness of the gender politics at stake when that which is cut up and fragmented is the female body. In Boty's work the irruption of the body back into the abstract field of large-scale painting highlights the absence of any discussion of gender, sexuality, and, importantly, the body in both abstract and figurative work at this time, with the majority of it being executed by young, male artists. The paintings by Hockney made during his time in Los Angeles also demand a re-evaluation on these grounds, with the homoerotic charge of his pop scenes an important rejoinder to the Greenbergian emphasis on form and color rather than subject matter or politics. Back at St. Martin's, the kinds of affiliation and influence taking place took on a rather different, less ambivalent, and decidedly non-pop aspect. Certainly, the question of the body, whether abstracted, fragmented or figuratively represented remained far from the concerns of those sculptors working with Caro.

Anti-form and Anti-monumentality: Modernism under Pressure

It was at St. Martin's that Caro's lessons, learnt from Smith and Greenberg, found a home. Caro was teaching at this time on the innovative "advanced sculpture course," which Frank Martin, then head of the sculpture department, established as a way of by-passing the regulations for assessment that the National Diploma in Design imposed, and that examined students only on figurative work. As the course was not officially recognized, it remained "vocational" and independent to a degree from the strictures governing the rest of the school's departments. Students signing up for the course were explicitly encouraged to "break new ground" and to work in an abstract idiom with unconventional materials.²⁵

Caro brought his experiences from America to St. Martin's, which included the introduction of a welding shop and an area completely devoid of traditional tools and equipment, so that students might begin to think afresh the boundaries and context in which to produce work.²⁶ Caro's abstract, colorful forms and employment of simple geometric shapes had an immediate and powerful influence on his students, with six of the nine artists included in the Whitechapel Gallery's 1965 exhibition "New Generation Sculpture" having studied on the advanced sculpture course at St. Martin's: David Annesley, Michael Bolus, Phillip King, Tim Scott, William Tucker, and Isaac Witkin.

"New Generation Sculpture" was the second survey show held at the Whitechapel showcasing young British artists. It presented the radical new concepts of "sculpture" currently being explored at St. Martin's, at the same time offering a three-dimensional response to the "Situation" exhibition. The materials these artists were using ranged from the pastel pink and baby blue plastics of King's geometric forms (King was one of the first artists to use plastics), to the bright yellow and sea-green spray-painted steel surfaces of Annesley's metal abstract sculptures, situated formally somewhere between Caro's playful curves and lines and an over-sized child's toy, and Scott's glass and wood work *Peach Wheels*. What united the work of the "new generation" sculptors was their shared decision to rid sculpture of its traditional base. They also began to actively foster comparisons with the work of their American peers. This stemmed in part from their desire to distance themselves as much as possible from the perceived provinciality of British art in international art circles: when, in 1963 Greenberg came on a visit from New York to London, several students (under Caro's advice) contributed £15 to £25 each toward Greenberg's air fare, in order to secure for themselves a "crit" with him.²⁷ In November 1965 Greenberg returned to chair the jury for the John Moores Exhibition, Liverpool (John Latham's entry had been rejected from the show, an event that prompted his "chew-in" party one year later).²⁸

For all its break with modes of sculptural practice then dominant in Britain, and its shift toward a shared formal vocabulary with American modernist sculpture, it was not long before the work of the "new generation" of sculptors came under attack by another group of artists, also working out of St. Martin's. For

these artists the development of a radical new sculptural idiom was dependent not on a continuation or inheritance of American modernism, but precisely on the very undoing of its formal and conceptual strictures. In other words, the declared “anti-monumentality” that Caro sought in his work still seemed, to these artists, to not go far enough. What they called for was a radical renegotiation of the very parameters of the work of art, an expansion of its boundaries toward an even more capacious definition of the category of “art” in general, and “sculpture” in particular. In the hands of students such as Gilbert & George, Barry Flanagan, Richard Long, and Bruce McLean, the monumental abstract work being made by the “new generation” was, if not rejected outright, certainly placed under increasing pressure.

Flanagan was also a student of Caro and, while he retained an interest in the idea of sculpture as base-less, often placed directly on the floor or without traditional support, his use of pre-stitched or folded fabric shapes, organic forms, and materials such as rope, sacking, and sand reads as a critique of the modernist work of art. It challenged any claims to monumentality and permanence to which art works had, until then, aspired (interestingly, Flanagan had been instrumental in helping John Latham organize the “chew-in” attack on Greenberg’s *Art and Culture*). Flanagan’s soft sculpture did not set out to negate the idea of sculpture, but rather, it offered a radical new understanding of the parameters of the three-dimensional object. “I did not have an anti-attitude to the classic idea of sculpture,” Flanagan has claimed recently, but rather “the approach was more constructive.”²⁹ Flanagan’s decision to work in a variety of soft, tactile, and malleable materials signaled a dramatic shift in the understanding of sculpture that exceeded that of Flanagan’s tutors and classmates at St. Martin’s.³⁰

In particular Flanagan’s 1966 *sand muslin* (1966) and *Heap 4* (1967) are works that are placed – slumped, really – directly on the floor. Each consists of simple stitched sacks stuffed with sand that have been kneaded and pressed into shape, with *sand muslin* (Fig. 8.2) taking the form of two white squashed circular mounds and *Heap 4* 15 sand-filled hessian sausage shapes. Both of these works are slight yet surprising. They barely register as “sculptures,” yet the powerfully anthropomorphic sense in which they appear almost ludicrously figurative or reminiscent of the body insists upon their status as representative works of art. Two breasts placed on the floor; a pile of soft phallic forms draped on top of each other, this is sculpture pushing at the very limits not only of form but also of representation. Unlike the insistently abstract, geometric aesthetic of Caro or King’s modernist sculptures, Flanagan’s works propose an alternative, offering a radical rethinking of what sculpture might consist. Soft sculpture instigated a reconfiguration of the way in which three-dimensional form might address the viewer’s body through an abstract yet compelling encounter that relied less on identification than a kind of empathy, an abstracted recognition.³¹ The kind of body imagined by these works is less stable and unified than, say, the bodies in the bronze family groups of Henry Moore or the maternal forms of Barbara Hepworth. Even the kind of encounter staged in the work of King, Caro, and Annesely, for all its emphasis on play and the



FIG. 8.2 Barry Flanagan: *sand muslin*, mixed media, 181×302×302 mm, 1966.
 Source: © Tate, London 2011. © The Estate of Barry Flanagan. Courtesy Plubronze Limited.

spectator's physical navigation of the work, did not set out to dismantle the sense of stability or unity the viewer might expect to retain when viewing a work of art.

While Flanagan's soft sand, cotton, and rope works are far less dramatic in their address to the viewer than, say Riley's abstract op art or Caro's large, colorful metal sculptures, their abstract suggestion of the body through the stitched recumbent forms generates an unsettling encounter. There is something viscerally body *like* about the use of soft slumped materials and fabrics. With their fleshy, skin-like appearance, it appears as though the upright monumental human form (think of Moore's maternal figures or, for a more contemporary example, Anthony Gormley's iron casts of human bodies) has somehow dropped out of the piece, leaving behind only the remnants or envelope of the body, re-cast here as impoverished and vulnerable. Of course, this is to "read in" to the works, to impose a metaphorical reading upon a series of abstract works of art that ultimately resist any such interpretative model. My point is that to re-make sculpture in the way that Flanagan does signals a fundamental shift that occurred at this time in terms of how artists and viewers could begin to rethink the kind of visual and physical encounter the work of art could offer. It did not have to be representational, nor did it have to offer the viewer an analogue or sculptural double, as, say, portrait

painting, figurative sculpture, and sculptural busts had previously sought to do. Rather, the boundaries surrounding the work of art had become unshackled from any such obligation to “represent” in the traditional way.

Destruction in Art

In 1963, Gustav Metzger, an ex-student of David Bomberg who had come to Britain as a child refugee during the war, performed a famous iconoclastic gesture on the South Bank in London that was a political statement against warfare and destruction, but which took as its object of attack the art work. Wearing an outfit pieced together from army surplus consisting of a gas mask, jacket, and gloves, he set about spraying acid onto a suspended sheet of nylon, a sculptural re-casting of the abstraction of Pollock, but with acid not paint hurled at the surface. The “auto-destructive” aspect of the piece, with the artist’s hand not touching – not *able* to touch – the burnt acid-soaked sheet of tattered fabric was at once an iconoclastic assault on the status of the art work and powerful statement of his political anger at “the chaotic, obscene present.”³² Metzger’s gesture marked a renegotiation of artists’ social and political position and posed questions about how they might tailor their artistic activities to political ends.

In 1966, London was host to a series of events, several of which revolved around the Better Books bookshop on Charing Cross Road, a favorite location for radical young authors and artists, and the site where Latham made a series of book towers (“skoob towers”) that he subsequently burnt down. The focal point of the events was the “Destruction in Art Symposium” (DIAS) that was organized by Metzger and John Sharkey and involved Latham, Flanagan, Bob Cobbing, dom sylvester houédard, Mark Boyle, Ivor Davies, and Jeff Nuttall. The event was unprecedented and its internationalism striking: artists from abroad included Yoko Ono, Jean-Jacques Lebel, Otto Muehl, Gunther Brus, Hermann Nitsch, Henri Chopin, Jean Toche, Rafael Ortiz, Al Hansen, Juan Hidalgo, and Wolf Vostell. Most people involved with the event were visual artists; however, the discussions that took place during the symposium covered politics, social problems, and science. The collective ambition was to unite in finding a way to explore and challenge destructive tendencies at work politically and socially, through the medium of art. As Clive Phillpot has pointed out, the symposium, and events surrounding it “contrasted sharply with the ebullience of British pop and hard-edge abstraction.”³³ It was during this event that the object in art came under direct, physical attack, signaling, for many of the artists involved, the end of the art work itself, although without fully committing to the later wholesale rejection of the object that conceptual art would later demand.

The symposium itself took place in September 1966, at the Africa Centre, London. The panel consisted of Metzger, Vostell, Hansen, and Hidalgo. Metzger’s “auto-destructive” manifesto stemmed from his own political commitments, in particular his involvement with the Campaign for Nuclear

Disarmament (CND). Indeed, Metzger's political activism at the time informed many of his self-named "auto-destructive activities," demonstrating a deep commitment to the uses art could be put in reality, seemingly a million miles away from the "ivory tower" that Greenberg had previously declared the only safe haven for advanced art, in which to protect itself from the pressures of market forces and popular demand.³⁴ Other events that took place in London related to DIAS included Yoko Ono's performance of her work *Cut Piece* at the Africa Centre, in which audience members were invited to step up to the stage and cut sections of her clothing away until it had all been removed. This famous performance by Ono is a dramatic realization of the kinds of pressures the body, as represented in art and, in this instance, as belonging to a real person, on stage, naked and vulnerable, was subjected to during this period. It also offered a literal example of violence aimed explicitly at the female body, a kind of response to the metaphoric cutting and slicing of Boty's earlier pop painting collages. Other events that took place at that time signaled that the work of art was buckling under the pressure; performances, poetry readings, films, happenings, and debate instead structured the whole event, most of which exists now only in photographic and occasionally, film form. The precarious status of the object in the mid-1960s, as something that was provisional, vulnerable, and unstable was to become intrinsic to sculptural practice by the end of the decade, with the drive toward conceptualism. Metzger's auto-destructive activities might be considered precursors to that later "dematerialization" of the object, whose origins critics Lucy Lippard and John Chandler located in the mid-1960s shift away from object-based art – even at its most minimal and abstract – toward the replacement of the object with concepts and ideas only; as a sheet of paper, a phone call, a performance, or an exhibition consisting of a set of photocopies.

Three years later the status of the object of art was questioned in a way distinct from the DIAS events. In 1969, "attitudes" or ideas came to take precedence over the formal aspects of the art work, which, although not directed to explicitly political ends sought to destabilize the status of the art work and the viewing encounter to radically new ends. In 1969, Flanagan, along with fellow St. Martin's students Bruce McLean, Richard Long, Jan Dibbets, and Roelof Louw were included in two international exhibitions that sought to address the changing status of the work of art from a pristine, finished object toward a new conception of the art work as "process." This was a moment when the idea of art seemed poised to replace its previous status as fixed, closed "thing." The two shows were "Op Losse Schroeven" at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam and "When Attitudes become Form: Works-Concepts-Processes-Situations-Information," which opened at the Kunsthalle, Bern, before moving to the Institute of Contemporary Art, London, where Charles Harrison took over from Harald Szeeman as curator. Harrison has since noted that although he added four British-based artists to the London installation, John Latham was a "notable omission" from both shows.³⁵

The works included in the show were not connected formally, rather, what they shared was an "attitude," and sense that the object was not fixed and bound but

ongoing and open to change and revision. Harrison recalls receiving the first works from Switzerland and being at times confused over where the packaging and paper documents accompanying the art works ended and the works themselves began.³⁶ Photographs, lines of rope and string, material slumped and propped, typed signs to be displayed in lieu of an “object”; the works in the “Attitudes” show pushed the boundaries of the work of art to their most precarious and elastic. All this is not to suggest however that the show was a chaotic jumble; the rooms were organized (albeit loosely) both thematically and also nationally. There were rough groupings such as the “Italian” room and the “American” room, although there was a certain amount of overlap – Alighero e Boetti put his work in the American room, while Flanagan ended up between Joseph Beuys and Claes Oldenburg.

The publication accompanying “When Attitudes Become Form” was as much a conceptual project as exhibition catalogue, with several artists who were not included in the show itself offered “space” within its pages. McLean’s own page in the catalogue is a deflating yet defiant comment on the austere black and white photography then being employed by the minimalists and other so-called “process” and “land-art” artists in America, McLean submitted a series of “four banal postcards of Barnes bought in a local shop.” McLean’s photographic work in the catalogue made clear his difference from the American artists then dominating the international art scene by drawing upon the same visual language as the artists he obliquely references, just as Riley’s paintings had drawn attention to the previously repressed physical, bodily mode of encountering abstract, “optical” painting.

The kinds of alliances and new modes of artistic production and process that came into being during the 1960s in Britain were often marked by a destructive edge, with artists such as Blake, Hockney, Flanagan, and McLean dismantling those master narratives of modernist art established by their North American peers by using a variety of unconventional formal and conceptual means. At this time, the reconfiguration of what art could be became a mainstay of advanced art practice. In Britain, the younger generation found themselves in a unique position as they sought both to respond to American modernism while at the same time working through the implications of that model in order to develop their own distinctive idioms. In particular what I hope to have made clear is that the various divergent responses to the model of modernist practice that took shape were dependent to a large part on the educational background, which is to say the institutional framework, out of which these artists were working out. On the one hand a kind of shorthand is useful, so that we might pitch, say, the “painterly” or figurative work by those artists associated with the Royal College of Art, and on the other the kind of objects being produced at St. Martin’s, with their emphasis on non-traditional media and abstraction. However, the situation is far from clear cut, and in the closing years of the decade, as the “Destruction in Art Symposium” demonstrated, this is a period of incredibly rich and complex institutional and transnational exchange and conversation. The particular kinds of antagonism, rejection, and incorporation of the dominant North American

modernist model provided artists with an expansive critical vocabulary with which to work. The twin aspects of Latham's *Art and Culture*, as at once destructive and generative act, articulate most clearly the ambivalent strategies and positions available to the younger generation of artists working in the immediate aftermath of modernism, who sought not to simply reject but to enter into a critical relationship with their predecessors. Far from the object in art progressively "dematerializing" throughout the 1960s, the art produced in Britain during what Susan Sontag dubbed the "mythic era known as the sixties," marked instead an antagonistic, radical, and productive encounter with how the work of art could be fruitfully rethought and its parameters redrawn.³⁷

Notes

- 1 For recent critical reevaluation of British art of this period see "A Very Special British Issue," *Third Text*, vol. 22, issue 3, 2008.
- 2 See Bloom, H. (1997) *The Anxiety of Influence: a Theory of Poetry*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press for the most famous account of artistic strategies of influence and inheritance.
- 3 Greenberg, C. (1939) "Avant-gardes and kitsch," *Partisan Review*, 6, 5, 38.
- 4 Greenberg, C. (1993) "Modernist painting," in J. O'Brian (ed.) *Clement Greenberg: the Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 85.
- 5 Seitz, W. (1965) *The Responsive Eye*, New York: Museum of Modern Art.
- 6 I borrow the phrase "eye/body problem" from Lee, P. M. (2004) "Bridget Riley's eye/body problem," in *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the Sixties*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. This chapter provides an excellent reevaluation of op art, specifically through an account of the way in which op art offered a specifically gendered, *bodily* mode of viewing encounter.
- 7 "'Op? Urp'," *Miami Herald*, July 25, 1965, MoMA Archives, as cited in Lee (2004), 174. See also Follin, F. (2004) *Embodied Visions: Bridget Riley, Op Art and the Sixties*, London: Thames and Hudson.
- 8 Fried, M. (1998) "Three American painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski and Frank Stella," in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Review*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 213–265, 224.
- 9 For an excellent account of the importance of the Kasmin Gallery at this time, see Tickner, L. (2007) "The Kasmin Gallery," *Oxford Art Journal*, 30, 2, 233–268.
- 10 The phrase was Lawrence Alloway's, as cited in Tickner (2007), footnote 33.
- 11 See Fer, B. (2000) *On Abstract Art*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, and Krauss, R. (1994) *The Optical Unconscious*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, for two very different but compelling psychoanalytically informed accounts of modernism's blind spots. See in particular chapter 5 "The cut" on Jackson Pollock.
- 12 Fried, M. "Art and objecthood" and Greenberg, C. "The recentness of sculpture," both reprinted in Battcock, G. (1994) *Minimal Art: an Anthology*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

- 13 Roger Coleman (1960) introduction to *Situation*, exh. cat. London: RBA Galleries, 1960, as quoted in Marlow, T. (2003) "Open situations: British abstraction in the sixties," in *From Blast to Freeze: British Art in the 20th Century*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 172.
- 14 See chapter 6, "The phenomenological turn" in Potts, A. (2001) *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press.
- 15 See Fried, M. [1963] "Anthony Caro", 269–276, and "New work by Anthony Caro" [1967], 172–175 in Fried (1998).
- 16 See Anne M. Wagner's (2005) recent work on the importance of Henry Moore to later generations of sculptors in *Mother Stone: The Vitality of Modern British Sculpture*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press.
- 17 Greenberg, C. ([1956] 1993) "David Smith," in J. O'Brian (ed.) *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Affirmations and Refusals 1950–1956*, vol. 3, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 275.
- 18 Anthony Caro, interviewed by Phyllis Tuchman, 1980, as quoted in Hilton, T. (1984) *Anthony Caro Sculpture 1960–1984*, exh. cat. London: Arts Council, as cited in Marlow, T. (2003) "Open Situations," *From Blast to Freeze: British Art in the 20th Century*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 173.
- 19 See Fried, M. (1963) "Anthony Caro," in *Anthony Caro: Sculpture 1960–63*, Whitechapel Gallery: London, unpaginated. This essay is reprinted in Fried (1998), 296–277.
- 20 Alloway, L. (1961) "An interview with Anthony Caro," *Gazette*, 1, as quoted in Mellor, D. (ed.) (1993) *The Sixties: Art Scene in London*, London: Phaidon, 105.
- 21 See Schimmel, P. (ed.) (2005) *Robert Rauschenberg; Combines*, Los Angeles, CA: The Museum of Contemporary Art.
- 22 Galzebrok, M. (1970) "David Hockney: an interview" in *David Hockney: Paintings, Prints and Drawings 1960–70*, London: Whitechapel Gallery, 11. See also Whiting, C. (2007) *Pop L.A.: Art and the City*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press and Meyer, R. (2002) *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 23 David Hockney, as quoted in Webb, P. (1988) *Portrait of David Hockney*, London: Chatto and Windus, 193.
- 24 See Minioudaki, K. (2007) "Pop's ladies and bad girls: Axel, Pauline Boty and Rosalyn Drexler," *Oxford Art Journal*, 30, 3, 402–430.
- 25 Course description 1962–1965, as quoted in Tant, R. (2004) "Sculpture at St. Martin's," in C. Stephens and K. Stout (eds) *Art and the 60s: this was Tomorrow*, London: Tate, 88.
- 26 Tant (2004), 88.
- 27 Mellor, D. (1993) "A New Sculpture 1960–1966" in *The Sixties: Art Scene in London*, London: Phaidon, 102.
- 28 See Walker, J. A. (1998) *Cultural Offensive: America's Impact on British Art Since 1945*, London: Pluto Press, 82 and 216.
- 29 Barry Flanagan, in an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, in *Barry Flanagan: Sculpture 1965–2005* (Dublin: IMMA, 2006).
- 30 Other artists working in the early to mid-1960s with soft, malleable, and unusual materials such as latex, wool, plaster, leather, fur, fabric, and vinyl include Eva Hesse, Yayoi Kusama, Louise Bourgeois, Don Potts, Lucas Samaras, Frank Lincoln Viner, and

- Bruce Nauman. Many of these artists were included in Lucy Lippard's important exhibition "Eccentric Abstraction," held at the Fischbach Gallery, New York, in 1966.
- 31 See the essays by Briony Fer and Mignon Nixon in Nixon, M. (ed.) (2002) *Eva Hesse*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press for two different approaches to abstraction and the body in the work of Hesse.
 - 32 Metzger, G. (1962) "Machine, auto-creative, & auto-destructive art," *Ark*, Summer, 8, as quoted in Wilson, A. "A Poetics of Dissent," in C. Stephens and K. Stout (eds) (2004) *Art and the 60s: this was Tomorrow*, London: Tate, p. 100.
 - 33 Phillpot, C. (2000) "From nothing," in *Live in Your Head: Concept and Experiment in Britain 1965–1975*, London: Whitechapel Gallery, 9.
 - 34 Greenberg, C. (1939) "Avant-garde and kitsch," *Partisan Review*, 6, 34–49, 38.
 - 35 Harrison, C. (2003) "A crisis in modernism," in *From Blast to Freeze: British Art in the 20th Century*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 223.
 - 36 See the original catalogue with essays by Szeeman, H. and Harrison, C. (1969) *When Attitudes Become Form: Works, Concepts, Processes, Situations, Information*, Bern: Kunsthalle Bern. See also Green, A. (2004) "When attitudes became form and the contest over conceptual art's history," in M. Corris (ed.) *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Fer, B. (2004) *The Infinite Line: Remaking Art after Modernism*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, Gresty, H. (1984) *1965–1972: When Attitudes Became Form*, Cambridge L Kettle's Yard, and Harrison, C. (1969) "Some recent sculpture in Britain," *Studio International*, 177, 907.
 - 37 Sontag, S. (1966) "Afterword: thirty years later," *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 308.

Part 4



Nationhood

Art and Nation in Eighteenth-Century Britain

Cynthia Roman

In eighteenth-century England, narratives about fine art and those about national identity were inextricably intertwined as the visual arts both reflected and mediated constructions of nationhood.¹ For their part, English artists, patrons, and theorists debated the relative merits of history painting versus portraiture to represent national culture and to express the evolving character of a polity, which was increasingly inclusive of middling classes. Histories of British art generally recount contemporary narratives about the failure of English artists to paint history, explaining that artists had to negotiate a conflict between the practice and patronage of portraiture and their aspirations to paint history without proper training and sufficient financial and cultural support. On the one hand, dependency on remuneration drove the most talented artists to pursue portrait painting: the nation's aristocratic collectors and patrons favored portraiture, with some even defending portraiture as a worthy product of the national school of painting that could uniquely reflect English culture and in fact provided a more suitable representation of the nation. On the other hand, many connoisseurs, critics, and artists advocated history painting as the highest aim of the nation's most ambitious painters and considered the failure of English painters to produce a significant school of history painting to be a failure of national magnitude. Their challenge was thus how to encourage and sustain artists to produce historical art that was both worthy of national honor and also representative of new notions about national identity. Traditionally, history painters depicted significant and heroic events that would elevate and instruct by example, drawing subjects from the Bible, classical history and literature, mythological tales, or epic poetry. During the later decades of the eighteenth century, history painters made considerable adjustments to content and manner to align their history pictures more closely with shifting notions of nationhood.

Although formulated as a debate about aesthetics and patronage, control over the power of fine arts to imagine, represent, and define British nationhood was in fact at stake. The lines of this contest fell fairly consistently along class divides often in the guise of issues concerning patronage. While the nobility and aristocracy had long patronized portrait painters and adorned their great houses with paintings of ancestors, thereby establishing the legitimacy of power and position based on hereditary, the rising middle classes, made wealthy through commerce, yet still socially and politically disenfranchised, increasingly vied for political and cultural power through the promotion of alternative representations of national history in the narrative of political events. As the new moneyed classes appropriated the authority of the fine arts for cultural expression, the nature of history painting itself evolved to represent the concerns of the commercial classes in their efforts to legitimize aspirations to participate fully in the national polity. At the same time, artists seeking alternative support constructed new ways of imagining national history that would appeal to these potential new audiences and, as a result, history painters represented ideas of a nationhood, which included the counter-public of the aspiring middle classes.

To address the struggles and seeming failures of the nation's artists to excel at history painting, English artists and critics both sought recognition for native painters, as well as corrections to obstacles that prevented the national school from achieving parity, if not superiority, to European counterparts. These efforts to promote a national school of painting occurred within the context of larger debates about British genius for the visual arts and national propensities for patronage. Foreign writers often attributed the shortcomings of British art to some inherent mismatch of British national genius to the visual arts. In England, the inferior state of British fine arts was attributed to other obstructions, most notably the lack of training and opportunity due to the misguided taste of potential patrons. Combating aspersions on native culture and talent, many professional British artists emulated the continental model of history painting in the academic tradition. The national cultures, however, were quite different and the demands of the public did not neatly align with European artistic traditions. The European models held up for emulation were those associated with strong academic traditions of history painting, most particularly the celebrated achievements of Italian painters dating back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, such as Michelangelo and the Carracci, and of French academic painters of the seventeenth century, most notably Poussin, who thrived under the powerful French Academy founded in 1648 under Louis XIV. The Italian and French artists were generally deemed superior to English artists by virtue of their native talent, which was aligned with superior national taste as well as the patronage of the church and state, respectively. These painters and their patrons were apparently considered to have higher aptitudes for history painting or subject pictures that were believed to be the highest form of art.

In contrast, portraiture predominated English painting and collecting for centuries, and eighteenth-century discourse generally identified a pronounced

shortfall in the achievement of native painters who concentrated so heavily on a genre of lower order in the hierarchy of the fine arts. The lack of achievement in British history painting was attributed by many to a deficiency in national genius for the fine arts particularly in contrast to the clear superiority of the national genius for literature and poetry, which was evident in the universal celebrity of Shakespeare and Milton, for example.

In self-defense, many artists and art theorists positioned the failure of native art as the failure of patronage. Opportunities to paint historical subjects were scarce. The English state and church did not patronize art on the level of the strong centralized authority of the French monarch or of the Catholic Church and the English aristocracy simply favored portraiture. Still the emulation of European history painting did finally culminate in 1768 with the founding of the Royal Academy. For decades, artists in England had attempted to establish support for an academy on the European model and the founding of the Royal Academy promised to address long-standing grievances from artists and art critics for increased public recognition, patronage, and support that would promote the growth and development of a national school of art and would include a thriving body of history painters. Thus, the President of the Academy declared at its opening meeting that:

An Academy, in which the Polite Arts may be regularly cultivated, is at last opened among us by Royal Munificence. This must appear an event in the highest degree interesting, not only to the Artists, but to the whole nation.²

Royal patronage was held to be critical for establishing status³ and so the English Academy was formed under the patronage of George III. Royal patronage was primarily nominal and symbolic, however, as the monarch's support was only in a private and personal capacity rather than as head of state. George III did not sponsor the Academy in an official capacity as head of state as the French King Louis XIV had done. Moreover, despite the professed emphasis on European traditions of history painting espoused by the Academy, the first painter to be elected President of the Royal Academy when it was founded in 1768, was ironically Sir Joshua Reynolds, the central character in British portraiture.

Nevertheless, for the first time English artists had a prestigious organization powerful enough to promote their professional status and to provide the kind of organized training that had by then become associated with the visual arts in every other major European country.⁴ The earliest academies of art sought to raise the status of artists from craft to liberal art thus placing high importance on the intellectual content of painting. To this end, Reynolds, as President of the Academy, delivered an annual lecture addressed to both students and the public seeking both to instruct and to educate. In his annual lectures to the students, Sir Joshua Reynolds codified the institutional dogma on history painting, imparting his understanding of the European traditions he so highly valued. He had visited

Italy and absorbed the art of old master classical tradition where instruction for the students was a central activity for academies. Thus painting was promoted as an intellectual pursuit and painters were encouraged to be learned and to deliver lectures on art in a variety of subjects that would promote history painting,⁵ all in the national interest. The quest to establish historical narrative as a viable subject for painting found an outlet in the Academy and many artists continued to aspire to paint the type of grand style history subject promoted by academic tradition. Yet, despite the promise of progress invested in the founding of the Royal Academy, the values and mandates of academic ideas simply did not universally accord with the taste or interests of many segments of contemporary society. History painting in the traditional, idealized, and timeless form had little popular appeal in England. The British government rarely commissioned history painting. In fact, while sharing many artistic ideals of the French Academy and modeling its training methods on it (as did virtually every other academy in Europe), the Royal Academy never acquired a similar level of power in England. It was not state funded and was reasonably free of royal influence. The Academy's dependence on the French authoritarian model even stirred some hostility in Britain.⁶ The Academy for many was out of step with British culture. Despite the fact that one of the principal reasons for the founding of the Royal Academy was to encourage a national school of history painters, little encouragement was forthcoming from a persistently indifferent public.

Simultaneously however, another narrative was put forth by those who defended the strong native tradition of portrait painting. Portraiture, and miniature portrait painting in particular, was championed as the unique and characteristic achievement of the nation's artists and in fact a genre more suitable to record the character of great individuals from English history. Principal among the proponents of portrait painting was Horace Walpole (1717–1797), who asserted and celebrated his own activity as a collector and patron of portraiture.⁷ Walpole collected no contemporary history painting and owned little in the way of old master narrative pictures save a few inherited from his father Sir Robert Walpole's collection at Houghton. Rather, the works of fine art in Walpole's collection were overwhelmingly portraits, and his display at Strawberry Hill functioned as a proto museum in which art together with other objects and ensembles were shown in order to convey his views on the history of England, its monarchs, and a distinguished lineage for his own family.⁸ Additional endorsement of English portrait painting came with the publication of Walpole's *Anecdotes of Painting in England* (1762–1771) based on the manuscript notes of the antiquarian George Vertue (1684–1756).⁹ Like Walpole, Vertue invested considerably in the potential of portraiture to document, convey, and enliven history.

For Walpole, portraiture was likely a more desirable form of national history than narrative painting as it reflected more accurately elements of the individual biographies and characters of illustrious men, which he found so compelling. In a letter to the historian John Pinkerton, about the latter's *Essay on the Ancient History of Scotland*, Walpole promoted a construction of history as one of

individual persons rather than events. He wrote, "I was so totally unversed in the story of original nations, and I own always find myself so little interested in savage manners, unassisted by individual characters, that ... I retain no memory of the ground I have trod." He continued, "I do not care a straw about your subjects, with whom I am no more acquainted than with ancient inhabitants of Otaheite."¹⁰

Thus, the conflict for artists who sought to follow theoretic prescription without patronage continued to be problematic. With an element of nationalist competition with European countries, British history painters were compelled to raise awareness and pressure the nation and its constituents. While many took the call to paint history very seriously, opportunities were few. Resourceful artists sought and found ways to fashion new audiences and to produce historical subjects more sympathetic to these new British publics. As Walpole's comments noted above suggest, a big challenge for artists as well as literary historians was to find ways to interest audiences in stories of national history. The most ambitious painters set on painting history were therefore compelled to devise innovative solutions and to essay new formulae for narrative painting, to seek new audiences, and, in the process, to imagine new ideas about nationhood.

James Barry demonstrated particular ambition and tenacious determination in following his notoriously zealous commitment to the idea that history painting was the measure of a nation's worth and played a decisive role in determining its character. He believed with intense conviction and vision that it was an artist's mission to reveal high-minded moral truths that will instruct and enlighten his audience. This role would be played in the national interest. As Professor of Painting at the Royal Academy (1782–1799), Barry advised students that history painting and sculpture should be their main ambition. The people he was most intent on inculcating, however, were the people of the British nation and he issued his rally call to the public and potential patrons as well as to artists. Intent on directing a change, he published an apology for the state of the visual arts in the nation. In *An Inquiry into the Real and Imaginary Obstructions to the Acquisition of the Arts in England*, Barry defended the reputation of his country and the under-appreciated merit of its artists, locating a severe handicap in the misguided action of dealers and collectors who preferred to import foreign art rather than support native talent. He wrote:

When we reflect upon the great variety of useful institutions, which do so much honour to the public virtue of this country, it is really a matter of surprise that the arts should have lain so long unheeded, and that no means have yet been devised at extricating historical painting out of the confused mass of meaner arts with which it is indiscriminately jumbled... There is however great reason to hope that something will yet be done, and ... a noble public spirit will somewhere step forward.¹¹

While no such public spirit materialized for Barry, he was not deterred. Barry executed a series of six large-scale paintings (each over 12 feet high) depicting the "Progress of Human Civilization." Executed between 1777 and 1783, for the

Great Room at Adelphi House of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce.¹² Barry's was one of the grandest and most ambitious painting projects undertaken by an eighteenth-century British artist, although it was envisioned and realized without commission or patronage. Other artists preceding Barry had devised similar schemes to decorate public buildings as ways to create opportunities to paint history. In 1746–1747, for example, Francis Hayman and William Hogarth organized an effort for artists to decorate the Foundling Hospital.¹³

Relying purely on his own resources, Barry endured great financial hardship and discouragement stemming from public indifference. He persevered in his own project as a demonstration of his conviction on the supreme importance of the arts in the progress of civilization and the encouragement of the arts in contemporary England. The series illustrated Barry's notions of historical advancement and offered a model to contemporary England for further achievement in the future. In essence, following an Enlightenment program, Barry's insistence that art and artists play a fundamental role in advancing society and assisting the pursuit of happiness by individual members carried enormous implications for encouraging the arts in the nation.

Barry's realization of a scheme initially focused on English history was ultimately conceived as the progress of human civilization, featuring the benefits of commerce and industry and other human faculties such as the arts, as a factor contributing to the attainment of human happiness. The series thus traces the progress of civilization by closely linking the achievements of individuals and societies in antiquity with those of the commercial world of contemporary England.

The complex program and often highly idiosyncratic meaning of the series required Barry to write a lengthy explanation. Beginning with the progress of civilization in ancient Greece, the first painting depicts Orpheus leading a primitive people out of barbarism into a more civilized condition. In the second painting, *A Grecian Harvest-Home*, a peaceful, agrarian society celebrates an abundant harvest. The third painting, set at an idealized Olympic Games, illustrates Greek society at its height with a gathering of the finest minds and most famous athletes. The fourth and fifth paintings focus on contemporary England and present the artist's ideas on how improvements might best be achieved in this newly commercial nation, particularly under the auspices of the Society. *Commerce or the Triumph of the Thames* (1777–1784), the fourth painting in the series, celebrates the achievements of English trade and manufacturing. A number of illustrious British sailors and navigators, identified by Barry as Sir Francis Drake, Sir Walter Raleigh, and Captain Cooke, propel a personification of the Thames. These historical figures are accompanied by a procession of tritons and nereids who hold aloft various articles of English manufacture. Barry allows the arts to celebrate the triumphs of commerce with the inclusion of Charles Burney, the musician, who joins the procession playing a keyboard. The naval tower in the distance was added by Barry in 1801 following an open competition for a column commemorating Britain's naval victories over France.

The Distribution of Premiums in the Society of Arts, the fifth painting in the series, is devoted to the activities and benefits of the groups whose rooms the cycle adorns. Even more poignantly, the devotion of one of the paintings to this subject emphasizes Barry's conviction on the importance of the arts in the progress of society. The group portrait shows the Society gathered to distribute its awards promoting the arts, agriculture, manufacture, and commerce. The painting is essentially about patronage, especially of the arts. Barry's depiction of works of art dominates the center of the painting. Although highlighting the Society's activities, Barry also includes other institutions with promise for the encouragement of the arts. The riverfront of Somerset house refers to the Royal Academy and the distant view of St. Paul's Cathedral alludes to the potential patronage of religious art.

The last painting in the series, *Elysium and Tartarus or the State of Final Retribution*, includes a selection of 125 identifiable portraits of "the great and good men of all ages and nations who were cultivators and benefactors of mankind." The group crosses a wide span of history and encompasses a wide range of cultures illustrating Barry's view that the historical achievement of civilization in general and that of the English nation in particular was founded on an extended community of individuals who contributed to the progress of civilization and the formation of established society. In this, Barry includes philosophers, statesmen, poets, writers, and artists.

While few endured Barry's extreme sacrifice in the moral pursuit of high art, similarly few achieved the immense success of Benjamin West, who enjoyed exceptional status as one of the few painters in England to gain plentiful patronage and status in his pursuit to paint history. A favorite of George III, West earned the title of Historical Painter to the King in 1772, and in 1786, the king commissioned West to paint a series of eight canvases depicting subjects from medieval English history. Exemplifying monumental public art officially sponsored by the state in the person of the king, this commission at the end of the eighteenth century was as close to the European model of state patronage as the English monarchy was to come.

West's commission arose from the decision to restore and refurbish Windsor Castle as the chief royal residence. Continuing the long-standing narrative on the need for patronage of English artists over foreign paintings, West's earliest biographer records a conversation in which West reportedly disapproved of the use of Italian painters to illustrate "monkish legends, in which no one took any interest, while the great events in the history of their country were but seldom touched." Accordingly, the theme of the series affirms the reign of King George by the endorsement of lineage from the preceding history of English monarchs. The pivotal canvas depicts St. George, patron of the Order of the Garter, while the remaining seven illustrate events from the history of Edward III, founder of the Order and his son the Black Prince. The seven subjects include *Edward II Crossing the Somme* (1788); *Edward III with the Black Prince after the Battle of Crecy* (1788); *Queen Philippa at the Battle of Neville's Cross* (1789); *The Burghers of Calais* (1789); *The Institution of the Order of the Garter* (1787); *Edward III*

Entertaining His Prisoners (1788); and *Edward, the Black Prince Receiving, John, King of France, Prisoner, after the Battle of Poitiers* (1788).

Exhibited at the Royal Academy between 1784 and 1794, the completed series was installed in 1796 in the Audience Chamber at Windsor Castle. These paintings served an undeniably public function as commissions granted by George III to the official Historical Painter to the King and destined for a ceremonial space. They also constitute West's most monumental undertaking as a painter of historical subjects. Along with Barry's paintings for the Society of Arts, West's Windsor series is one of the most ambitious historical cycles in eighteenth-century England. Notably, West has chosen to represent his appeal to the national consciousness by turning to themes based entirely in English history and West's paintings are one of the most significant group of subjects from the English Middle Ages that was produced during the eighteenth century.¹⁴

The placement of West's paintings in the Audience Chamber restricted spectator access to privileged individuals engaged in some capacity with matters of national government, and full appreciation of the subjects required a fundamental concern with civic moral issues traditionally linked to representations of state authority. Accordingly, West conceived his Edward series with high-minded concern for the moral seriousness consonant with the public aspect of these pictures. He depicted a series of aggressive military campaigns as the progress of royal valor, justice, and magnanimity and he conceived and executed the individual subjects as epic events set in grand, relatively well-defined settings rendered with historical accuracy and bustling with the activity of numerous figures depicted in intricate detail. The elevated, even pedantic tone of visual rhetoric was meant to impress upon viewers a sense of the civic importance of a given historical episode from English national history, particularly as it pertains to the royal lineage of George III. To convince viewers of the historical accuracy of his creations, West conducted diligent research and consulted illustrated antiquarian publications for the rendering of historical setting, costume, regalia, and other accoutrements. He also introduced many portraits of distinguished historical characters and enumerated these in a key.

The military accomplishments of Edward's reign are depicted with calm dignity befitting a royal audience chamber. King Edward's actions are rendered without an affective display of emotion or passion. The model behavior of the king and his entourage is in keeping with traditional models of history painting as illustrative of heroic action worthy of emulation. Moreover, as works commissioned for a public ceremonial space, West's paintings followed decorum dictated by academic doctrine to show the protagonists exemplifying stoic bravery and disinterested patriotism. *Edward III Crossing the Somme* and *Edward II with the Black Prince after the Battle of Crecy* depict events from the king's successful military campaigns in northern France in which Edward's much smaller army defeated the French king and an army many times the size. Some 25 figures are identifiable in the latter battle scene. *Queen Phillipa at the Battle of Neville's Cross* illustrates the heroic if apocryphal action of the queen. While Edward III was in France, she raised an army to meet the Scottish king David II who was allied with France at Neville's

Cross, near Durham. Although by historical testimony, the Queen was on the battlefield only before and after the action, West's painting shows her present while the battle rages thus dramatically aggrandizing the Queen's heroic role.

Another painting from West's Windsor Castle pictures, *The Burghers of Calais*, also highlights the exemplar moral behavior of Queen Philippa. After Calais surrendered to Edward's siege, he agreed to spare the town's inhabitants if six of the most considerable citizens instead surrendered to him. They were to appear before him bare-headed, bare-footed, with ropes around their necks, and present the keys of the city. The Queen interceded to spare them from execution. Departing from historical accounts, West renders all the participants standing for an upright dignified confrontation rather than pleading supplicant on bended knees. The centrality of the Queen's humanity is emphasized by the emphatic gesture of her outstretched arm and visual focus created by the highlighted brightness of her dress contrasted with the dark attire of those around her.

The Institution of the Order of the Garter is one of the three largest paintings executed for the Audience Chamber and was a central piece in the artist's conception. Edward III established the Order of the Knights of the Garter at Windsor and the scene is set anachronistically in St. George's Chapel (erected over 100 years later). The last two subjects, *Edward II Entertaining his Prisoners* and *Edward, the Black Prince Receiving, John, King of France, Prisoner, after the Battle of Poitiers*, focus on the admirable humanity and honorable conduct of these royal persons who treated their enemies with courtesy and respect. The first illustrates the moment when Edward recognizes the bravery of his prisoners who had given him worthy combat in battle by the offering of gifts, releasing the ransom and setting them free. The second illustrates the admirable and respectful manner with which the young Prince of Wales treated the French king and his son whom he had defeated and captured.

While West enjoyed unparalleled opportunities as Historical Painter to King George III, he remained the exception rather than the rule. Artists aspiring to painting history, who neither benefited from the royal munificence enjoyed by West nor were compelled by the zealous commitment displayed by Barry, had instead to seek alternative patronage and thus often were forced to select themes and tailor the treatment of history painting to suit the circumstances. One strategy of some significant success was the shift from patronage of great men and public institutions of government or religion to the patronage of the arts through the anonymous customers, dealers, and publishers following the general commercial character of English culture.¹⁵ In fact, one of the most important features of the period of patronage after 1760 was the mapping of patronage onto the consumer and dealer,¹⁶ mirroring a similar shift toward greater inclusion in the national polity. Denied the luxury of aristocratic support more prevalent in other European countries, British painting, by necessity, became a matter of financial speculation for many artists who conceived and executed their art with a view of profits to be gained from exhibition and the sale of reproduction prints.



FIG. 9.1 Benjamin West: *The Death of General Wolfe*, oil on canvas, 1510×2135 mm, 1770.

Source: Transfer from the Canadian War Memorials, 1921 (Gift of the 2nd Duke of Westminster, England, 1918) photo © National Gallery of Canada.

Successful exploitation of the commercial market required artists to find strategies to capture the attention of the national public. Such circumstances compelled the aspiring history painter to devise a manner of popular history painting that would appeal to the new modern British patron – a broader art-buying public. Many embraced an innovative discovery that the portrayal of significant current events would not only cater to the interest of a news-conscious public but could simultaneously satisfy an artist's aspirations to paint history. Topical subjects of national interest drawn from military campaigns or matters of state could forge a synthesis of these two phenomena – reportage dictated by the art market and the painter's predilection for the grand style. Ironically, despite the aspersions cast on the national school of painting, British artists, patrons, and commercial gallery entrepreneurs and publishers frequently capitalized on rising nationalism in the development of subject matter, style, and marketing strategies.

Although he enjoyed almost exclusive patronage of the king, Benjamin West experimented and triumphed in the commercial market as well. *The Death of General Wolfe* (Fig. 9.1) is among the earliest and most significant examples of the revolution of history painting whereby contemporary national events were depicted in the exalted rhetoric of the grand style reserved for the distant past.

Painted in 1770, West's picture commemorates the death of Major-General James Wolfe who died leading British forces in battle against the French at Quebec. In terms of ambition, scale, and monumentality, West elevated his portrayal of the death of a contemporary national hero to the level of high art. As with the *Burghers of Calais*, West carefully renders the scene with exacting historical detail. A key published to accompany an engraving after the picture identifies six figures, in addition to Wolfe, who are represented with portrait likenesses and in modern dress. Each soldier wears a uniform appropriate to his branch of service. The view apparently resembles the actual topography of the battle site. Interestingly, this depiction of accurate and specific detail of a modern event ran counter to academic traditions that encouraged idealized representations of heroic episodes from the distant past in order to emphasize the universal moral values central to the academic tradition of history paintings. Through a process of selection and distillation, the artist aspiring to the grand style was to seek a general idea of an imagined past rather than to record the particular, familiar, or individual. West nevertheless infused his particularized portrayal of this contemporary military conflict with timeless dignity, comparing the death of a modern national hero to that of a Christian martyr by composing the central group with the dying general as a traditional *pieta*, informed by his study of European old master painting.

The revolution in history painting required financial viability as well as popular appeal. William Woallet's engraving after West's painting established the commercial feasibility of speculative history painting based on a market for reproductive prints. One of the most commercially successful prints ever published, Woallet's engraving apparently cleared a profit of £15 000 for the publisher John Boydell.¹⁷ This amount was significantly greater than most could earn for a privately commissioned history painting. This enormous commercial success of engravings after West's paintings appeared to provide a solution to aspiring history painters, as well as access for new middle class audiences to fine art and its potential for nation building.

Many other history painters tested the alternatives offered by the commercial promise of topical subjects. Benjamin West's American compatriot in London, John Singleton Copley (1738–1815), was among the most successful followers of West's lead. Having arrived in London from Boston after a journey to Rome, Copley, like many British artists, aspired to make the transition from his previous focus on portraiture to the high-minded genre of history painting and, like his peers, he devised his own opportunities and experimented with new constructions of national history. In Rome, Copley had joined the large community of British artists who were likewise engaged in studying and sketching classical and renaissance art that were the models of the academic painter. While in Italy, he explored a wide range of standard subjects from classical, mythological, and Biblical sources. Once in London, Copley turned his attention to contemporary national history. With his first major painting of a significant topical event, *The Death of the Earl of Chatham*, Copley realized his ambition to become a leading history painter, while simultaneously achieving sufficient prosperity in an environment known for limited opportunities.

When William Pitt, 1st Earl of Chatham suffered a stroke in the House of Lords and died soon after, both West and Copley recognized the potential of this topical nationalistic subject to capture public attention. Chatham's dramatic collapse and subsequent death were tied up with contentious politics – the debate over American independence. Chatham collapsed while attempting a reply to the Duke of Richmond's defense of American aspirations. While West executed only an initial small composition, Copley exploited the full potential of public interest with a major large canvas. With enormous ambition, Copley created an epic grand style composition full of theatricality combined with numerous portraits of notable Lords.

Although Copley had been elected to membership in the Royal Academy in 1779 and enjoyed the status associated with the prestigious institution, in 1781 he chose to display *The Death of the Earl of Chatham* in a private venue in competition with the annual Academy exhibition. He thereby controlled the publicity of his work and realized greater commercial profit. An independent one-man show provided a concentrated and effective means for artists to benefit financially from the display of their work. With "a fully commercial exploitive sense," Copley hired the Great Room at Spring Gardens to display *The Death of Earl of Chatham* to sensational success. The exhibition attracted more than 20 000 persons at a shilling each within the first 6 weeks and Copley was said to have made £5000 from the exhibit.¹⁸

While Copley found alternative remuneration for his individual efforts at history painting, through his public exhibition, he simultaneously pointed the way to expanding the national audience for high art. There were, however, limits to how far many were willing to extend the community for art, and admission fees were often imposed to keep out undesirable free-lookers.¹⁹ As the Society of Arts noted,

all cannot be judges or purchasers of works of art. Yet we have already found by experience that all are desirous to see an exhibition. When the terms of admission are low, our room was throng'd with such multitudes, as made access dangerous, and frightened away those, whose approbation was most desired.²⁰

An exhibition of the original painting to a wide audience, however, was crucial for promoting engravings by subscription. The print market provided the most significant remunerative potential for painters of contemporary history. Copley initially hired the preeminent engraver Francesco Bartolozzi to produce a large-scale print of *The Death of the Earl of Chatham*; however, because Bartolozzi's print took so long to produce and was expensive to purchase, Copley subsequently hired Bartolozzi's student Jean Mari Delattre to produce a smaller less costly print. Despite ensuing disputes about the quality of the second print, this process firmly established the commercial viability of prints as a revenue source for Copley to paint history while also proving the extent and interest of anonymous audiences. In fact, Copley's business relationship with John Boydell, the print-seller and self-styled promoter of British art, began over a mutually beneficial arrangement for a reproductive print after *The Death of the Earl of Chatham*. In 1779, after an unsuccessful attempt to persuade the Guildhall to commission a

painting as a memorial for the Earl of Chatham, Boydell instead arranged to collect subscriptions for reproductive prints after Copley's painting.

Boydell was even more closely involved as virtual impresario for Copley's great history painting *The Death of Major Peirson*, a masterful demonstration of Copley's accomplishment in painting topical subjects with popular appeal in the grand style.²¹ Like West's *The Death of General Wolfe*, Copley's painting of *The Death of Major Peirson* capitalized on a national subject well suited to stir patriotic sentiment. The events combined the glorious triumph of British military and the heroic death of a young commanding officer at the moment of victory. On the night of January 5, 1781, a substantial French force seized control of St. Helier, the capital of the English island of Jersey. The ranking officer of the defending British troops, 24-year-old Major Francis Peirson took command and crushed the invasion. Although victorious, he was mortally wounded by enemy fire. A black servant retaliated by shooting the French soldier who made the fatal shot.

Copley did not paint on speculation this time, but was commissioned by Boydell who paid him £800. Copley and Boydell thus partnered in exploiting the potential of a major monumental history subject, a reproductive print market, and the publicity and admission revenue of a major independent exhibition. Copley first displayed this picture, along with his earlier *The Death of the Earl of Chatham*, in May 1784, again in a private exhibition at the Haymarket coinciding with the annual spring exhibition at the Royal Academy. After this private exhibition of this work with Copley's earlier *The Death of the Earl of Chatham*, Boydell displayed *The Death of Major Peirson* at his gallery in Cheapside and oversaw the production and sale of the print after it.

A brochure served the important function of a proposal for a reproductive print to be engraved by James Heath. The pamphlet also described the action and presented "the facts" represented in the painting thereby promoting the "truth" and accuracy of Copley's efforts. The artist claimed topographical accuracy and portrait likenesses of the central officers for which a key was provided. He expended much energy and time on research and numerous preparatory drawings and oil sketches to achieve the accuracy of portraits, costume and setting detail and to manage the intricacies of his elaborate composition. Despite the stated emphasis on facts to satisfy the reportage aspect of his project, Copley, however, also contrived the composition to optimize the drama and theatricality of his painting to satisfy the dictates of grand style history painting. As with the pieta quotation in *The Death of the Earl of Chatham*, Copley, like West, drew associations between his portrayal of the dying officer in *The Death of Major Peirson* and Christian martyrdom from centuries of European painting traditions. The central group relies on the composition of *The Entombment of Christ* by Rubens after Caravaggio and the whole picture is similar to compositions of *The Massacre of Innocents*, including one by Rubens and one by Antonio Tempesta.

Despite much public acclaim and financial success, Copley's entrepreneurial efforts met with some harsh criticism. The associated commercialism was deemed by many as unbecoming to an academic painter and even potentially casting

aspersion on the national school of painting. As spokesman for the Royal Academy, Chambers called Copley's exhibit "a raree-show."²² Others questioned the propriety of such blatantly commercial activities for artists. The English engraver Valentine Green denounced the practice of independent exhibitions as humiliating and complained that the English were "making Marchand d'Estampes of our first men of Genius and reducing the study of their Professions to Connoisseurship in proof impressions from Engravings."²³

Interestingly, in contrast, John Boydell was frequently praised as a commercial Maeceneas for his public spirit and his encouragement of a national school of history painting. The commercial market place proved to be an effective arena for patronage of the arts in providing a means to transfer art consumption from the long-standing monopoly of privileged individuals to a community of anonymous private consumers. Along with this transference of patronage came a realignment of cultural privilege. The print market gave patronage to aspiring artists, while simultaneously bringing the arts to audiences formerly excluded from that arena and thereby opening the potential of the fine arts to inform and mediate cultural values that defined the nation.

Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery was one of the most original attempts to target mass audiences through the market for reproductive prints. Boydell undertook an ambitious program to improve the state of the arts in England, particularly history painting. While at the same time based on previous experience in the reproductive print market, he anticipated a considerable profit. In keeping with patriotic undercurrents, he fixed on illustrating the works of the nation's greatest poet, William Shakespeare. For the Shakespeare Gallery scheme, Boydell commissioned exhibition paintings from the leading artists of the day, almost all of whom were also members of the Royal Academy. Boydell displayed these pictures in his purpose-built Shakespeare Gallery at the fashionable Pall Mall. In addition to an admission charge to view the exhibition, Boydell's primary income was to come from reproductive prints published by subscription. He produced an elegant folio edition of large engravings after the paintings and a series of smaller prints to illustrate a nine-volume edition of the plays.

The Shakespeare Gallery spawned several imitators at the end of the eighteenth century. Following on from Boydell's success with Shakespeare, each competing publisher astutely rallied around nationalistic themes and selected a "great" British text to illustrate. John Henry Fuseli launched an individual effort to illustrate Milton; Thomas Macklin commissioned artists to illustrate the English Bible; and Robert Bowyer engaged the nation's artists to illustrate *The History of England* by David Hume, who was considered the most successful and widely celebrated British historian to date.²⁴ Dedicated to the encouragement of an English school of history painting, these galleries and related illustrated publications aimed to redress an imbalance between the recognized literary achievements of the nation and the deficiencies in the visual arts.

Significantly, in their role as patrons of the arts, these print publishers all stated a common nationalistic aim shared by the founders of the Royal Academy to encourage English painters as they vied with continental counterparts for

opportunity and recognition. Robert Bowyer, for example, presented his plan as “a Great National Undertaking” and styled his project specifically as “a monument worthy the munificence and patriotic spirit of Britons” and a “national work” consisting of the “combined exertions of the most eminent native abilities, in celebrating native worth.”²⁵ Bowyer thus made an overtly nationalistic call to rally Englishmen in support of his scheme to encourage growth of the arts in the aid of history. He even boasted optimistically that this alternative form of patronage, which rested in “the private purses of individuals” might prove superior to that provided by church, aristocracy, or even royalty:

In foreign countries no work of any magnitude has been undertaken without the aid of a royal treasury: it is for Britain alone to boast, that in her dominions the purses of private individuals can effect more, than in other realms the wealth of monarchs dare attempt. Elsewhere the risk would have been madness: but it is otherwise here, where to deserve the patronage of the public is to secure it.²⁶

Bowyer’s notion of the new public was relatively inclusive, reaching beyond a limited elite. He predicted that, since engraving has become a branch of trade, “public patronage will have a favourable opportunity of stretching her fostering hand, far wider than private encouragement could reach; whilst the art of the engraver multiplies and diffuses those beauties which must otherwise be confined to a single cabinet.”²⁷ This more comprehensive strategy necessarily broadened notions of nationhood in the construction of English history, which Bowyer’s project represented.

Bowyer’s challenge to more traditional forms of patronage followed shortly on West’s Windsor Castle Series commissioned by King George. Interestingly, Bowyer commissioned three paintings from West. Reflecting the varying purposes and audiences; however, the work West produced for each project were quite different. In keeping with the royal commission for public ceremonial space, in his monumental paintings for the Audience Chamber at Windsor, West had rendered events from the English past as significant and memorable moments in national history and celebrated significant historical figures who stood as examples of heroic behavior befitting national honor. The Historic Gallery project presented a divergent agenda and audience. Compared with the Windsor series, the paintings that West executed for Bowyer differ in narrative content, format, and style revealing a shift in the representation of “national” history to accord with the new collective audience of private citizens. Epic history painting in the academic tradition was transformed by print culture into a sentimental genre. Parallel to the development of the novel in literature, the visual arts embraced a specialized vocabulary of morality and humanity divorced from the civic language of public affairs.²⁸ Although Bowyer, like Boydell, asserted that his purpose was to encourage the high art of history painting, he and his artists made accommodations to the changing audience and nationalism. Accordingly, Bowyer and his artists reconceived history painting as less heroic and more sentimental. None of Bowyer’s pictures

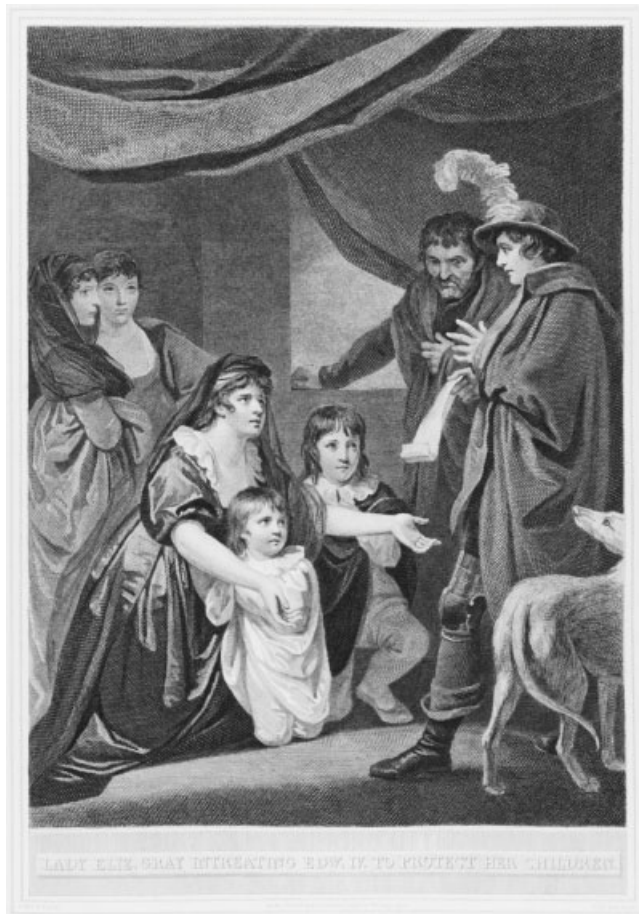


FIG. 9.2 William Bromley after John Opie, *Lady Elizabeth Gray Entreating Edward IV to Protect her Children*, etching and engraving, 316×223 mm, 1800.

Source: From Bowyer, R. (1812) *A Series of One Hundred and Ninety-Six Engravings, (in the Line Manner) by the First Artists in the Country, Illustrative of the History of England*, London. Courtesy of The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

are epic or monumental in the way that the paintings for West's Windsor Castle series are. Pictures from the Historic Gallery that depict disinterested action of a political or military nature in the service of public benefit are virtually non-existent. Furthermore, even pictures that ostensibly depict heroic action or civic virtue are, upon closer analysis, imbued with sentiment. Overall, themes of moral sympathy and social sentiment predominate Bowyer's illustrations of English history, as does an emphasis on domesticity and virtuous heroines.

While West's Windsor Castle paintings did focus somewhat on the humanity and heroism of Queen Philippa, with the broadening private audiences, the emphasis on female heroes and feminine sentiment as a primary subject for history

painting gained increasing popularity. Bowyer's Historic Gallery presented many examples. William Bromley's engraving after John Opie's *Lady Elizabeth Gray Entreating Edward the Fourth to Protect her Children* (1800) (Fig. 9.2) is a striking example of the increasing intimacy and interiority of historical narrative. Here, the public realm of state politics or military exploit is completely neglected. Royal characters are represented in the most private of circumstances and the viewer is allowed a glimpse of private sentiments. The print illustrates the story of the romance and subsequent marriage between Edward IV and Lady Elizabeth Gray, focusing solely on the stirring of the prince's affection for the young widow who threw herself at his mercy. The lady, kneeling before the prince, pleads her case while sheltering her younger child.

As in virtually all of the work commissioned for Bowyer's Historic Gallery, Opie paid little attention to describing setting, costume, or accoutrements with historical accuracy. The composition is limited to a few main protagonists to allow focus on the expression of passion and relationships. The illustration focuses solely on the emotional dynamics of the story and the moral virtue of the female protagonist. The artist has represented the woman and her child as agents of social attachment replacing the attributes of stoic virtue as civilizing forces for the new nation. In this way, Bowyer and his artists affirmed the established commercial order as integral to nationhood by illustrating the moral conduct of members of a British nation that could embrace those formerly disenfranchised from political and cultural privilege.

Ultimately, history painting and portraiture were both replaced by landscape painting. Rising from the lower hierarchies of painting below either history painting or portraiture, landscape ultimately triumphed as a major idiom in the British national school of painting. Landscape attracted the highest talent of artists like Thomas Gainsborough and J. M. W. Turner and seemed to express issues of deep national concern more effectively than history painting in the continental model ever did.

Notes

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- 2 Hutchison, S. C. (1968) *The History of the Royal Academy 1768–1768*, London: Chapman & Hall, 1.
- 3 Vaughan, W. (1999) *British Painting: the Golden Age from Hogarth to Turner*, London: Thames and Hudson, 99.
- 4 Vaughan (1999), 98.
- 5 Wark, R. (1975) "Introduction," in R. Wark (eds) *Joshua Reynolds, Discourses on Art*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- 6 Vaughan (1999), 101.
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- 8 See Snodin, M. (ed.) (2009) *Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press.
- 9 "George Vertue Notebooks" vols 1–6. The Walpole Society. Vols 18, 20, 22, 24, 26, 29, and 30, Oxford: Walpole Society, 1929–1950.
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- 14 Greenhouse, W. (1985) "Benjamin West and Edward III: a neoclassical painter and medieval history, *Art History*, June 8, 178–191; and von Erffa, H. and Staley, A. (1986) *The Paintings of Benjamin West*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 93–97 and catalogue entries 56–76.
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- 18 On the *Death of the Earl of Chatham* see Prown, J. D. (1966) *John Singleton Copley* 2 vols, Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, vol. 2, chapter 12, 275–291. See also, Ballew Neff, E. (1996) *John Singleton Copley in England*, London: Merrell Holberton, 66–67.
- 19 Altick, R. (1978) *The Shows of London*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 101ff.
- 20 Pamphlet quoted in full in Edwards, E. (1808) *Anecdotes of Painters who Have Resided or Been Born in England*, London: Leigh and Sotheby, xxvii–xxviii.
- 21 On *Death of Major Pierson*, see Ballew Neff, E. (1996) *John Singleton Copley in England*, London: Merrell Holberton, 67 and cat. no. 18.
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International Exhibitions

Linking Culture, Commerce, and Nation

Julie F. Codell

Mapping as Cultural Practice in International Exhibitions

Recent practitioners of New Geography suggest that mapping involves world-building, the production and planning of social relations, and visual exhilaration that were also the effects of international exhibitions whose organizers claimed to reflect reality and to imagine the future:

Mapping is a fantastic cultural project, creating and building the world as much as measuring and describing it ... the function of mapping is less to mirror reality than to engender the re-shaping of the worlds in which people live ... We have been adequately cautioned about mapping as a means of projecting power-knowledge, but what about mapping as a productive and liberating instrument, a world-enriching agent, especially in the design and planning arts? ... uncovering realities previously unseen or unimagined, even across seemingly exhausted grounds ... mapping *unfolds* potential; it re-makes territory over and over again, each time with new and diverse consequences.¹

International exhibitions reshaped the visual world's relation to social and economic forces and portrayed and imagined interconnections among nations around the world.

Mapping, as Corner suggests, is also about worlds not yet born, as well as how worlds appear. Maps are not passive records, but generate their own reading systems in relation to what they point to (mountains, bays, etc.) to create systems of meaning and an orientation to a sign system that we read as referring to the material or physical world. Maps are fictional, symbolic, and abstract, without a simple one-to-one relationship to the physical world (as if this were even possible). The Great Exhibition, like a map, reoriented visual culture in the

world by creating multiple visual sign systems in 1851, some of which were born there and would come to dominate international exhibitions and their related institutions – museums of everything from art to natural history into the twenty-first century.²

The many recent studies of these exhibitions have emphasized their expression of imperial policy, ethnographic presentations of real colonial subjects put on display, and contradictions between the stated intentions to link nations and the realpolitik competition for markets and empires among European nations that displayed their manufactured wares, machines, and fine arts. International exhibitions mapped a new visual regime that embraced an early form of globalization while also generating heightened nationalism. European nations “othered” not only their colonies and non-European worlds, but also each other, applying concepts of race, culture, technology, progress, and nationhood to the entire world.

One New Geography concept is the network, a word that appeared almost 200 years before the internet. Many European societies’ imperial ambitions were driven by rapid changes in communication (telegraph, telephone, the wire service) and transportation (Suez Canal, vast train networks across Europe and India). Networks enabled exchanges of goods, cultures, ideas, social values, and economic systems and were “integral to the reality of a home market, generating connections and exchanges ... as early at the eighteenth century.”³ International exhibitions offered the spectacle of goods and production technologies made available by these exchanges and connections.

The Great Exhibition of 1851 might be usefully viewed as a map, the first of a series of cultural and scientific maps represented by exhibitions’ displays of goods, raw materials, and machines. The British were also constructing parallel cosmological visual “maps” of the world as a microcosm – Kew Gardens with the world’s plant life, the British Museum with the world’s art, the British Library with the world’s books, and the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum) with the world’s crafts. International exhibitions were similarly intended to contain the world’s goods. However diverse the phantasmagoria of goods, exhibited goods were inscribed with a nineteenth-century impetus to classify, categorize, and replicate the riches of empire in British museums, archives, and botanical gardens.

Theorists Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze note that maps and books send out rhizomes that connect points to one another, making new, decentered links and meanings outside conventional centers or hierarchies.⁴ The Great Exhibition created new rhizomes that questioned older hierarchies, such as high art vs. crafts, manufacturing vs. handicrafts, metropole vs. colony. As Carol Breckenridge points out, “world fairs provoke new rituals of seeing” and “place objects in the service of commerce and in the service of the modern nation-state, with the inevitable imperial encounters ... they yoke cultural material with aesthetics, political and pragmatics.” Everyday objects are transformed “into the *spectacle of the ocular*.” Fairs “situated metropole and

colony within a single analytic field” to create an imagined world view and an equally imagined imposed unity of values “in a discursive space that was global, while nurturing nation-states that were culturally highly specific.”⁵ The Great Exhibition began a process of dissolving some hierarchies to open new relationships among culture, manufacturing, the arts and the mass public. Four exhibitions were especially central to creating new maps and rhizomes: the Great Exhibition of 1851, the Paris International Exhibition of 1878, the Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886, and the Franco-British Exhibition of 1908.

The Great Exhibition, 1851: Culture, Commerce, and Display

The Great Exhibition in 1851 inaugurated a radical revision in thinking about industrialism, nationalism, and the mass public together, beginning with its innovative glass and wrought iron building, the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, by Joseph Paxton. Organized under the auspices of Prince Albert, Queen Victoria’s husband, the Great Exhibition’s international scope revealed national differences and exposed the poor design of many British goods compared with products from the Continent, India, and the Middle East whose designs, high quality craftsmanship, and beauty took Europe by storm. This was not the first national exhibition, but its massive, international scale overwhelmed earlier national British or French exhibitions that preceded it. Hailed as a triumph for England, international cooperation, free trade, merchants, and workers whose labor was the center of most exhibition displays, the Exhibition was defined in different, often contradictory, ways. One of its contributions was to link commerce and culture often through complex, chaotic displays, blurred or invented categories of objects, and diverse intentions of its organizers who ranged from local township committees and urban industrial committees up to Prince Albert.

In 1851 world’s fairs, department stores, incessant advertising, and the ubiquity of visual images were still emerging as cultural forces and beginning to bring together diverse populations differentiated by region, language or dialect, class, gender, age, religious belief, and race. This visual world of goods and images began to circulate globally in periodical press illustrations and advertising, as well as in international exhibitions that occurred every two or three years somewhere in Europe, North America, or the empire. Some social class barriers were loosened through the exhibitions. After the first three weeks of 5-shilling admissions to limit spectators to the middle and upper classes, the Great Exhibition opened its doors to the working classes who could afford the 1-shilling fee on shilling days and time off from work. Fears over revolutionary Chartists in England who demanded universal suffrage in 1848 turned out to be unfounded, and the classes mingled harmoniously at the Exhibition. Workers were also included in local

planning committees. Over six million people attended the Great Exhibition, and many were workers taken for a free day excursion by their employers, working men's associations or mechanics' institutes, often riding special cheap trains to London.

When journalist Henry Mayhew, famous for his *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851) wrote his novel, *1851: or, The Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Sandboys and Family* (1851), illustrated by the caricaturist George Cruickshank, he identified many dominant characteristics either consolidated or introduced by the 1851 Great Exhibition through his fictional archetypal "sight-seers" as he called them:

The African had mounted his ostrich. The Crisp of the Desert had announced an excursion caravan from Zoolu to Fez. The Yakutskian Shillibeer had already started the first reindeer omnibus to Novogorod. Penny cargoes were steaming down Old Nile ... floating from the Punjab, and congregating down the Indus ... calling at the piers of Muscat and Aden, to pick up passengers for the Isthmus – at two-pence-a-head. The Esquimaux ... The Hottentot Venus ... The Yemassee ... The Truefit of New Zealand had dressed the full buzz wig, and cut and curled the horn of the chief of the Papuas... Alexis Soyer was preparing to open a restaurant of all nations, ... from pickled whelks to nightingales' tongues... Barnum, too, had "thrown up" Jenny Lind, and entered into an agreement with the Poor Law Commissioners to pay the Poor Rates of all England during one year for the sole possession of Somerset House, as a "Grand Hotel for all Nations"... every corner of the earth had sent some token of its skill and brotherly feeling ... Never was labour – whether mental or manual, whether the craft of the hand or of the brain – so much honoured – the first great recognition, perhaps, of the artistic qualities of the artisan.⁶

Here were international rhizomes that brought the goods of the world to London and created a space for the co-mingling of people from all socio-economic strata. Commerce was hailed as a unifying force replacing older homogenizing institutions, such as religion or local customs.

Exhibition displays, however, increasingly blurred distinctions among fine art, crafts, and technological inventions, all of which had equal status, display spaces, and popularity among spectators. Certain national, racial, and imperial assumptions guided displays and contents. For example, the British determined European strength lay in the fine arts, while colonial subjects presumably had a genius for crafts, despite millennia of Indian sculpture, painting, and architecture. Exhibitions reinforced national and racial stereotypes by restricting displays to predetermined categories. The organizers devised 30 categories of objects, 4 for raw materials, 6 for machines, 19 for manufactured objects, and 1 for all the fine and "plastic" arts, from painting and sculpture to mosaics and enamels. The fine arts were "illustrative of the taste and skill displayed in such application of human industry," a description that emphasized labor over aesthetic or design issues.⁷ Class X, for example, "Philosophical Instruments," included clocks, surgical instruments, and musical instruments. England won medals in this category. Medals were awarded for both the beauty and efficiency of these instruments.

Juries were composed of equal numbers of British and foreign judges and included such notables as astronomer John Herschel. One display exhibited 700 specimens of wood from around the globe with their places, names, and uses. Paul Greenhalgh notes that exhibitions had the “aim of promoting the principle of display,” at first as “a device for the enhancement of trade, for the promotion of new technology, for the education of the ignorant middle classes and for the elaboration of a political stance” (Greenhalgh, 1988, 3). Its utopian visual spectacle was intended to validate notions of progress, international cooperation, and world unity. The fine arts, relegated to a small display in 1851, were given a large place at the Paris Exhibition in 1855 to underscore the identity of Paris as the world’s greatest art center. Napoleon the Third sent a decree on the importance of the fine arts. In later exhibitions the arts became central, as fine arts display increased in size and artists competed for medals.

Visuality, Things, and the Display of Nations

The circulations of goods in exhibitions were part of larger processes of communication, transportation, and imperialism all represented through intense visualization by commercial and museum display systems, photography, illustrated magazines and newspapers, book illustrations, and even paintings that traveled around the world (e.g. William Holman Hunt’s *Light of the World* made a world tour starting in 1905). England’s network emerged as a result of both early industrialization and colonization.

Organizers believed the Exhibition marked a unique historical moment. In *The Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue of the Great Exhibition (1851)*, Henry Cole, later Director of the South Kensington Museum, began with a paean to “commercial industry,” which included handicrafts:

The activity of the present day chiefly develops itself in commercial industry, and it is in accordance with the spirit of the age that the nations of the world have now collected together their choicest productions ... an event like this Exhibition could not have taken place at any earlier period, and perhaps not among any other people than ourselves. The friendly confidence reposed by other nations in our institutions; the perfect security for property; the commercial freedom, and the facility of transport which England pre-eminently possesses, may all be brought forward as causes which have operated in establishing the Exhibition in London.⁸

The exhibition contributed to the widening sphere of visibility. Scopophilia, the love of seeing in a world rich in visual experiences, induced by the exhibition was matched by the new illustrated press. The exhibition’s organizers published guides and an extensive catalogue. The *Illustrated London News* regularly ran engravings of the objects, crowds, events, and the Crystal Palace’s floor plan. The series, *The Illustrated Exhibitor and Magazine of Arts*, published in 1852 by

John Cassell, contained myriad engravings ranging from the processes of making soap, hydraulics, button manufacture in Birmingham, to drawings of the insides of mollusks! *Punch* carried cartoons about the exhibition, and the *Art Journal* illustrated exhibition objects. Designer Matthew Digby Wyatt, secretary of the executive committee, had each London daily newspaper send him five copies of reports on the exhibition. Wyatt published *The Industrial Arts of the Nineteenth Century. A Series of Illustrations of the Choicest Specimens Produced by Every Nation, at the Great Exhibition of Works of Industry, 1851*, between 1851 and 1853.

The Exhibition was heavily documented, recorded, analyzed, and interpreted in publications in which aesthetics, science, manufacturing, and commercial topics were interconnected. Prominent scientists and scholars gave lectures that continued after the Exhibition to sum up the knowledge gathered in 1851. Reproductions of some artifacts found by Austen Henry Layard in the ancient Assyrian city of Nineveh taught attendees ancient history and piqued popular interest. World fairs promoted new products like Coleman's mustard (Paris, 1878), Fleishman's yeast, Goodyear India rubber (Philadelphia, 1876) and the ice cream cone (St. Louis, 1904). Goods for the home were also signs of progress and of high levels of civilizations, despite their often over-ornamented design and overstuffed surfaces, so annoying to the young William Morris when he visited the 1851 Exhibition. He was not the only critic of Victorian mid-century taste. Henry Cole, Augustus Welby Pugin, and John Ruskin all shared a view that beauty lay in the fitting of an object's form to its function with a minimal amount of decoration. Some businessmen argued, on the other hand, that if British objects were not beautiful, they still were valuable for being cheap and available to a large population.

The poet Baudelaire noted, "The entire visible universe is only a storehouse of images and signs to which the imagination assigns a place and a relative value; it is a kind of nourishment that the imagination must digest and transform,"⁹ much as we do with maps that are storehouses, as well as spurs to the imagination. Some Victorians described the 1851 Exhibition as a "showroom" for "merchandise."¹⁰ The exhibitions confused entertainment and education, remapping these areas and sending rhizomes across them and juxtaposing art with advertising and manufacturing. The twentieth-century philosopher Walter Benjamin noted, "World exhibitions are sites of pilgrimages to the commodity fetish,"¹¹ while Fyodor Dostoyevsky in 1863 condemned exhibitions as terrifying, false, apocalyptic, and determined by the worship of Baal.¹²

The Great Exhibition's *Catalogue* conveyed both the confusion of the mass of objects and new ideas about crafts, aesthetics, and labor still in formation. Thousands of individual exhibits linked raw materials from colonies with manufactured products made from these materials and produced in Europe. Their link was labor, whether by machine or human body, which turned raw materials into goods. The Exhibition's joint celebration of the machine and of human labor disguised the reality that machines had begun to replace human labour on a large

scale since the late eighteenth century. Connecting raw materials, manufacturing, and consumer goods into a visible set of links and processes, the exhibition defined empire as a source of raw materials and cheap labour.

One unexpected consequence was the reorganization of schools of design in Britain to improve British manufactured goods and expand employment for working class artisans. Another consequence was the concerted, systematic effort by art museum curators and administrators, a new breed of art professionals, to collect craft objects from around the world, especially high-quality crafts, such as textiles, leatherwork, woodcarving, and metalwork from India, Japan, and the Middle East. These became models for British manufacturing design.

A key element in the debate over British taste and technological progress was a debate over the aesthetic of machines that permitted objects to be over-decorated and materials to be imitated, so one material could look like another. Excessive decoration appealed to many consumers as a sign of quality and value. Painting techniques, like three-dimensional *trompe-d'oeil*, were applied to carpets and textiles, which, some argued, should instead exploit their two-dimensional surfaces, as in abstract designs from India and Turkey. Certain historical styles were upheld as ideal for imitation (e.g. Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Gothic, etc.). Pugin's Medieval Court seemed antithetical to the industrialized Crystal Palace exhibits, and many criticized it as false, unmodern, and over-decorated.¹³ Some exhibiting designers were concerned with modern issues, such as working-class housing, or domestic designs that promoted cleanliness, mobility, and multiple uses.

As historian Jeffrey Auerbach points out, in 1851, "the goods displayed did not just cater to middle-class taste, they helped form that taste, educating people not only about what to consume, but to consume in the first place" (121). Consumption and taste became social and moral issues, as well (Auerbach, 1999, 120). Organizers decided not to price objects, rejecting crass commercialism. Yet company handouts and guides indicated objects' prices and over 40000 people came to the Crystal Palace to buy exhibited goods. The economic system itself was on display and the arts, as well as manufactured goods, became part of that system. The free trade theme highlighted by the organizers endorsed international cooperation and interpreted industry as a means to mediate competition and conflict.

National Unity and the New

International exhibitions and their vast visual culture were part of the process of defining national identity, however imagined that national community might be. As Carol Breckenridge notes, "With the emergence of the nineteenth-century nation-state and its imperializing and disciplinary bureaucracies, new levels of precision and organization were reached. This new order called for agencies as archives, libraries, surveys, revenue bureaucracies, folklore and ethnographic agencies, censuses and museums. Thus, the collection of objects needs to be understood within this larger context of surveillance, recording, classifying and evaluating."¹⁴

Many Britons from all classes and regions came to London for the first time to see their own capital, forging a common, unifying experience. The exhibition opened up visual worlds of goods, inspired consumption by voluminous displays of domestic furnishings and goods from all over Britain and the world. The Exhibition coaxed attendees to see themselves as consumers *and* as united Britons and to learn to discriminate among purchases' value, price, quality, and taste. Taste would increasingly become a sign of social status, distinction and national identity after mid-century.

Of course, national unity was itself a fiction, more ideological than pragmatic. Exhibitions exposed and juxtaposed cultural differences, and cultural, regional, and linguistic differences co-existed even within a single country. The arts had a function in the emerging language of nationalism as markers of a nation's level of civilization and also of international cultural influences. Despite its industrial prowess, America, for example, was represented not only by its machines and high-quality manufactured goods, but primarily by Hiram Power's very popular *The Greek Slave* (Raby Castle, England), which had earlier toured America in 1847–1848. This sculpture raised political issues over America's slavery disguised in the statue of a Greek girl enslaved by Turks, as well as aesthetic issues over its nudity. American artist Peter Stephenson who exhibited the popular marble sculpture *The Wounded Indian* (1850) (Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia), and George Catlin, who exhibited images of Native Americans, raised questions about America's origins, civilization, and treatment of native peoples. Japanese art and architecture, frequently displayed in exhibitions from 1862 on, inspired the "stick" and "shingle" styles of American domestic architecture and the work of Frank Lloyd Wright. Japanese art inspired French nineteenth-century modernism, and African art inspired early twentieth-century French art, despite French views of Africans as "savages." Similarly, the stunning quality of Indian crafts, which became a rallying point for the British Arts and Crafts movement, was striking partly because the British erroneously viewed Indians as backward.

International exhibitions occurred every couple of years somewhere in the world and their formats were affected by other visual spectacles. The new three-ring circus, the Olympics, revived in Athens in 1896 and held in conjunction with international exhibitions in Paris, St. Louis, and London (1908), and Queen Victoria's silver, gold, and diamond Jubilees (1877, 1887, 1897, respectively) influenced spectators' expectations and international exhibition displays. Spectators compared international exhibitions to medieval tournaments and the ancient Olympics.¹⁵ The Victorian historian Thomas Macaulay compared the Great Exhibition to the *Arabian Nights*. By the turn of the last century, world exhibitions constructed a "phantasmagoria"¹⁶ of commodities and entertainments, much like theme parks today. The entertainment side of international exhibitions linked them to medieval fairs and festivals with food stalls, sports, music, actors, a "mass international popular culture" (Greenhalgh, 1988, 45) closer in scale to twentieth-century entertainment and mass rallies than to medieval popular culture.

The sites themselves became increasingly elaborate, highly landscaped, and full of unusual architecture, culminating in the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition with its neoclassical “white city,” artificial lake, and monumental sculpture. Circus impresario P. T. Barnum was a consultant for this exhibition. Buffalo in 1901 created a fantasyland in bright colors and in St. Louis in 1904 classical architecture and picturesque gardens spread out over 1272 acres. The Panama–California Exhibition in San Diego, 1915–1916, had a Court of Abundance. All these spaces reflected the excesses of fantasy and visual wonder of succeeding exhibitions, starting with the electrically lit 1878 Paris Exposition, a wonderland of mirrors, cascades, and Oriental architecture, a format repeated in the 1908 Franco-British exhibition where water, electricity, and oriental ornaments were combined.

Peter Hoffenberg argues that in later nineteenth-century exhibitions’ “large-scale cultural events and institutions” were more dynamic and effective in luring the public to imperial visions.¹⁷ Expanding popular forms of spectacle and fantasy embodied the ideology of a new, aggressive imperialism with the dual auras of fantasy and technological advancement (211). The spectator became the focus of later exhibitions intent on attracting the public more through an intensified “simultaneity” of experiences than on educating it.

After 1851, there was a surge in collecting Indian objects as collecting itself “became institutionalized and internationalized” in museums, department stores, fairs and similar institutions. These sites all linked art and commerce, as taste and economic success in trade became marks of national and social identities (Breckenridge, 1989, 208). Mechanics Institutes and other educational institutions created exhibitions of local histories, science, and technology. Some stores, like Liberty’s, juxtaposed high-end national and international goods (including imitations of Indian crafts), blurring the line between art and commerce and between authentic goods and cheap imitations.

Politically, the internationalism of Expositions provided opportunities for meeting on a grand scale for the cultivation of socialist movements. The socialist French commissioner of the 1867 exhibition, Frederic Le Play, invited workers from everywhere and provided housing for them. After the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, socialists disbanded at the Philadelphia 1876 exhibition, but a new socialist movement was founded at the 1889 Universal Exposition. Fairs were ideal for socialists’ international politics. In 1889 they rallied around the centenary of the French Revolution, while European monarchs refused to attend lest they appear to condone revolution.

The Great Exhibition brought assumptions about high art into explicit contact with industrialization, empire, rising middle-class patronage, political economy, mass markets, mass education, consumption, and nationhood. The popularity of machine displays endorsed a union of technology and culture apparent in new visual technologies, such as photography and panoramas, and the spread of museums into small cities and provinces. Panoramas were paintings in 360 degrees around a central stage from which spectators could wander along a rail to see the

entire scene of city or a famous battle, with nearly life-size figures. Many believed that exhibitions were educational for the general public (who had only rudimentary education until the 1870 Elementary Education Act). Art exhibitions held among London's poor in the East End and John Ruskin's development of scientific exhibitions in Sheffield, among other similar projects, created new public spaces where all classes, races, men, women, and children could mingle and share new knowledge about history, science, and art. After 1851 the fine arts gained more attention at subsequent exhibitions, in which they increasingly enlarged their exhibition space, as "high" art became a symbol of national character and dominance, matching industrial progress and imperialism as markers of national achievements and modernism. Exhibition juries awarded prizes for machines and objects in 1851 and fine art medals in subsequent exhibitions, as organizing committees became sensitive to national progress identified by aesthetics, not only by technology.

Spectacles beyond Time and Space

The Great Exhibition seemed enormous to its contemporaries but it was dwarfed by subsequent exhibitions in Europe, India, Australia, and North America.¹⁸ Its almost 14 000 exhibitors from 34 nations and over 6 million visitors were outsize by the Paris Exhibition of 1855 and by the still larger London International Exhibition of 1862 with the first display of the room designs and furnishings by Morris, Marshall, Faulkner, and Company soon to lead the Arts and Crafts Movement, and the 1867 Paris Universal Exposition that covered 41 acres on the Champs de Mars in Paris. The USA's first exhibition in Philadelphia attracted almost 10 million visitors with 48 acres of exhibitions in 1867, a centenary of America's Declaration of Independence. Size expanded further in Sydney in 1879 and Melbourne in 1880. In the 1880s, large exhibitions were held in Turin and Brussels and smaller ones in Newcastle, Ghent, Lille, Zurich, Bordeaux, Amsterdam, Caracas, and Calcutta. The 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition celebrating Columbus's "discovery" of North America had over 21 million visitors and the first Ferris wheel, outdone in turn by the 1900 Paris Exhibition's 48 million spectators viewing 9 million exhibitors, including a special exhibition on electricity that powered much of the machinery. Not surprisingly, exhibitions after 1851 were organized largely by centralized governments and produced endless volumes of reports, catalogues, statistics, and assessments. St. Louis in 1904 suffered the greatest deficit of American fairs. Though many fairs lost money, subsequent tourist business for years afterwards benefited cities.

Sight was not the only sense tapped by exhibitions. Sound recordings allowed attendees to hear opera and discover the telephone. Edison's two rooms featuring his incandescent light were very popular in the 1881 Paris International Exhibition of Electricity, initiating a series of electricity exhibitions. Exhibitions reflected the

urbanization of the world, the identification of a country with its urban center, usually its capital, and the competition for technology among nations for advancing trade and colonial domination. Motion became a feature in world's fairs from machines in 1851 to moving platforms. The Cineorama applied cinematography to the panorama, as ten cinemagraphs moved together around the spectator in Paris in 1900.

Time, space, and categories for things were transformed after 1851 as spectators became increasingly familiar with archaeology and colonial cultures, and exhibitions became increasingly "spectacalized." Visitors could see the world, or its highly selected objects taken as representative of whole cultures, in a few hours or a few visits. They could "see" time in displays of archaeological objects. Each subsequent exhibition sought new and unusual objects and displays, making categorizations increasingly difficult (where should an elephant made entirely of walnuts be listed?¹⁹) and necessitating a committee of scientists to create new classification systems for displays and objects for the St. Louis 1904 Exposition. Scientist William Whewell noted, "By annihilating the space which separates different nations we produce a spectacle in which is annihilated the time which separates one stage of a nation's progress from another."²⁰ Exhibitions combined notions of progress as inevitable with a version of evolution misapplied to nations and cultures.

Representing history as progress, Philadelphia celebrated the centenary of American independence in 1886, France the centenary of the Revolution in 1889, Chicago Columbus's arrival in the New World in 1893, Paris the new century in 1900, St. Louis the Louisiana Purchase in 1904, and the Franco-British exhibition, the 1904 Entente Cordiale in 1908. Exhibitions visualized and measured the time from the celebrated, nationalistic past event while arguing that in doing so they served social unity, peace, mass education, trade, and "progress" (Greenhalgh, 1988, 16–17).

The Fine Arts

After 1851, the fine arts became more prominent at international exhibitions, still linked to manufacturing design and considered an alternative to technology and science. The hierarchy of high and popular arts was leveled by juxtaposed displays and in exhibition publications. While the fine arts and crafts were kept distinct from popular entertainment, being in the same venue meant boundaries were blurred and both could be seen as entertainment. Works of art could be sold at exhibitions, entering exhibitions' mercantile and commercial functions. Fine arts displays were often the least visited, but many works found their way into national museums and private collections.

The fine arts was an inclusive category, embracing painting, sculpture, drawing, architecture, engraving, and prints; the British expanded the category to include painting on enamel and glass, carving, photography, textiles, and even electrotypes

of ancient works (Greenhalgh, 1988, 199). Mural and sculptural decorations were among exhibition sites, too. Painting displays were divided between the host country's half and half for all other nations. Once space was distributed, most countries used a jury system to select artists, usually the most successful and well known, excluding many younger artists. By 1867, artists had to be born after a certain date to qualify, but when numbers of exhibitions increased in the 1870s, famous artists could not keep up with exhibitions competing for their work, and private collectors were unwilling to have their works shipped off for months.

To meet increasing demands for painting, art works from earlier periods were displayed in the 1874 South Kensington exhibition, in Paris in 1889 and 1900, in Chicago in 1893, and in London in 1908. Some artists became national heroes, such as Eugene Delacroix (35 works) and J. A. Ingres (40 works) in the 1855 Exposition. Gustave Courbet had 11 works (although *The Studio* and *The Burial at Ornans* were rejected for lack of space, presumably). He created his own private pavilion for his works, a practice other artists copied: Edouard Manet, 1867; August Rodin, 1900; Le Corbusier, 1925 (Greenhalgh, 1988, 202). Rodin's *The Bronze Age* scandalized the 1878 Paris exhibition marked by conflicts between academic and avant-garde artists. By 1900, Rodin privately exhibited his work in his own pavilion. Decisions about French art were dominated by the Ecole des Beaux Arts, the centralized academy, which controlled juries and exhibitors for international expositions. French organizers often rejected their best artists. In Paris in 1900 impressionists and post-impressionists were exhibited and finally recognized, thanks to critic Roger Marx (Greenhalgh, 1988, 206). Art nouveau dominated exhibitions' displays and the Decorative Arts Palace, reaching an apex in the largest exhibited art nouveau collection at the 1908 Franco-British Exhibition, which housed 500 displays. France embraced art nouveau, but the British were less appreciative of this style.

Britain was the most prolific fine arts exhibitor, second only to France in non-British exhibitions. British artists generally did well in international exhibitions: John Everett Millais received numerous medals and Edward Burne-Jones, whose work influenced Continental symbolism, was much sought after. William Powell Frith and Lawrence Alma Tadema (though Dutch, he lived and worked in England) were well received. British and French art were often compared and contrasted in exhibition commentary, based on beliefs in national "schools."

African and Asian art was not included in fine art pavilions, but in ethnographic displays that had a profound influence on European art, despite this categorical inequity. The art of Japan, the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa entered European ethnography or natural history museums. African art at the 1900 Exposition appealed to the visiting French fauves and cubists, and the Palais du Trocadéro continued to house African and Oceanic art after the exposition; Picasso visited its collection there (Greenhalgh, 1988, 219–220).

Exhibition architecture was often innovative, influenced by engineers rather than by professional architects (Greenhalgh, 1988, 150–151), beginning with gardener Joseph Paxton's daring use of glass, wrought iron, and pre-fabrication

in the Crystal Palace.²¹ Glass and iron were used for some exposition buildings in Dublin, New York, and Paris's 1855 Palais de l'Industrie. Innovations in 1889 included the Eiffel Tower and the Galerie des Machines, its arches spanning a huge inner space designed by Charles Louis Ferdinand Dutert and engineered by Victor Contamin, winning the grand prize that year and remaining until 1910. Architect Louis Sullivan, who, like Frank Lloyd Wright, despised the classicism revived at the 1893 Chicago Fair, designed the Fair's Transportation Building. The Exposition of 1900 had a Rue des Nations, including architecture and décor from European and non-European countries. Kiralfy's White City for the 1908 Franco-British Exhibition, inspired by Chicago's structures, disguised its modern structural materials under plaster facing, and had an imposing stadium. The first Paris metro stations were created in preparation for expositions. Wembley Stadium was initially built as the Empire Stadium for the British Empire Exhibition of 1924. Major parks in Paris and Glasgow also housed exhibitions at various times. Subsequent exhibitions included LeCorbusier's Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau at the 1925 Paris Exposition des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes and Alvar Aalto's Finnish Pavilion in New York, 1939.²²

Displaying the Empire

At the Great Exhibition, colonial themes that would dominate later exhibitions were nascent. India's space was large and the place of honor in the court on the southwest corner of the intersection of the Crystal Palace's transepts along the processional aisle from where the Queen led rituals of opening and closing the exhibition. The popular Indian Court exemplified modern display techniques with carpets hung on the walls, not on the ground, and a vast array of palanquins, elephant trappings, thrones, crowns, scepters, vestments, metal vessels, weapons, woven and printed textiles, and shawls. One room featured the Raja of Travancore's ivory throne, a present to the queen; Prince Albert sat on it at the closing ceremonies.²³ An Indian Court appeared in Paris in 1867, at South Kensington exhibitions in the 1870s, Vienna in 1873, and Paris in 1878 where the Indian Court covered 20 000 square feet. In 1886 at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, Indian exhibits took up 103 000 square feet and cost £22 000. Indian palaces and courts appeared in exhibitions up through 1939, funded largely by the British government in India. In Paris in 1889 a reproduced "Cairo" had a long street with vendors, camels, belly dancers, and bartering shop owners, consolidating experience and pure fantasy from popular images and literature. The Franco-British Exhibition of 1908 had a huge building with minarets, towers, domes, and entertainment on Indian life, such as the Court of Honour in an invented "Mohammedan-Hindoo" style built by Imre Kiralfy, British musical entertainer and organizer of international exhibitions from 1890 on.²⁴ At the Empire Exhibition at Wembley, 1924, the official guidebook claimed that the exhibition, limited to Britain and its empire, demonstrated India's progress under British rule, also the message of the

Festival of Empire in 1911 at the Crystal Palace, re-located to Sydenham after 1851. The 1924 Indian court spread over 5 acres, with a palace on three of them, costing £180 000 (Greenhalgh, 1988, 61). The last imperial exhibition was in Glasgow in 1938. The “white” colonies and dominions – Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa – were differently displayed, almost as separate nations, and they were highly competitive with each other.

Empire dominated post-1851 exhibitions, as it became the marker of a nation’s greatness. Competition for colonies, especially in Africa, became fierce from the 1880s on. People from the colonies attended the 1851 exhibition; by 1867 they themselves were exhibited in Paris’s North African exhibits of bazaars, cafés, camels, and a Tunisian barbershop (Greenhalgh, 1988, 85). Colonial subjects, often brought at the peril of their health, appeared in live reconstructed villages from British and French colonies and were subject to the public’s gaze, like animals in a zoo, and to disease, cold, and lack of food or payment, usually lacking contractual protection against such treatment. Sometimes whole families, even extended families, were brought over; sometimes people in these recreated villages were strangers to each other.²⁵ They often performed daily tasks or, if artisans, produced crafts.

The Colonial and Indian Exhibition in 1886 opened with pageantry, processions, foreign dignitaries, and a triumphal arch in the Indian Court. Poet laureate Alfred Tennyson wrote a paean to the exhibition and to empire that was set to music by Arthur Sullivan. The exhibition, opened by Queen Victoria on May 4, 1886, attracted about 5.5 million visitors. Recreated villages, appearing to be “anthropologically correct” and therefore educational, were promoted as exotic and as the spoils of empire. Some displays were extravagant, including theatre performances, reconstructed temples, incense, music, and dancing girls from Java and Dahomey. In Philadelphia in 1876 there was an installation by Chinese, Arab, and Japanese draftsmen and a Turkish bazaar and café. Paris in 1878 had an Algerian bazaar and a Cairo street. In the 1880s Britain set up teahouses with Asian waiters. By 1889 colonials’ presence invoked a cosmology of all peoples (like the plants in Kew Garden) and an evolutionary belief in European superiority, while reflecting the emergence of anthropology in France and in Britain, a discipline that contributed to the belief in Europeans’ right to seize all colonial art and craft objects for European study.

The American writer Horace Greeley thought that Great Exhibition objects were “utterances,” manifesting “meaning, power, and spirit.”²⁶ Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai suggests that objects’ meanings follow their trajectories as their meanings shift through sequences of exchanges of uses and places to which objects are moved.²⁷ Many objects from international exhibitions found their way into private and public collections. One stunning example is the Jaipur Gate from the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, the central portion of the eastern Exhibition Road entrance to the Indian art-ware courts of the Colonial and Indian Exhibition held at South Kensington in 1886 and the entry to the Rajputana (now Rajasthan) section. The Maharaja of Jaipur, who sponsored a Jaipur Exhibition in 1883 simultaneous with an International Exhibition in Calcutta, paid for its construction.

Although carved and assembled by Indian craftsmen, the gate was a hybrid designed by Englishmen Colonel Samuel Swinton Jacob (1841–1917) and Surgeon-Major Thomas Holbein Hendley (1847–1917), who combined Mughal and Rajput architectural elements. The inscription in English, Sanskrit, and Latin on the front is the motto of the Maharajas of Jaipur: “where virtue is, there is victory.” The Latin inscription on the back reads “from the east comes light.” The gate was flanked by side screens later removed. Part of one screen is in the Horniman Museum, London. After its transfer to the Imperial Institute, the gate was donated to Hove Museum and Art Gallery in 1926 and erected in the garden when the Maharaja of Jaipur visited Hove in 1986 to mark India’s Independence.²⁸

The 1889 Paris Exposition was France’s response to the 1886 Colonial and Indian Exhibition. The French built elaborate pagodas, palaces, and bazaars representing their North African and Southeast Asian colonies on 100 acres of the Champs de Mars and the Trocadéro, and expanded its colonial exhibits for the 1900 exhibition. American imperialism was displayed first in 1901 at the Buffalo Pan American World’s fair and then in the 1904 St. Louis Fair’s displays of the Philippines, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Alaska, and Hawai’i.

Exhibition attendees could travel the world without leaving their country; Paul Gauguin was inspired to travel to the French colony of Tahiti. Recently conquered peoples, like the Maoris, were especially popular exhibits, often described as once savage, but displayed as docile, without considering the price they paid for this change or the genocide inflicted on them. African Americans had no representation in American exhibits and Native Americans were exhibited as passive and entertaining. T. N. Mukherji, an Indian curator sent to London to accompany and help arrange the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, commented on how Indian artisans attracted large crowds who saw them as strange, barbaric, and backward.²⁹ Mark Twain commented on how backward the colonies appeared in the 1867 exhibition.³⁰ These living displays were treated as scientific evidence for prejudicial assumptions about race that served to further justify colonialism.

Yet, exhibitions’ visual displays were opportunities for critiques of colonialism. To socialists and radicals exhibitions’ utopian promises were false and their real purpose was to promote capitalism’s inequalities of wealth. Art critic Theophile Gautier, responsible for the philosophy of “art for art’s sake” in France, noted in 1865: “In the Indian chiffons, in the Turkish embroidery, in the straw mats of Africa, there is a soul: the machine is without a soul, like Fedora”.³¹ Some attendees recognized that displays hid serious problems. A writer in *Revue des deux Mondes*, 1900, asked, “Why is starving India incarnated in well-coifed, well-nourished, well-clothed Indians? Because famine is not and never can be an Exposition attraction ... India is not only a warehouse, it is a cemetery”.³² Exhibitions avoided suggesting that colonies were not prosperous or colonials not happy, despite rising anti-imperialism in many colonies. When the Indian politician Dadabhai Naoroji, himself a Liberal Member of Parliament in London (1892–1895), spoke at the 1900 Paris Universal Exposition, he received a standing ovation when he first walked to the podium from where he condemned the British in India.³³

Nationalism, colonialism, and internationalism were bound together in the intentions and competitions of the exhibitions. Members of planning committees included active imperialists: the Earl of Derby, President of the Central Committee of the Franco-British Exhibition and the British Empire League, and Viscount Selby, Chair of both these organizations. George Birdwood, who organized the Indian section of the 1878 Paris Exhibition complete with extensive catalogues, was the historian of the East India Company, and an advocate for Indian crafts. For the 1909 Imperial International, Kiralfy created Irish, Scottish, Ceylonese, and Dahomeyan villages. A Senegalese village, created by France, was described in the Official Guide as lacking “all the fashions and utensils of the luxurious life,” implying that they were industrially backward (Greenhalgh, 1988, 92). For the 1911 coronation of George V, Kiralfy prepared more native villages and displays. Dutch and French exhibitors promoted their imperial resources. Even modest urban exhibitions embraced colonial displays; for several years beginning in 1862 the London South Kensington exhibitions displayed works from 35 colonies and dominions. Imperial exhibitions were held throughout Britain after 1900, using museum formats to promote empire.

International exhibitions fueled other nationalist and imperial spectacles. Kiralfy created independent extravaganzas like “Nero, or the Fall of Rome” in London in 1889; a reconstructed “Venice,” complete with water, reproductions of Venetian buildings, and an Italian choir of 1000 in 1891 and 1892; a “Grand History of America” in Chicago in 1894; and “Our Naval Victories, an American Naval Spectacle” in New York in 1895. From 1890 he worked with Barnum Enterprises. In 1895, Kiralfy created “India, a Grand Historical Spectacle” and “Savage South Africa Spectacle,” 1899, with Africans and Asians as exhibits themselves for the first time in Britain (Greenhalgh, 1988, 91), and he formed London Exhibitions Ltd.

Franco-British Exhibition, 1908: Modernism and Women

For this exhibition, impresario Kiralfy using the 1893 American model created his “White City,” a huge stadium that was used until 1914. The theme in 1908 was modernism and the exhibition sparked debates over the definition of modern art. British artists were selected by a committee that worked through artists’ professional societies (organized by genre or medium), a filtering system based on professional networks that reinforced conventional styles and well-known artists. This exhibition was marked by disruptive art politics: artists demanded that “modern” art – impressionism in France and French-influenced impressionist painters in England – be shown, a move resisted by a conservative selection committee on both sides of the Channel, led by the head of the French jury Leon Bonnat who resisted including impressionist and post-impressionist works. British impressionists, many in the New English Art Club, were increasingly studying in France to gain drawing skills that they felt the Royal Academy failed to supply and to study under a master in the French “atelier” system.

The 1908 exhibition debate over modern art was ultimately over which nation was more “modern.” Modern art was a separate category with its own space. Art became defined by national character and temperament in “schools” identified by country. Sir Isidore Spielmann, organizer of British fine art displays for several international exhibitions, promoted a nationalistic British modern represented by several generations of pre-Raphaelites. He failed to contact the International Society of Sculptors, Painters and Engravers for artists to exhibit, and British artists protested in a letter to *The Times* over the lack of internationalism in art displays. His brother Marion Harry Spielmann, critic and editor of the *Magazine of Art*, wrote the catalogue entry on British art for the exhibition, and he claimed (without evidence) that impressionism was inspired by pre-Raphaelitism. The disruptions opened the way for modern art to be included here and in subsequent exhibitions.

Closely tied to the definitions of modernism were debates over the changing roles of women. The American Expositions of 1876 in Philadelphia and 1893 in Chicago had Women’s Pavilions which both increased women’s visibility and awareness of their contributions in many fields. There were also women’s sections in the 1886 New Orleans Exposition and a pavilion of women’s industries in Glasgow in 1888. Some protested that special pavilions or exhibits about women marginalized their work. Among “invisible” workers at exhibitions, women ran the machines, like the boilers, and designed buildings and displays.

For Philadelphia, a women’s executive committee planned a section of the main building, but were denied space there and had to find private funds for their own building. Many press accounts focused on trivial objects like children’s clothes, paper flowers, butter sculpture, and painted shells. Serious works included Martha Coston’s Pyrotechnic Night-Signal used by the government, hand-run sewing machines, electric therapy equipment by Dr Elizabeth French, women engineers running machines and other inventions, education, clothing, paintings, and women writers, as well as feminist meetings of the Association for the Advancement of Women chaired by astronomer Maria Mitchell (Greenhalgh, 1988, 176–177).

At the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, the Women’s Building represented an articulated feminism with large displays of women’s sculpture, painting, and crafts (including Native American work), furniture, metalwork, engravings, and industrial designs. The building’s interior was designed by Alice Rideout and decorated with Mary Cassatt’s mural *Modern Woman*. Sophia Hayden, an MIT graduate, designed this Italian Renaissance style building (Greenhalgh, 1988, 180). Two hundred thousand women attended the exposition’s conference on women, including suffragists Elizabeth Stanton and Susan B. Anthony who had protested women’s segregation in Philadelphia. The French had a “Palais de la Femme” in 1900, but did not limit women to this space (Greenhalgh, 1988, 188–190).

It was in the arts that women’s work was most accepted. The percentage of work by women displayed in exhibitions from 1855 to 1900 averaged 3.5%, with France having the most works by women artists (Greenhalgh, 1988, 191–193).

Women were generally restricted to one work, although Kate Greenaway exhibited 13 works in 1889, and a few others were accorded more than one (Greenhalgh, 1988, 194).

The 1908 Franco-British Exhibition was a step backwards for women and the representation of their work. Women, who made up half the spectators, became increasingly prominent as consumers, the intended audience for displays of domestic items and crafts, and producers of display goods.³⁴ Women's work and politics were topics of this exhibition within and outside its "Palace of Women's Work," organized by a committee of aristocratic women, most related to men on the exhibition's Executive Committee. This emphasis on domestic life was intentionally *unfeminist*. Women's art displayed in the Fine Art Palace included photography, in which women were very active, but little space was devoted to women in science or industry, while displays of women's dilettantism and hobbies took up much space. The Women's Industrial Council protested over working-class women's 12-hour days as cleaners, vendors, and booth operators, with only one rest room for 1000 women workers provided by the YWCA, not the exhibition (Greenhalgh, 1988, 183–187).

Conclusion

A French spectator in 1900 noted the irony of the coming together of all nations but in separated sites, forming a "contradiction of a cosmopolitanism endorsed by all and of a nationalism each day more intransigent, everywhere more jealous of maintaining or restoring the integrity of the race, of the mother-tongue, of the laws, the traditions."³⁵ Competition for the market remained a key motivation driving exhibitions. Despite the 1851 exhibition's stated intentions of presenting a world in which nations could share ideas and compete in commerce, not war, European wars did not end, of course, and Britain had been involved in many conflicts over everything from fears of a papal takeover to the Russian threat to India. In 1848 the Continent erupted in revolution. In 1852 Louis Napoleon declared himself emperor, recalling Britain's earlier Napoleonic wars and in 1853 the Crimean War broke out. Commercial competition spilled over into competition among nations for exhibition mania. Napoleon III consciously sought to dazzle the whole world in the expositions of 1855 and 1867. The American government spent over 30 million dollars to exhibit between 1862 and 1926, largely from private funds.

While international exhibitions fueled nationalism and its expression in imperialism and economic competition, they also complicated national identities. Boundaries between national and international were permeable in manufacturing and in art. While many people were becoming aware of themselves as part of a nation in 1851, soon exhibition attendees saw themselves as world travelers. Imperialism defined new categories and disciplines – ethnography, anthropology – as well as profoundly affecting European art. African and Asian art helped shape

and define European modernism, despite Europeans' racism and ethnocentric display modes, including the display of colonial subjects. As art became a sign of national worth and took up more and more space in international exhibitions, it exemplified the permeability of national culture with internationalism and the serious consideration of colonial cultures as worthy influences on European cultures.

Notes

- 1 Corner, J. (1999) "The agency of mapping: speculation, critique and invention," in D. Cosgrove (ed.) *Mappings*, London: Reaktion Books, 213.
- 2 See Buzard, J. Childers, J. W. and Gillooly, E. (eds) (2007) *Victorian Prism: Refractions of the Crystal Palace*, Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, and a bibliography on international exhibitions at <http://www.tu-cottbus.de/BTU/Fak2/TheoArch/Wolke/eng/Bibliography/ExpoBibliography.htm>, retrieved September 6, 2012.
- 3 Mattelart, A. (1999) "Mapping modernity: utopia and communications networks," in D. Cosgrove (ed.) *Mappings*, London: Reaktion Books, 175.
- 4 Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 6–21.
- 5 Breckenridge, C. A. (1989) "The aesthetics and politics of colonial collecting: India at world fairs," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 31/2, 196. See also the website "A Treasury of World's Fair Art & Architecture" at <http://digital.lib.umd.edu/worldsfairs/index.jsp>.
- 6 Cited in Burton, A. (ed.) (2001) *Politics and Empire in Victorian Britain: a Reader*, London: Palgrave, 85–87.
- 7 Auerbach, J. A. (1999) *The Great Exhibition of 1851: a Nation on Display*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 93. Many of my comments are from Auerbach. Greenhalgh, P. (1988) *Ephemeral Vistas*, Manchester: Manchester University Press; Brain, R. (1993) *Going to the Fair: Readings in the Culture of Nineteenth-Century Exhibitions*, Cambridge: Whipple Museum of the History of Science; Findling, J. E. (1990) *Historical Dictionary of World's Fairs and Expositions 1851–1988*, New York: Greenwood Press; and Purbrick, L. (ed.) (2001) *The Great Exhibition of 1851: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, Manchester: Manchester University Press. See also Kriegel, L. (2007) *Grand Designs: Labor, Empire, and the Museum in Victorian Culture*, Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, and Rydell, R. W. (n.d.) "The books of the fairs: materials about world's fairs, 1834–1916," in Smithsonian Institution Libraries at <http://microformguides.gale.com/Data/Introductions/10020FM.htm>, retrieved September 6, 2012.
- 8 Cole, H. (1851) "Introduction," *Catalogue*, 3 vols, London: Spicer Brothers, Clowes and Sons, 1.
- 9 "Tout l'univers visible n'est qu'un magasin d'images et de signes auxquels l'imagination donnera une place et une valeur relative; c'est une espèce de pâture que l'imagination doit digérer et transformer," "Salon of 1859" (section IV: "Le gouvernement de l'imagination"), *Revue Française*, June 10–July 20, 1859.
- 10 Phrases are from "Helix," *Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review* (April 1850) and Hippolyte Taine, 1855, respectively, in Brain (1993), 25.

- 11 From *Reflections* (1979), in Brain (1993), 25.
- 12 Brain (1993), 189.
- 13 See Ganim, J. (2002) "Medievalism and Orientalism at the world's fairs," *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia: International Review of English Studies*, Aug, 179–190.
- 14 Breckenridge (1989), 195–196.
- 15 These analogies by L. F. M. R. Wolowski in 1848 are cited in Brain (1993), 21.
- 16 This word for the overwhelming sensory experience of abundance was first used by Walter Benjamin (1982), *Gesammelte Schriften*, V: *Das Passagenwerk*, R. Tiedemann (ed.), Frankfurt, 1090–1095. Benjamin applied it to nineteenth-century visual spectacles of commodities, beginning with the Parisian Arcades of shops under glass roofs, and referring to the disorienting, dreamy, sensory overload of commodities, and to his belief that visual experience was key to understanding history.
- 17 Hoffenberg, P. H. (2001) *An Empire on Display: English, Indian and Australian Exhibitions from the Crystal Palace to the Great War*, Berkeley, CA and London: University of California Press, 3.
- 18 There are several sources and websites that provide histories of international exhibitions and world's fairs: Geppert, A. C. T., Coffey, J. and Lau, T. (2000) "International Exhibitions, Expositions Universelles and World's Fairs, 1851–1951: a bibliography," *Wolkenkuckucksheim: Internationale Zeitschrift für Theorie und Wissenschaft der Architektur*, (Special Issue), available at <http://www.tu-cottbus.de/theoriederarchitektur/Wolke/eng/Bibliography/ExpoBibliography.htm> and the Smithsonian site at http://www.sil.si.edu/silpublications/Worlds-Fairs/WF_Format.cfm?format=Web%20Sites, both retrieved September 12, 2012.
- 19 See Greenhalgh (1988) 42, on the jumble of objects and activities in fin-de-siècle exhibitions.
- 20 "The General Bearing of the Great Exhibition on the Progress of Art and Science," 1852, in Brain (1993), 151.
- 21 See website "Victoria Station" on the 1851 Great Exhibition at <http://www.victorianstation.com/palace.html>.
- 22 The Crystal Palace was moved to Sydenham, but was destroyed by a fire in 1936. The 1876 Centennial Exposition's main building is now the Smithsonian Institution's Arts and Industries Building in Washington, DC. From Expo '29 in Seville, Spain, the "Plaza de España" is in a large park, and many pavilions have become Consulate-Generals' offices. The Exploratorium in San Francisco was the Palace of Fine Arts at the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition. In Brussels, the Atomium remains from the 1958 exposition. The Seattle Space Needle was the 1962 World's Fair's symbol, and the 1962 US pavilion became the Pacific Science Center. San Antonio kept the Tower of the Americas, the Institute of Texan Cultures, and the Convention Center from HemisFair '68. Moshe Safdie's Habitat 67, Buckminster Fuller's American pavilion (now the Biosphere), and the French pavilion (now the Casino de Montreal) remain from Expo '67 in Montreal. The Sunsphere remains from Knoxville's 1982 World's Fair. The Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago was the 1893 World Columbian Exposition's Palace of Fine Arts. The Royal Exhibition Building in Melbourne was constructed for the 1880 Melbourne International Exhibition. The EUR quarter in Rome, built for a planned 1942 World's Fair, was never used because of the Second World War; today it hosts governmental and private offices and some museums.
- 23 Breckenridge (1989), 203.

- 24 Described by art critic Walter Armstrong in 1908, cited in Greenhalgh (1989), 61.
- 25 See Mathur, S. (2007) *India by Design: Colonial History and Cultural Display*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, and Mathur, S. (2000) "Living ethnological exhibits: the case of 1886," *Cultural Anthropology*, 15, 4, 494–534. See also Chattopadhyay, S. (2005) "A critical history of architecture in a post-colonial world: a view from Indian history," *ARchitronic*, 6, 1, at <http://corbu2.caed.kent.edu/architronic/v6n1/v6n1.05a.html>, retrieved September 6, 2012.
- 26 "The Crystal Palace and its lessons: a lecture," 1852, in Brain (1993), 61.
- 27 Appadurai, A. (ed.) (1988) *The Social Life of Things*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 5.
- 28 Hove Museum and Art Gallery website, <http://www.brighton-hove-rpml.org.uk/Museums/hovemuseum/History/Pages/TheJaipurGate.aspx>, retrieved on September 12, 2012.
- 29 Mukherji, T. N. *Observations on the Indian and Colonial Exhibition* (1889), cited in Burton (2001), 245–246.
- 30 *The Innocents Abroad*, 1869, in Brain (1993) 177.
- 31 Gautier, T. (1865) "L'Inde" in *Caprices et Zigzags*, 1865, in Brain (1993) 177.
- 32 In Brain (1993), 184.
- 33 Brain (1993), 186.
- 34 For women living under purdah, there were "zenana days," special ladies-only events at exhibitions in India.
- 35 In Brain (1993), 165.

Itinerant Surrealism

British Surrealism either side of the Second World War

Ben Highmore

Introduction

There are various ways of treating British surrealism. The first, and by far the most popular approach, is to ignore it. Or when not ignoring it, to marginalize it in comparison to those practices coming from the seemingly more central (national, metropolitan) locations of surrealism.¹ The history and criticism of modern art, as it has been dominantly practiced in the twentieth century, has encouraged an “international perspective” on modern art that has always valued the new, the original, and the radical over the bound spaces of national art. To some degree this follows the internationalist drive of the avant-garde in their utopian desire to refuse the logic of the nation state. Yet the internationalism often practiced by art history has clearly performed a “global” nationalism whose chosen centres of art production coincide with the metropolitan centers of European and American economic and cultural wealth. In this, “*international modern art*” (or simply modern art) has been the alibi for a more pervasive form of nationalism whose imaginary borders extend far beyond their legal and physical boundaries. A quick scan through the surveys of “modern art” (in both museums and books) suggests that the geography of modern art was centered in cities like Paris, Vienna, and Berlin prior to the Second World War, moving to New York and Los Angeles in the second half of the twentieth century.

This sense of modern art’s global nationalism (which might also go by the name of Eurocentricism or imperialism) is neatly pictured by the US artist Mark Tansey in his painting *Triumph of the New York School* (1984), where two armies, meeting on a devastated battlefield seem to be signing a treaty. On the left and dressed in First World War military uniforms is the European contingent (Salvador

Dalí, Marcel Duchamp, Pablo Picasso, and others); on the right dressed mainly as GIs is the US group (Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Robert Motherwell, and so on). On the European side there are horses, on the US side an armored car: there are no women in either camp. The two figures signing the treaty are not painters but writers: for the US it is the art critic Clement Greenberg; for the Europeans it is the French writer and theorist of surrealism André Breton. The painting is a joke, but it is a serious one. It is a literalist translation of the various analogies that might describe a century of modern art seen from the perspective of global nationalism.²

From this perspective British surrealism would fail on a number of accounts: it would be seen as derivative, unoriginal, evolving merely as a result of the influence of the Parisian art world. In global nationalist terms it would be seen as parochial, existing on the outer rim of Parisian modernism, and as a mere satellite of the postwar expanded global footprint of (US) Anglophone culture. The “failure” of this parochialism could be read as the swapping of a metropolitan avant-garde boldness, for something cower, more muted, more provincial. One riposte to this perspective is to claim uniqueness and distinctiveness for British surrealism, not in relation to Paris (or later in relation to New York), but “on its own terms.” Thus a second way of treating British surrealism could be termed the “native” or “nativist” response (even though it has been practiced effectively by French and US historians).³ This is the argument that British surrealism is a distinct formation that is not a version of a more proper French original, but one that has its own specific national antecedents (a national tradition) that have shaped it, and which, in turn, it has shaped.

For British surrealism this perspective has been closely associated with the critic Herbert Read. Herbert Read was one of surrealism’s most effective critical champions and tireless promoters. His position recognizes the necessity of asserting the internationalism of the surrealist avant-garde while simultaneously insisting on the specificity of the English contribution to the “movement:”

From the moment of its birth Surrealism was an international phenomenon – the spontaneous generation of an international and fraternal *organism* in total contrast to the artificial manufacture of a collective *organisation* such as the League of Nations. It would therefore be contrary to the movement to present, as some have suggested, a specifically English edition of Surrealism. We who in England have announced our adherence to this movement have no other desire than to pool our resources in the general effort. Nevertheless, there is an English contribution to be made to this effort, and its strength and validity can only be shown by tracing its sources in the native tradition of our art and literature.⁴

The contradictions involved in declaring surrealism a movement that works against national borders while asserting the specificity of an English surrealist tradition is clearly evident in the genesis of the above quotation. Written as part of a long introduction to a volume on surrealism that was published the same year as the “International Surrealist Exhibition” in London (for which Read was the

leading organizer) it sought to position the British contribution as both equal and different to those from mainland Europe; of similar aesthetic value but unique in preoccupation and atmosphere.

Against these two approaches (an internationalism that remainders most of the world, and a nativism that argues for national specificity based on cultural heritage) I want to suggest a third approach. This would be to set British surrealism within a national (and international) context, but instead of reading it as the inheritor of a national tradition, this approach would work to describe and explain British surrealism in relation to its contemporaneous social and cultural contexts. The intention here, then, is not to provide a survey of British surrealism (that has been undertaken elsewhere⁵), nor to appraise it for its aesthetic merit, but to connect various elements of surrealism to their social and historical moments, and to see surrealism as responsive to these moments. My concern, then, is not genealogical (I am not tracing the emergence of an aesthetic, or its antecedents); rather I am interested in the moments when British surrealism becomes vividly social, when it interconnects with interests and issues from the world in general. My starting point is 1936. While this is not the first moment when surrealism is taken up in Britain, it is the moment when surrealism takes to the social stage in a concentrated way. Focusing on 1936, in the initial pages of this essay, allows me to posit, right from the word go, a number of surrealisms. From 1936 I will move to the Second World War and on into the present, treating surrealism not as an exclusive club, but as a set of proclivities and as a set of cultural resources that have been utilized to various ends.

There is an argument orchestrating this account of British surrealism. First, I want to suggest that, because of the delay in the sustained engagement with surrealism in Britain (Breton wrote the “Manifesto of Surrealism” in 1924⁶), when it eventually arrives in London in 1936 it is accompanied by a number of critiques. This means that some of the most avid supporters of surrealism in Britain are also surrealism’s best and most pertinent critics. Contradictorily, perhaps, rather than this resulting in British artists moving away from the original impetus of surrealism, I want to argue that it reconnects them to surrealism’s initial energy and critical potential. Second, and connected to this, when surrealism “appears” in Britain in 1936 the “storms of war” are already in the air (Adolph Hitler, “Führer of the German Reich,” was rearming Germany and had reoccupied the Rhineland; Franco’s fascist forces were successfully fighting for control of Spain). Given that many British adherents of surrealism were (like their French counterparts) vociferously anti-fascist as well as socialist, aesthetic practice in 1936 was always open to the scrutiny and the “test” of social and political urgency. Thus British surrealism, I would argue, was from the start an art movement affected by war, a “war art” in a manner of speaking. Third (and again linked to the previous two points), British surrealism was from the beginning enmeshed in vernacular cultural forms that come to the fore in the period after the war and into the present. The practice of surrealism, in both Britain and elsewhere, is never simply an art of expression; it is also, most crucially, an art of *discovery*. Surrealism is always (and more perfectly)

found outside the studio, the museum, or gallery: it is there on the beach, in the street, in shop windows, in bedrooms and cheap hotels. To insist on the social actuality of surrealism is to critique any tendency to turn it into an artistic style, an aesthetic parlour trick. These three interlaced arguments concerning British surrealism's skepticism toward mainstream surrealism (or what had become of certain tendencies within surrealism), its practice under the shadow of war, and its engagement with mundane, vernacular culture, provide the undertow of what follows.

The wager here is not that British surrealism should be treated as a unique variety of surrealism and should thereby be given honorable mention in the annals of avant-garde art, but that by treating all artworks as embedded in social and cultural networks that are always both local and (inter)national we produce better art and architectural history. Such a perspective doesn't simply work to give us a more productive context for studying art that had previously been seen as marginal to the canon of "great art;" it also works to provide more productive accounts of that canon. For example, Margaret Cohen's wonderful *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* reads canonical works of French surrealism (particularly André Breton's 1928 novel *Nadja*) by connecting them to specifically Parisian as well as national contexts: through contemporary tourist and travel guides and the history of revolutionary struggle that was enacted in the streets of Paris, in the name of attempting to change the social and political culture of France.⁷ National frameworks, then, are a way of insisting on the spatial and temporal specificity of artworks, while refusing to see these spatial and temporal specificities as isolated: artworks connect across time and space within and across the material and imaginary borders of nation states.

Swanage 1936

In April 1936 *Architectural Review* published an article by Paul Nash entitled "Swanage or seaside surrealism."⁸ In their July 1936 issue the same magazine announced a "Holiday Surrealism" competition offering a prize to its readers for holiday photographs that offer the best "spontaneous examples of surrealism discerned in English holiday resorts."⁹ The judges were Nash, the painter and writer Roland Penrose, and the magazine's editor (Hubert de Cronin Hastings). Against the prevailing notion of surrealism as the deployment of techniques for fabricating photographic images (collage, for instance, or photographic processes like solarization¹⁰), *Architectural Review* readers were being asked to locate surrealism "out there" in the physical world. Or, more pointedly, they were being asked to find them out there in the world of the English holiday resort. Nash's article was an example of how to do this.

His article, and the images that he used to illustrate it with, shows a version of British surrealism as an approach to place, where landscape is treated as a dynamic social space, embedded in history, where nature and human endeavor meet and

compete. That the results would be surreal seems to emerge from two different forces. The first is historical and relates to the way that industrialism has traditionally dressed itself up in styles from the past. Sometimes this is done to awe-inspiring effect. For instance in a later essay Nash writes about Isambard Kingdom Brunel's suspension bridge over the Avon Gorge in Bristol:

Far above, at a sickening height, hung a crimson bridge held over the chasm by immense chains which swung across and threaded into the eyes of two strangely shaped towers at the full height of either cliff. These towers had a vague likeness to something out of Egypt, yet recalled somehow the Earl's Court Exhibition. But in the gloaming their quaintness changed to romantic glamour and an indefinite architectural dignity. The whole scene, in fact, set in the pale illumination of the afterglow, had a poetic spell.¹¹

This "modern" bridge, improbably slung across a vast gorge in the landscape, and looking like it could have come from Egypt, produces surreal affects. But while Brunel's bridge might be majestic, the results can also be ludicrous and show the vain pomposity of wealthy industrialists as they stamp their mark on the landscape. The second force is nature itself. Not only is the natural world the background against which these forms look out of place, nature is also an active agent, which in the end will return anything and everything "to the soil." But it is also a form of architecture that always seems to outstrip (in plain strangeness) the attempts that people make to generate the marvellous. Thus it is the uncanny environment of Bristol's landscape that provokes the bridge: "But here in the Avon Gorge I had no doubt whatever that it was the natural features and spirit of the space that inspired irrational dreams."¹²

For Nash, seaside towns like Swanage are more often marked by the ludicrous aspirations of the wealthy than by the "irrational dreams" of Brunel. In 1935 Nash spent the year driving around Dorset preparing his travel guide *Dorset Shell Guide*.¹³ "Swanage or seaside surrealism" can be seen as a result of this immersion in the area, and as a product of his insistent reading of the coastal towns of Dorset. His account of Swanage is equally attentive to both the natural and social environment of the town. He describes the affective pull of Swanage: "Quite apart from its superb natural setting, its quarry landscapes and the lovely bay, it has a strange fascination like all things which combine beauty, ugliness, and the power to disquiet."¹⁴ Disquietude, more than the marvellous, is the single most important characteristic of surrealism, and for Nash it is not only in the face of the sublime sight of the Avon Gorge that disquiet can be found, but in the strange ugliness that modernity has fashioned in Swanage.

Nash's account of Swanage begins by placing the town in a geological time-frame: "In the early ages, Swanage was a haunt of turtles and crocodiles, as the fossil remains will show."¹⁵ As his narrative of the place proceeds he shows how it became, in Victorian times, a family place, unlike many of the seaside towns

frequented by “aristocratic roués and loafers” (Nash is quoting nineteenth-century accounts of Swanage). The Victorian “niceness” produced “the most debilitating ambitions of smugness and development.”¹⁶ As it was constantly evolving from a small fishing village to a modern seaside town “the whole place was changing unbelievably. What remained of the fisherfolk leaned on the walls of the now dis-used jetty, glowered at the hideous façade of the new Parade, and spat disgustedly into the sea.” For Nash: “Modern Swanage is of such extreme ugliness architecturally, that the inhabitants instinctively look out to sea or across the bay to the noble contour of Ballard Head.”¹⁷

So far this account sounds like any number of nostalgic complaints of modernity as ugly. Yet what Nash produces is a reading of it that sees the class ambition written into the landscape as a disquieting incongruity that is surreal. Thus the ugliness of the architecture and the splendor of the natural surroundings provide the contradictory backdrop for Swanage’s most surreal elements. Illustrating this with a stark photograph of the seafront, where the sea and the Head are almost bleached out by the exposure, Nash shows us a monumental column with four stone balls on top (cannonballs) (Fig. 11.1). Nash asks the reader to “imagine a shipwrecked stranger” arriving in Swanage from the sea:

Incredulous, and fancying himself light-headed, he wanders down the deserted esplanade until a stone column surmounted by a pyramid of cannon-balls set askew looms in his path. Reading the inscription that this monument was raised to commemorate King Alfred’s victory over the Danes, he becomes convinced his reason has left him or that he is merely part of a dream.¹⁸

What produces the disorientation in the stranger is the historical juxtaposition of elements. As Nash goes on to show the monument was erected by John Mowlem in 1862. Mowlem was a local man who became enormously wealthy by exploiting the resources of the area (stone and labour). In a rivalry with another local big-wig, Mowlen stamped his ambition on the town by erecting the monument to King Alfred. His rival George Burt (also rich from the local stone) transplanted a number of lampposts to Swanage, which had once graced the pavements of London.

Swanage’s surreal disquiet is the product of the social aspirations of people such as Burt and Mowlen and pays little heed to the nature of the place; it uses the environment merely to showcase their wealth and ambition. In this surrealism is the juxtaposition of elements “out of time” and “out of place,” producing radical incongruities between the present (Swanage, 1935) and a number of different times and places. The monument itself coalesces the time of its creation (mid-nineteenth century) with its reference to the ninth century (Alfred the great ruled from 871–899), while also revealing the source of its benefactor’s wealth (it is made of the local stone). That a small, only recently transformed, fishing village should be the receptacle of such faux grandeur is Nash’s point. Surrealism is, then, a way of reading the built landscape in relation to the social relations of the people that shape it and the strange truncations of time and space that this shaping produces.



FIG. 11.1 Paul Nash: Image of *Alfred the Great Monument*, black and white negative, 69×113 mm, c.1935.

Source: From the Paul Nash Collection.

© Tate, London 2011.

The surrealism of the photograph is understated. Like many of the photographs that accompanied the work of French surrealists, in particular Jacques-André Boiffard's photographs of Paris that were used in Breton's *Nadja*, photography is used to insist on the strangeness of place.¹⁹ By using the blandest compositions (situating the objects in the center of the frame, and refusing oblique angles) photography is being used as a form of reportage: insisting again and again that surrealism is not a product of the torrid imagination of the surreal artists, but is a condition of modern life itself. But like many surreal photographs it also shows us a desolate landscape, free of people, as if this place exists on the other side of human history. The German critic Walter Benjamin, in a piece inspired by surrealist thinking, considers such photographs (and he has in mind the photographs of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century photographer Eugène Atget) as demonstrating an almost forensic attention to the urban environment as "crime scenes."²⁰ Nash's photograph of the Alfred the Great monument displays this attention,

and while Nash is mainly remembered today for his paintings, his photographs of Swanage and Dorset reveal a surrealism that is not so much an aesthetic production as a critical understanding of history as it has fashioned the landscape and the built environment.

Burlington Gardens 1936

Paul Nash exhibited a number of paintings at the 1936 "International Surrealist Exhibition" in London, along with a "found object" (interpreted) made from the driftwood of the Dorset coast. He was one of the 69 artists included in the exhibition,

and one of the 27 who were British. In writing an account of “British surrealism” it is worth insisting on the difficulty and uncertainty implied by both these terms. Many writers on surrealism refer to the work of people like Nash as English surrealists. Herbert Read, for instance, in his introduction to the 1936 publication *Surrealism*, linked surrealism to a specific English heritage. If such usage seems to exclude a poet like Dylan Thomas, who was Welsh, from being included, the term “British” might be the name for an unstable set of identifications. Len Lye the abstract filmmaker and painter, for instance, whose work was included in the exhibition, might be considered a British artist at the time as he was living and working in London, yet he was born in New Zealand and spent most of his life there. Francis Bacon, who was born and brought up in Ireland, was not included, because the committee considered him “not surrealist enough,” yet if he had been included, would he have figured as an “English,” or “British,” or “Irish” artist? Subsequent understandings of art history might also balk at the idea of excluding Bacon for his lack of surrealist ambience.

A useful example of the uncertainties of national and artistic affiliation can be demonstrated by a brief look at the artist Eileen Agar. Agar, who had been living in Swanage in 1935, and had had a brief but intense love affair with Paul Nash, was one of the artists chosen to represent a British contingent in the exhibition. Agar herself commented in her autobiography how ad hoc some of the choices had been and how unstable the category of “British” was:

I think it has to be admitted that the English committee hunted with some urgency for a reasonable quota of “Surrealists” to represent Britain in the International Surrealist Exhibition. Charles Howard, for instance, was an American abstract painter, and yet he was included because his work often incorporated what could be read as “biomorphic” forms.²¹

Agar herself was born in Argentina, considered herself to be part of the British contingent in Argentina, with a Scottish father and an American mother. At times the sense of British-ness seems to be only secured by the linguistic similarity and an identification with a cultural heritage. And in this way Agar identifies “her” surrealism with an English heritage: “Surrealism came from France to the shores of Albion (to mingle with our native roots in Blake, Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear).”²²

The New Burlington gallery exhibition was by all accounts a massive success and a truly international event bringing together work from 14 countries. Agar’s account of the exhibition is characteristically effervescent and, like most accounts, peppered with anecdotes:

The International Surrealist Exhibition was well-timed, and that very hot summer the New Burlington Galleries became a new source of wonder as we made living contact with the materialisations of strong spiritual forces, and sought to hunt down the mad beast of convention. You turned into Burlington Gardens, symbolically between the Royal Academy and Bond Street, and took the lift to the third floor of

an ordinary-looking building. After that the spectacle began. The large rooms were crowded with the works of de Chirico, Dalí, Duchamp, Brancusi, Giacometti, Klee, Miró, Picabia and Picasso amongst others. There were many notables present as well as many respectables, and they acted as people usually act when observed in an “immoral place.” They tried to be invisible.²³

The anecdotes are many: Dylan Thomas walking around with a teapot full of boiled string, asking people if they liked weak or strong; Shelia Legge with her face completely covered by roses, carrying a pork chop and an artificial leg, and so on.²⁴ Perhaps the most famous event is Salvador Dalí’s lecture, given by the artist in a “deep-sea diving suit, holding two borzois on the leash in one hand and a billiard cue in the other. A bejewelled sword hung at his side.”²⁵ Due to the heat and the fact that Dalí couldn’t remove his diving helmet he started to suffocate, and might have passed out if Gala (his wife) and Edward James hadn’t managed to unscrew the helmet.

The “International Surrealist Exhibition” worked to establish British surrealism “all at once.” This didn’t mean that surrealism arrived in Britain in a sudden burst. Many of the artists and organizers had been working with surrealist ideas and had been making connections with surrealists in Paris for a number of years. Yet it was the exhibition of 1936 that really gave surrealism in Britain a social currency and cultural vividness. Accounts of the exhibition suggest that during the months it was open over 1000 visitors a day came to the exhibition. Yet if British surrealism has this explosive showcase in 1936, it wasn’t long before the idea of British surrealism as an artistic movement was liable to be challenged, both from within and without.

Eileen Agar suggests that the sense of dramatic change might be read in some of the painting of the time. In the 1936 show, she exhibited (among others) the painting *Quadriga* (Fig. 11.2), which went on to be exhibited in the Museum of Modern Art, New York, exhibition “Fantastic Art: Dada and Surrealism” (1936–7). Using an image of a horse’s head from the Acropolis, Agar repeats the motif, weaving biomorphic tracery across the four sections, connecting it to images of fountains and memories of childhood horse riding adventures. Yet even in this work, which might so easily be seen as pointing backwards to archaic and pre-adult worlds, the actuality of the present and what by then seemed like an irreversible future, is also emerging on the surface:

One horse’s face became four ghost heads, agitated, beating rhythmic cabballistic convoluted signs expressing movement and anxiety, each square a different mood. Were they the four horses of the Apocalypse? War was encroaching on the selfish peace of England: the Spanish Civil War acted as a kind of distant prelude to the Second World War, and it was to be many years before the Four Horsemen allowed their steeds to return to my frame.²⁶

And it wasn’t only going to be Agar’s paintings that would refuse the relative comfort of archaic and childhood connotations: surrealism itself was changing.



FIG. 11.2 Eileen Agar: *Quadriga*, 521×610 mm, 1935.

Source: © Courtesy of the Penrose Collection © care of the Bridgeman Art Library / The Estate of Eileen Agar.

Blackheath 1936

By 1936 a small group of intellectuals (mainly artists, poets, and filmmakers) would regularly gather at the Blackheath home of the poet Kathleen Raine and the journalist and poet Charles Madge. Madge had been one of the first writers in Britain to seriously and critically assess surrealism. Included within the group were the poet David Gascoyne, whose *A Short Survey of Surrealism* had been published in 1935, and Humphrey Jennings the filmmaker and painter.²⁷ Both Jennings and Gascoyne had been on the organizing committee for the “International Surrealist Exhibition” and had exhibited within it. Toward the end of the year, in a short review of the book edited by Herbert Read (*Surrealism*), which included an introduction by Read and an essay by Hugh Sykes Davies, Jennings launched a vigorous and substantial critique of the way that surrealism was being framed in relation to a British cultural past. Crucially it was the way that Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Romanticism in general were being recruited by these British authors, against forms of classicism, and as a way of embedding

surrealism in a national tradition, that provoked the scorn of Jennings. For Jennings the disparaging of classicism in favor of romanticism was simply the swapping of one form of cultural and political conservatism for another:

Is it possible that in place of a classical-military-capitalist-ecclesiastical racket there has come into being a romantic-cultural-*soi-disant* co-operative-new uplift racket ready and delighted to use the “universal truths of romanticism—co-eval with the evolving consciousness of mankind” as symbols and tools for its own ends? Our “advanced” poster designers and “emancipated” business men—what a gift Surrealism is to them when it is presented in the auras of “necessity,” “culture” and “truth” with which Read and Sykes Davies invest it.²⁸

Scornful of the limitations that such romanticism puts on surrealism and perspicacious about the use it would be put to by generations of advertisers, Jennings balks at an image of surrealists as “petty seekers after mystery and poetry on deserted sea-shores and in misty junk-shops” (220). The targets are predominantly Herbert Read, but may also include something of the seaside surrealism of Paul Nash and Eileen Agar.

Against this, participants in the Blackheath discussions were imagining a surrealism that was clearly less interested in producing surreal products (artfully arranged found objects from seashores and junk-shops) than in realizing the potential of surrealism as a social project. This required recognizing that phenomena like coincidence, symbolism, and the unconscious were not individualistic experiences to be rendered in paint, collage, or construction, but profoundly social and collective experiences. There were a number of reasons why this might be an urgent matter. On the one hand theirs was a democratic political mission to find the symbols for collective experience from within actual collective experience. Second, in an age when the mass media was saturating collective life, it was crucial to find alternative avenues for mass representation.

Mass-Observation became a movement designed to release the unconscious energies of the masses through collective forms of authorship (books that would be made using diary reports from the mass of observers), and collective forms of research. Organized initially by Madge and Jennings, and then later by the anthropologist Tom Harrisson, Mass-Observation was (at least originally) a form of surrealism as social project, as a social and cultural science.²⁹ As well as encouraging participants to generate their own accounts of everyday life, and recruiting observers to provide more general accounts of ordinary life, social events themselves could also provoke an outburst of unconscious energies. Thus the abdication crisis in the winter of 1936 was not significant in and of itself for Mass-Observation: what was important was the way that the event revealed the sexual anxieties and desires of a nation. Similarly, the fire that burnt down the Crystal Palace in 1936 is only significant because it clearly affected a mass of people.

The fire that destroyed the Crystal Palace may have some significance in the fact that it destroyed a historically significant building that had once held the promise of empire under its glass sarcophagus, but it was the very fact that thousands and

thousands of people turned out to see it, that they were compelled by the destructive energy of the fire, which, for Mass-Observation, was a clue to its real significance. Were the spectators secretly enjoying both the destructive energy of the fire and the destruction of the building itself? Certainly in some of the descriptive passages in the newspaper there is a sense of awe, of fascination at the bedazzling spectacle: "Masses of glass dropped continually, and section by section the huge skeleton of ironwork visibly bent and twisted and fell with heavy crashes and in immense showers of sparks."³⁰ For David Gascoyne, writing as both a surrealist and a Mass-Observationist, the fire didn't simply speak of people's inner desires and anxieties but of a future that already existed in the present:

For most of us – we Mass-Observationists that is to say – it represented in a sort of symbolic way an image of the world-conflagration which we were already beginning to think of as about to break out, and we felt that it meant this, unconsciously, to the general public, hence the unusual fascination it seemed to have for everyone at the time.³¹

Events like the Crystal Palace fire and the abdication crisis are occasions when public "opinion" changes into public energy: ambiguous and contradictory energy, and so much more than anything that could be signaled by such a weak term as "opinion." And while the mass media (the press and the radio, primarily) do their best to turn such events into the mundane business of selling newspapers, even they can't subdue the restless unconscious energy alive in the world. So while Mass-Observation constantly criticizes the newspapers and the radio for the way it always invokes the "mass" without ever getting anywhere near a democratic form that might give them a voice, Mass-Observation also suggests a different way of reading the mass media. And here in the analysis of advertising and newspapers, Mass-Observation, importantly, are suggesting that surrealism can offer a way of reading the social forms of the media as a surrealist poetics:

Fourteen months as a reporter taught me to understand the queer poetry of the newspaper and the advertisement hoarding, and not to dismiss it simply because it is sensational and vulgar. Many critics of these things are critics only because they are snobs. They forget that there is a second element in them besides the sordid interest of newspaper-owner or advertiser: the element of the mass-wish. The best sub-editors and layout men are dominated by the mass-wish not only consciously, but unconsciously as well. For one thing, they have not the time very often to think out exactly what it is they are doing when they make up a page for the press. All they know is that their livelihood depends on their turning out a good page, which is to say the page that the public wants. The newspaper and the hoarding therefore serve as vehicles for the expression of unconscious fears and wishes of the mass.³²

There is, then, with Mass-Observation a distinction between surrealism as a category of objects or events, and surrealism as a methodological proposition from which to see the world (for instance, the proposition that the unconscious is not

“personal” but crucially cultural and social, in other words “collective”). In moving away from the production of surrealist artifacts, Mass-Observation remains true to something of the underlying force of surrealism. Perhaps there are moments when the only true surrealism has to refuse the lure of looking like surrealism.

From War to Postwar

That the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 had a substantial affect on British surrealism would, I imagine, hardly seem surprising. No doubt all art activity, of whatever tendency, is put in a different perspective by war (often making it one of the “luxuries” worth fighting for, but not necessarily with). Yet the peculiarity of surrealism, its double condition as a form of artistic production and something alive, out-there in the world, made it even more liable to transformation by war. Contradictorily, what emerges amongst surrealists is a sense that surrealist production is an inappropriate response to the horrific actuality of increased real-world surrealism. Thus Julian Trevelyan, who was a close friend of Roland Penrose as well as being involved with Mass-Observation, and who exhibited in the 1936 surrealist exhibition, would write in his memoirs of the 1930s and 40s:

Surrealism lost much of its impetus during the war. It became absurd to compose Surrealist confections when high explosives could do it so much better, and when German soldiers with Tommy-guns descended from the clouds on parachutes dressed as nuns. Life had caught up with Surrealism or Surrealism with life, and for a giddy moment we in England lived the irrational movement to its death.³³

This sense that surrealism in its social actuality was revealing its own deathly truth, made the idea of fabricating surreal “confections” indecent. Thus the wonderful sculpture that Trevelyan produced in 1937, *Machine for Making Clouds*, with a model of a boy’s head at the top of a meat mincing machine (as if the rest of the body had already been minced) and with white foam (the cloud) extruding from the base, when seen from perspective of war looked like an infantile parody of the real butchery taking place across Europe.

For Nigel Henderson, an artist who would only come to full artistic maturity in the postwar years, but who had grown up in surrealist circles (as a boy he had met Marx Ernst and Yves Tanguy, for instance) the war was traumatic and shockingly surreal:

Houses chopped by bombs while ladies were still sitting on the lavatory, the rest of the house gone but the wallpaper and the fires still burning in the grate. Who can hold a candle to that kind of real life Surrealism?³⁴

The question that the war poses for British surrealism is total: in the face of this kind of horror, which enacts the most horrendous disquieting incongruities, what could art (surrealist or not) have to offer?

For the artists Julian Trevelyan, Roland Penrose, Bill Hayter, and Buckland Wright the response to the new urgencies of war resulted in them forming the independent “Industrial Camouflage Research Unit,” which worked to find new ways of camouflaging large industrial buildings and war-related machinery and vehicles. When Trevelyan was called up he joined the army’s camouflage department, while Penrose became an acclaimed camouflage instructor writing books for the Home Guard on how to disguise buildings and people.³⁵ If surrealism before the war celebrated incongruity in all its forms, the job of camouflage is to produce congruity, to disguise factories, for instance, as part of a seamless rural landscape. If surrealism had sought to turn the world on its head, the war (that deathly real-world surrealism) turned artistic surrealism on its head. Yet for all that surrealism became a useful ingredient in the day-to-day job of camouflage, and both Trevelyan and Penrose made use of some of the more disquieting aspects of surrealism in their camouflage work (e.g. Trevelyan disguised pillboxes by turning them into ruins).

There is not the space here to give much of an account of the war years of British surrealism.³⁶ Many of the artists associated with pre-war British surrealism worked as war artists and produced some of the most memorable images in response to that military industrial conflict. The Second World War is often remembered through the images produced by Henry Moore of figures huddled in underground stations, or of Graham Sutherland’s paintings of devastated London, or Paul Nash’s *Totes Meer* (Dead Sea), a landscape of smashed aeroplanes that look like waves.³⁷ While Moore, Nash, and Sutherland were all (to various degrees) associated with pre-war surrealism, these images deploy none of the formal devices of surrealism. In the face of “real-life surrealism” the language of abrasive realism becomes the more useable form. Mass-Observation had become part of the Ministry of Information producing studies of wartime morale, while all the original founders of the movement had left.

In the postwar years, surrealism became an enlivening force for a group of artists deeply affected by their wartime experiences. But this wasn’t 1930s surrealism warmed up by a younger generation: in many ways it was both a return to the roots of surrealism, and a serious re-making of surrealism in the context of contemporary times. One of the major artists emerging out of the ruins of the war was Eduardo Paolozzi. His “British-ness” was inflected through a working-class immigrant upbringing in Edinburgh, and by the fact that he was interned in Scotland at the outbreak of war under the Emergency Powers of the Enemy Alien Act (his parents were Italian). After the war he struck up an intense friendship with Nigel Henderson who introduced him (often via Henderson’s mother, Wyn Henderson, who had worked for Peggy Guggenheim) to a variety of surrealists living and working in London and Paris.

Paolozzi remembers visiting Roland Penrose’s house with the surrealist and fashion journalist Toni del Renzio:

Together we would visit Roland Penrose at Downshire Hill, Hampstead – a home overflowing with bizarre books, African carvings, peculiar documents and strange

indescribable objects reflecting Penrose's admiration for Breton and Ernst. The Surrealist literature there and at Zwemmer's bookshop pointed to the making of art using unconventional materials and images. To my eye it was a happy return to my familiar Scottish street culture, to the cigarettes and film stars pasted in scrapbooks during my childhood.³⁸

Surrealism, as it is invoked here, is both a return to the vernacular street culture of his youth and a licence to make art from any materials that come to hand. This sense of surrealism as allowing for the serious consideration of material that had been deemed unworthy by the bastions of artistic taste is fundamental to early forms of surrealism, and essential for understanding the transformation of surrealism in the postwar period.³⁹

Paolozzi's involvement with the Independent Group (IG) at London's ICA (Institute of Contemporary Art) was important both for the way that Paolozzi introduced forms of mass culture into the discussion of art, and for the way that the IG facilitated, for Paolozzi, a more substantial separation from the surrealist "old-guard."⁴⁰ The ICA had been established by both Herbert Read and Roland Penrose as a way of promoting an international modernism, with surrealism and abstraction as the benchmarks of artistic value and authenticity. By the 1950s, surrealism, as it was promoted by Read and Penrose, could be seen as another form of cultural snobbery, excluding anything that might connect with the general (and commercial) culture. The IG, a loose affiliation of artists, architects, and writers, were dedicated to rescuing art from the likes of Read and Penrose. But in this they didn't reject surrealism: surrealism was a resource with which to understand the cultural situation, which included the mass commercial culture coming from (but not limited to) the USA.

Paolozzi's art in the 1950s and into the 1960s was based around the reclamation of "rubbish" – of material deemed unworthy, because it is ruined, childish, cheap, domestic, commercial, risqué, or simply discarded. On the one hand this included commercial publishing: science fiction magazines, photo journalism, and especially the new lifestyle color magazines featuring the latest domestic appliances, food, and so on. On the other hand his work included the physical world of broken toys, smashed machinery, and so on. In May 1958 at the ICA Paolozzi presented his work and gave an explanation of his working practice. The lecture introducing the work was called, significantly, "The metamorphosis of rubbish" and the event itself was titled "Image-Breaking, God-Making."

The ICA event is partly designed to establish a context for a recent set of sculptures including the Saint Sebastian sculptures (Fig. 11.3). These sculptures were made by pressing found objects (various forms of junk) into the surface of clay: "Into the clay I pressed pieces of metal, toys, etc. I also sometimes scored the clay... Either I would pour wax directly on to the clay to get a sheet or pour plaster onto the clay... The wax sheets were pressed around forms, cut up and added to forms or turned into shapes of their own. The waxes were cast into bronze."⁴¹

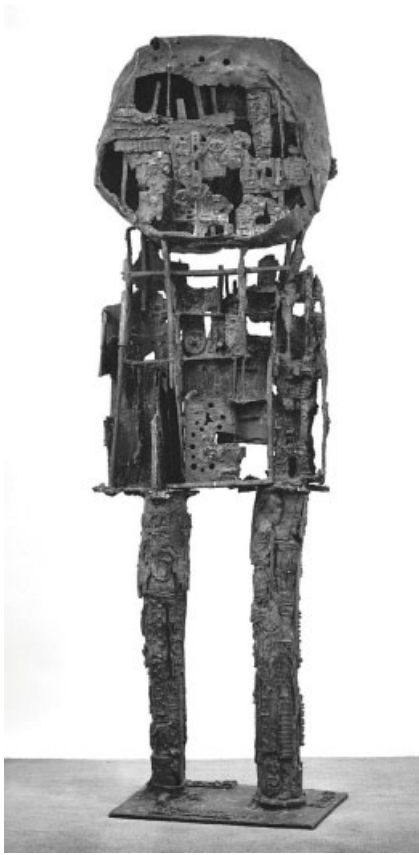


FIG. 11.3 Eduardo Paolozzi:
St Sebastian, No. 2, bronze,
2203×711×508 mm, 1957.
Source: Photograph by Robert E. Mates
© Solomon R. Guggenheim
Foundation, New York © Trustees of
the Paolozzi Foundation, Licensed by
DACS 2012.

Paolozzi's lecture at the ICA innumersates some of the material that was used in making this work:

METAMORPHOSIS OF RUBBISH

Dismembered lock
Toy frog
Rubber dragon
Toy camera
Assorted wheels and electrical parts
Clock parts
Broken comb
Bent fork
Various unidentified found objects
Parts of a radio
Old RAF bomb sight
Shaped pieces of wood
Natural objects such as pieces of bark
Gramophone parts model automobiles
Reject die castings from factory tip sites
CAR WRECKING YARDS AS HUNTING
GROUNDS.⁴²

This is a world of ruins that ranges from the mechanical to the organic, from the childish to the militaristic. If this is surrealism it is a surrealism more closely aligned to the art brut of artists like Dubuffet in Paris.

But while we could find the surreal in Paolozzi's work through the juxtaposition of incongruous materials (bomb sights and rubber dragons, for instance) it is ultimately in the working ethos of the finished sculpture that a sense of the surreal is most pronounced. In a short newspaper article reporting the ICA event a reporter from *The Times* writes:

Lured along to the Institute of Contemporary Arts in Dover Street by the promise of an "illustrated statement" by Eduardo Paolozzi widely advertised as "Image-making, God-breaking" we were disappointed to learn from the chairman that the title was not quite right. It should, apparently, have read "Image-breaking, God-making" – a somewhat ambitious commission, one felt, nevertheless.⁴³

God-breaking is the usual business of most avant-gardes: an iconoclasm that announces the audacity of the new. Surrealism, like other avant-gardes, shared this iconoclasm, most often in the form of its manifestos. By the 1950s such iconoclasm had

been performed more thoroughly through the conflicts of world war. More crucial, here, then is the insistent refusal simply to “make images,” to make just another picture or sculpture. The discarded shards that make up these sculptures present the viewer with a godless God, materially connected to a world of history: recent military history, natural history, machine history, the history of childhood, and so on.

St. Sebastian was a Christian martyr who was sentenced to death for his beliefs. Pierced with a multitude of arrows he survived and was nursed back to health. He was then beaten to death and thrown in a cesspit. That such a figure should resonate in the postwar period was due not simply to the recent cataclysm but to the sense of cosmic doom that continued alongside the material prosperity that was also emerging. Such a cosmic sense of history is present across all sorts of culture that participants in the IG (including Paolozzi) were interested in, not least in the science of cybernetics:

In a very real sense we are shipwrecked passengers on a doomed planet. Yet even in a shipwreck, human decencies and human values do not necessarily vanish, and we must make the most of them. We shall go down, but let it be in a manner to which we may look forward as worthy of our dignity.⁴⁴

These are the words of the author and predominant exponent of cybernetics, Norbert Wiener, describing the ever-present fact of entropy. But they could also be used to describe one overarching expression of postwar surrealism: the attempt to rescue optimism from oblivion.

British Surrealism Now

For contemporary artists in Britain, surrealism might be seen as just one resource amongst many, one tendency among myriad *isms* to be mimed and mined. Yet it would, I think, be hard to find many contemporary British artists that wholeheartedly identify as surrealists. Surrealism’s presence, though, might at times seem almost ubiquitous: any number of contemporary art installations, video works, performances, new media works, and so on, seem to shimmer with the sense of the uncanny that has always been the dominant mood of surrealist art. For contemporary artists working in Britain, surrealism provides an inescapable but difficult heritage. For contemporary artists, like the artists associated with the IG, any simple and direct affirmation of what Herbert Read called the “general effort” of surrealism, would suggest adherence to a patrician cultural heritage: an adherence constitutionally at odds with the demands of contemporary avant-gardism. At the same time, though, surrealism as a cultural poetics has so thoroughly penetrated both commercial culture (primarily through advertising) and modern art that it would be hard to think of many visual practices that don’t to some extent rely on a pantheon of surrealist techniques: found objects, automatism, psychic reality, bizarre juxtapositions, and so on.

The “young British artists” (that loose grouping of artists who gained reputations and notoriety in the 1990s) offer examples of what might be called “soft

surrealism,” producing work that relies on aesthetic effects common to surrealism but without sharing the exploratory ethos central to surrealism as a social project. Signature works by this group include Damien Hirst’s *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991) (a 14-foot tiger shark suspended in formaldehyde, set within a steel and glass vitrine) and Tracey Emin’s *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995* (1995) (an embroidered tent with the names of people she has slept with on the inside). Another “young British artist,” Sara Lucas, works with purposefully vulgar sexual substitutions (fried eggs for breasts, kebabs and kippers for vaginas), degraded materials (toilets and cigarettes), and religious symbolism. Later arrivals to this art scene would include the artists Jake and Dino Chapman with their 1995 sculpture of a group of pre-pubescent “children,” fused together, with misplaced genitals and orifices (anuses where mouths would be, penises for noses, and so on). The title of the work *Zygotic acceleration, Biogenetic de-sublimated libidinal model (enlarged×1000)*, together with the work itself, conjures up an uncannily joyful world of polymorphous perversity, coupled with a horrific sense of a grotesque and dangerous genetic experiment.

Such work as this resonates with the effects and affects of surrealist dramaturgy: sexual innuendo, explicitness, and vulgarity alongside the epic themes of death, love, and religion. Perhaps, though, what frames this work most thoroughly is the sense of artistic bravado and self-mythologizing (often deployed extremely effectively and ironically) that seems to underwrite it. While this work often acerbically reflects on a period obsessed with celebrities, it also can’t help perpetuating it. While many of the most famous surrealists (Dalí springs most readily to mind) traded on their self-aggrandizing role as artists, the most urgent condition for the dissemination of surrealism in Britain was, since the 1930s, the refusal of mythic individualism. In 1934, for example, Charles Madge, founder of Mass-Observation, would appreciatively quote the French poet and collagist George Hugnet, insisting that surrealism is “a laboratory of studies, of experimentation, that rejects all inclinations of individualism.”⁴⁵

Perhaps the contemporary artist who it is most useful to position within a lineage of British surrealism is Susan Hiller. As this chapter has been keen to argue, “British” is both a physical (and ideological) actuality and a fantasy. So as a final example it is fitting to choose an artist who was born and educated in the US (born in 1940 in Florida) but has been working in Britain since 1967. It is also fitting that Hiller wasn’t educated as an artist but as an anthropologist who became an artist partly as a way of renegotiating the Eurocentric and positivist tendencies within anthropology. That Hiller’s artwork can be understood in relation to surrealism is evident in the titles of several of her most well-known works from the 1970s onwards: *Sisters of Menon (and other automatic scripts)* (1981–2); *Dream Mapping* (1974); *Towards an Autobiography of Night* (1983); *From the Freud Museum* (1991–7); and *Psychic Archaeology* (2005).⁴⁶ In 1976 she co-authored with David Coxhead, *Dreams: Visions of the Night*, a cross-cultural study of dreams and dream interpretations that figure in artifacts from various periods across the globe.⁴⁷ As an editor her book *The Myth of Primitivism* was an important and critical response to the Eurocentric celebration of “the primitive” that had been central to many avant-gardes of the twentieth century, including surrealism.⁴⁸ In 2000 Hiller curated a travelling



FIG. 11.4 Susan Hiller: *Witness*, audio-sculpture, 400 speakers, wiring, steel structure, 10 CD players, switching equipment, lights; suspended from ceiling and walls; approx. dimensions 700×900 cm, 2000. Installation shot of the work at Artangel at the Chapel, Golbourne Road, London.

Source: Photography: Colin Davidson, Baltic, Gateshead 2004. © Susan Hiller. Courtesy: Timothy Taylor Gallery.

exhibition entitled *Dream Machines*, featuring an international array of artists who, using a variety of media (videos, installations, paintings, and so on) explore “altered” states of consciousness (drunken, hypnotized, hallucinating, and so on).⁴⁹

This cursory glance at Hiller’s career suggests an artist and an art practice that prioritizes dream states, and non-rational understandings of the world. Coupled with this is a refusal to see these states as exotic or “other” worldly, as the true domain of “tribal people,” for instance, or “the insane.” But while the subject matter is clearly within the arena of surrealist interests, it is her working process and her way of fashioning this material that links her most interestingly to the critical emergence of British surrealism in 1936. A single example will have to suffice to demonstrate this. *Witness* was first exhibited in 2000 (Fig. 11.4). An audio-sculpture, it consists of 400 small speakers hanging from the ceiling and wall at different heights (arranged so that listeners of various sizes, from

toddlers to adults, can hear the sound). Ten CD players relay accounts of UFO sightings and extraterrestrial encounters through the speakers. The speakers dangle from silver wiring in a darkened room, where a spotlight provides the semblance of a night scene in a silvery forest, and where the shadows cast from the speakers outline clichéd images of spaceships reminiscent of comic books and pastiches of science fiction films from the 1950s.

Over a period of roughly one year the witness accounts (about 80 of them initially compiled using archival sources) were recorded by a team of researchers. These testimonies come from around the world and are recorded in a number of different languages. The visitor's experience of the installation echoes, in part, its fabrication: to experience it is to witness the witnessing of an experience. As you move around the room picking up the tiny speakers and holding them to your ear, you hear people recounting improbable happenings, of the fear and awe that affected them, and of the state of disbelief they were in at the time. More than anything it is the sheer magnitude of the work that is affective, the polyphonic retelling of singular experiences. Like much of the work associated with "soft" surrealism, as well as the work of surrealism more generally it has an uncanny atmosphere, that haunts the listener. Unlike the work of many contemporary British artists, though, it insists on the collectiveness of such experiences, whether such experiences "actually" happened in a way that is being recounted is a moot point. The facts being relayed are the truth of people's beliefs.

For many artists surrealism was an invitation to experiment, to study the world from vantage points that would be counted out of court by the police of rationalism ("just tell us the facts"). This is not to offer recourse to the unreality of pure fantasy; rather it is to expand our "factual world" to include the materiality of desire, of anxiety, superstition, and so on. And this is why the less individualistic aspects of surrealism have always interconnected with anthropology and forms of ethnography.⁵⁰ After all if you are studying what a culture feels like, you would hardly be interested in facts if they didn't include the facts of belief, of experience. The serious commitment to research, to discovering the uncanny world that collectively exists, is also a testimony to Hiller's sense of taking artworks outside the realm of subjective expression. To translate *Witness* into the language of Mass-Observation would be to have *Witness* confront us with a mass-wish (who could lie about a wish?), and a mass-anxiety that simply short circuits discussion about the truth or falsity of the existence of UFOs.

In *Belshazzar's Feast* (1983–4), an earlier piece of work connected to *Witness*, Hiller produced a video installation that uses the video monitor as a modern-day hearth (the images in the video consist of the flames from a fireplace). The soundtrack consists of reported transmissions that occurred after the nightly TV shutdown (in the days before 24-hour television, of course). In her writings about this installation she describes the ethos and practice of her research:

My version quotes newspaper reports of "ghost" images appearing on television, reports that invariably locate the source of such images outside the subjects who

experience them. These projections thus become “transmissions,” messages that might appear on TV in our own living rooms. Like the language of the flames (“tongues of fire”), and the automatic scripts (“writing on the wall”), these incoherent insights at the margins of society and at the edge of consciousness stand as signs of what cannot be repressed or alienated, signs of that which is always already destroying the kingdom of law.⁵¹

The urgency surrounding surrealism in the present might be substantially different from that surrounding it in the 1930s, or in the 1950s, yet that sense of a force “already destroying the kingdom of law” might well be a constant (though often unarticulated) point of reference. And today it still might be worthwhile to sometimes side with these incoherent insights, to take sides against the “kingdom of law.”

Conclusion: Art in a National Frame

There is little, intellectually, to be gained by trying to reshuffle the pack of canonical artworks. To try and demote an image of melting clocks (Salvador Dalí's *The Persistence of Memory* from 1931) in favor of a photograph of Swanage, or to relegate a painting of bowler-hatted men falling like rain (René Magritte's *Golconda* from 1953) so as to promote junk sculpture, is to remain within the game of commodity markets. There is, however, much to be gained from viewing artworks within national frameworks. While this should allow a perspective that is as inclusive of Mexican art as British art, it will also allow us to reframe the artworks that have been central to the canon of surrealism (to restore the Spanish and Belgian contexts to Dalí and Magritte's paintings, for instance). This has little to do with national identity if by that we mean a newly spruced up version of national character, a trajectory that has always worked to exclude national experiences as much if not more than it has brought those experiences together.

National frameworks are productive when they are insistently material. The twentieth century might be marked by the steady increase of global financial forces and by international patterns of migration, but these are always regulated by nation states. A materialist approach to national perspectives can never be isolationist or nationalistic, but will have to recognize both the regulatory and fantastical force of the national (its ability to produce imagined nations, primarily through national mass media) without ignoring local contexts and international connections. In this it should be thought of as a form of “critical regionalism.” In Kristin Ross's words “critical regionalism ... not only represents the privileged vantage point from which to mediate between the local and the global: it does so without losing sight of the workings of the national state apparatus.”⁵² Eduardo Paolozzi's sculptural junk transformations, for instance, were fashioned in rural Essex from materials collected from London bombsites. His practice was informed by a period in Paris where he met artists like the Swiss sculptor and painter Alberto

Giacometti. Like many ambitious artists he worked and exhibited internationally. As a young man in Scotland he witnessed the way that local customs and practices were being mixed with American mass culture. In his childhood he was sent to fascist summer camps in Italy where his extended family lived ... I could continue here, multiplying the lines of connection between always local circumstances and international connections. The point, however, is not simply to insist that the national is always a crucial mediating frame, but to remember that what we call global culture or international culture is also national culture networked in particular ways.

If I have privileged the Second World War in this chapter as an event that reverberates across the middle years of the twentieth century, and echoes through the work of British surrealism, it is partly to remind myself that a national framework always connects to other nations. It is impossible to see the immediate pre-war years of Mass-Observation, for instance, outside the anti-fascist nationally collective solidarity of the Popular Front. The war years, of course, not only insist on the centrality of nation states but on the affiliations and rivalries that occur between nation states. And of course this is never an abstract state of affairs but has material consequences that not only include German bombs dropping on London, but American popular culture threading its way into the everyday culture of Britain as well as the national migrations that followed in the aftermath of war and the subsequent decolonization of the British empire. If art and architectural history is to benefit from national perspectives it will have to remain vigilant to the jingoism that crouches in the seams of national identity while opening itself to the material connections that critical regionalism sensitizes us to.

Notes

- 1 The early and now classic account of surrealism is provided by Maurice Nadeau (1987) *The History of Surrealism*, trans. by Richard Howard, London: Plantin. This book was first published in France in 1944. It makes no mention of a British surrealist contingent. A recent anthology edited by Mary Ann Caws (2002) *Surrealist Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, offers a rich and varied assortment of writers and artists, which certainly defies the narrow limits within which surrealism is often discussed. Of its 530 pages, roughly five pages are by British surrealists.
- 2 One of the most influential accounts of this process is Guilbaut, S. (1983) *How New York: Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- 3 See, for instance, Remy, M. (1999) *Surrealism in Britain*, Aldershot: Ashgate, and Ray, P. C. (1971) *The Surrealist Movement in England*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- 4 Read, H. (ed.) (1936) *Surrealism*, London: Faber and Faber, 20.
- 5 Michel Remy's (1999) *Surrealism in Britain* offers the most sustained account of this.
- 6 Breton, A. (1998) "Manifesto of Surrealism" (1924) in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. by R. Seaver and H. R. Lane, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 3–47.

- 7 Cohen, M. (1993) *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution*, Berkeley, CA and London, University of California.
- 8 Nash, P. (1936) "Swanage or seaside surrealism," *Architectural Review*, April, 151–4, republished in Nash, P. (1949) *Outline, and Autobiography and Other Writings*, London: Faber and Faber, 232–237.
- 9 *Architectural Review*, July 1936, 42 quoted in Walker, I. (2005) "The 'Comic Sublime': Eileen Agar at Ploumanac'h," *Tate Papers*, Autumn 2005, online at <http://www.tate.org.uk/download/file/fid/7408> (retrieved October 13, 2012).
- 10 A photographic technique whereby light is purposefully allowed into the darkroom during printing. The effect produces an image that looks like a cross between a negative and photographic positive image, while also introducing graphic elements within it.
- 11 Nash, P. (1939) "The giant's stride," in P. Nash (1949) *Outline, and Autobiography and Other Writings*, London: Faber and Faber, 238.
- 12 Nash (1939), 238.
- 13 See Cardinal, R. (1989) *The Landscape Vision of Paul Nash*, London: Reaktion, 12.
- 14 Nash (1936), 237.
- 15 Nash (1936), 233.
- 16 Nash (1936), 234.
- 17 Nash (1936), 234.
- 18 Nash (1936), 235.
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55° North 3° West

A Panorama from Scotland

Tom Normand

The fascinating geography of British art is overlain with fissures and fractures that are not simply topographical but are historical, political, and cultural. In a union of four nations it is to be expected that residues of earlier mores and manners might inform contemporary creative practice, but these are sometimes deeper and more coherent than might be anticipated. Where political union is characterized by a powerful center and vulnerable margin, the intensity of cultural anxiety experienced at the periphery can be explosive. When channeled into the visual arts this tension is often expressed in terms of a search for distinctive features and tropes within a “native” culture; that is to say, the pursuit of a local “identity.” “Identity,” of course, is not an essence but a construct and as such it is fluid, irregular, and responsive to particular socio-political needs. It is also a construct that is created in accretions of myth, history, and belief. In this respect it can be pervasive and enduring.

This essay explores the colorful manifestations of “identity” in Scottish art. The particular emphasis is the period after the Second World War and the core study concerns the moment of “The Vigorous Imagination” exhibition in 1987. Here issues of “Scottishness” were contrasted with the sense of “Britishness,” and complicated by an appeal to internationalism. Governing these contests was a developing political discourse in which devolution and independence were key coordinates. However, this particular historical moment contained echoes from previous configurations and would reverberate in the contemporary period. Consequently this narrative will recall the negotiation of “Scottish” and “British” art in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, while projecting forward to the sense of national identity in a globalized world.

In this respect the ideational coordinates of this study center upon the construction of a broadly nationalist discourse on the visual arts in Scotland. While this nationalism has been implicitly manifest in the array of painting,

sculpture, and multi-media practices from Scottish artists it has been acutely accented in the historiography of Scottish art. The claim to a unique and identifiable “tradition” in Scottish art became a feature of writing on the subject in the decade after 1979, the moment of the failed referendum on political devolution for Scotland. At this point the rift between “Scottish” and “British” accounts of the history of art and visual culture became marked. In essence, the panorama from Scotland countered the sense of an integrated and uniform landscape of British art in the modern period. It might be argued that the most notable seismic rumblings for this fault-line were felt in Edinburgh during 1987.

A Scottish Imaginary

In the summer of 1987 the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art presented the blockbuster exhibition “The Vigorous Imagination – New Scottish Art.” Amid a cacophonous celebration, and no small degree of spectacle, the exhibition proclaimed the renaissance of an identifiably “Scottish” art. A group of 17 artists had been assembled by the curators.¹ All were from the younger generation and represented the “new found Scottish confidence” as well as the “enormous international success” of the principal protagonists.² The assembled artworks ranged from the semiotically inspired painted conundrums of Steven Campbell (1953–2007) to the ironic assembled “sculpture” of David Mach (b. 1956). In between, the gallery visitor might be intrigued by the constructed photographs from Calum Colvin (b. 1960) and Ron O’Donnell (b. 1952); challenged by the feminist discourse in the work of Gwen Hardie (b. 1962) and Sam Ainsley (b. 1950); and confronted by the political audacity of Ken Currie’s (b. 1960) giant polemical canvases, or, the abject terror of Ian Hughes’ (b. 1958) searing portrait heads. Uniformity of style or subject was not immediately evident in this body of new Scottish art but there existed, generally, a return to painting, a fascination with the figure and narrative, and an interest in the expressive handling of paint. In the middle years of the 1980s these characteristics placed Scottish artists near the center of an art world trend that promoted figurative painting in reaction to the critical, and commercial, ebb in the established avant-garde forms of minimalism and conceptualism.

The debate surrounding “The Vigorous Imagination” remains instructive. By far the most vociferous champion was one of the curators of the exhibition, the critic Clare Henry. Reviewing the show in *Studio International* she declared that “the explosion of artistic talent in Scotland over the last five years is already legendary... Group shows, characterised by exhilarating vigour, irreverence and wit, have demonstrated to critics and public alike the new-found Scottish confidence.”³ In uncompromising style she continued that “Scottish art is currently at an all-time high”⁴ and proceeded to praise all the participating artists

in equal measure. Some of this enthusiasm spilled over into other reviews. John Griffiths, writing in *Art and Design*, noted that “(this) is a time of undebatable and extraordinary vitality in Scottish figurative art,”⁵ while the Marxist critic Terry Brotherstone commented, more soberly, “(it) is a striking, easily appreciated collection of recent work by 17 artists which may prove to have a significant place in the history of British painting.”⁶

Reviewers in the British national media were less impressed. Writing in the *Independent* Andrew Graham-Dixon remarked that “everybody, it seems, has been celebrating the arrival of a new generation of Scottish artists... But it’s hard to infer much about the Scottishness of modern Scottish art from this exhibition... In the end the show is more sampler than polemic.”⁷ While Timothy Hyman, reviewing the exhibition for the *Burlington Magazine*, complained that the best of the new Glasgow painters, Campbell, Currie, and Wiszniewski, had been swamped by an eclectic assortment of other artists:

The Vigorous Imagination could have been that much needed anthology, allowing us to consider the painters gathered at their best. Five Glasgow lions do appear in the arena; but the ring-mistress Clare Henry has twelve lesser-knowns clown on their backs, and the Babel of Scotland drowns out Glasgow’s common tongue. These twelve share nothing except nationality.⁸

This is a harsh judgment, certainly, but the language, in fact the discourse, of these reviews speaks of the core concerns governing Scottish, British, and western art in this period.

The 1980s were, perhaps, the last moment of nationalism(s) in the arts. The Royal Academy, in London, did much to propagate this approach to categorizing art. Sandwiched between prestigious exhibitions of “German Art in the 20th Century,” in 1985, and “Italian Art in the 20th Century,” in 1989, the Academy produced “British Art in the 20th Century,” which opened in the January of 1987. Commentators noted a bias to art from London, and the near comprehensive neglect of artists from Scotland. Indeed the historian and critic Duncan Macmillan was to reflect that “a significant number of the major British artists who have really understood modernism are Scots but are not here. J. D. Fergusson, William Johnstone, Joan Eardley, William Scott, Ian Hamilton Finlay are none of them represented.”⁹ “The Vigorous Imagination,” which opened as part of the Edinburgh International Festival in the August of 1987, was something of a riposte to the Academy’s selection though its “nationalist” program ran deeper and was even more complex.

Whereas the nationalistic emphasis in the Royal Academy exhibitions may be read as a correlate of the conservative and reactionary values so prevalent in the politics of the 1980s,¹⁰ the situation in Scotland was complicated by an aspiration toward a nationalism based upon a radical sentiment and a feeling of separate and distinctive “identity.” In some sense, then, the triumphalism that accompanied “The Vigorous Imagination,” at least within Scotland, was the recognition of a

political dynamic that remained unfulfilled. The root of this frustration stretched back to March 1979 when the revised recommendations of the Royal Commission on the Constitution, proposing devolved government for Scotland, were subject to enactment by referendum. While a majority of those voting accepted the proposition the scheme failed when the agreed bar, stipulating that 40% of the eligible population of Scotland should return a yes vote, was not met. In the event only 64% of the population was motivated to vote in the referendum, and from this reduced electorate a 40% majority of the total population was an impossible target. The reservoir of disappointment and resentment that gathered following this rejection became manifest in social, political, and most particularly cultural forms. There was much talk of a “Scottish cringe,” a failure of nerve based upon a national sense of inferiority and inadequacy.¹¹ The backwash from this critique was manifest in a concerted effort to assert, and demonstrate, the singular achievements of Scotland on the international stage. In the years after the failure of the devolution referendum a host of academic and popular books appeared detailing Scotland’s history; the pivotal role of Scottish intellectuals in the project of the Enlightenment; the life-changing innovations of Scotland’s inventors, engineers, and scientists; the “world-vision” of Scotland’s poets and writers; and, within the visual arts, the significant contribution of Scotland’s artists to the international art world.

In 1990 Duncan Macmillan published his *Scottish Art 1460–1990*, the first significant survey of Scottish art since James Caw’s *Scottish Painting: Past and Present* published in 1908. This built upon and extended his *Painting in Scotland: the Golden Age*, from 1986, which had successfully placed eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Scottish art at the center of international developments in the cultural and intellectual world. Macmillan, to some extent, helped generate a small industry in books and monographs on Scottish art and artists that came from the universities and museums of Scotland, and, in 2000, the commercial publishers Thames and Hudson recognized the unique nature of Scotland’s visual culture in the publication of Murdo Macdonald’s *Scottish Art*. More recently, still, Alexander Moffat and Alan Riach have had published *Arts of Resistance: Poets, Portraits and Landscapes of Modern Scotland* (2008), which consciously promotes a nationalist agenda in the reading of Scottish culture.

In extending this historiography it is notable that, in the summer of 1986, Scotland’s art was positioned within an international context with the publication of a new journal *Alba: National and International Contemporary Art from Scotland*. While the success of “The Vigorous Imagination” created a momentum that produced subsequent “blockbuster” exhibitions including “Scottish Art since 1900” held at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh during 1989, and “Scotland Creates: 5000 Years of Art and Design,” which opened at the McLellan Galleries in Glasgow in 1990. These exhibitions were accompanied by substantial catalogues that further accented the “different” nature of Scotland’s art and history: “different,” most especially, from a British or English narrative of culture where, it was felt, the Scottish dimension had been ignored.

The rhetoric that accompanied “The Vigorous Imagination” exhibition of 1987, then, can be viewed in this political and cultural context. Talk, as above, of “a new found Scottish confidence” and an “extraordinary vitality” was an assertion of national belief and pride in reaction to the compound disappointments of 1979. Naturally, much of this national psychosis became focused upon the “identity” debate. The issue of Scottish national identity had come to the fore following the relative success of the Scottish National Party in the General Election held in October 1974.¹² While the economic case for Scottish independence was secured with the discovery of oil surrounding Scotland’s coastline, the social and psychological argument became centered on a discourse of “separateness” and “difference.” Both of these constructs accented the distinctions to be made between Scottish culture and history, and that of England and the British state. Forever a contentious and arcane debate the boundaries hardened with the election of the conservative government in May 1979. Following upon the failure of the devolution referendum only two months before, the election of Margaret Thatcher’s government signaled a sea-change in Scotland’s relationship with England and Britain. The successive introduction of Monetarist policy, anti-trade-union laws, and the “Community Charge” or Poll Tax, were viewed as a merciless attack on the communitarian, egalitarian, and democratic principles that were understood to sit at the core of Scotland’s civic and political culture.¹³ “Identity,” consequently, was threatened by association with the British state, which ran headlong toward individualism, hierarchy, and social Darwinism.

This context was important for evidence of its consequence was everywhere in “The Vigorous Imagination” exhibition of 1987. Issues of Scotland’s separateness were highlighted in the polemical history paintings of Ken Currie with their emphasis on working-class identity, socialist politics, and the characteristics of radical aspiration. Equally, the tragic-heroic grandeur of Peter Howson’s (b. 1958) urban homeless evidenced the plight of the swelling underclass. Philip Braham’s dark and densely painted forest landscapes were the sites of Scotland’s battlefields and memory-places. While the ethereal quality of Kate Whiteford’s (b. 1952) installation, and even Keith McIntyre’s (b. 1959) symbolic animal pictures, could be read from the perspective of a crypto-Celtic nature mysticism. David Mach was careful to complement his assembled installation within the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art with a reference to his *Parthenon*; a sculpture made from used car tyres that had been built in Princes Street Gardens, Edinburgh, in the summer of 1986 and an ironic allusion, of course, to Edinburgh’s contribution to the European Enlightenment and its designated role as “the Athens of the North.”¹⁴ Ron O’Donnell perhaps most acutely signaled the distinction between Scottish and English or British culture with his totemic photograph *The Great Divide* (Fig. 12.1) (Scottish National Portrait Gallery, photography collection, Edinburgh). This work, a constructed installation built in the Gymnasium area of the Gallery of Modern Art, used appropriated materials, abandoned household debris, and cardboard cut-outs to create the interior of a domestic sitting-room. The “divide” occurred where the mid-section of the room had been fractured to



FIG. 12.1 Ron O'Donnell, *The Great Divide*, photograph from constructed set, 1987. Source: Collection of the artist.

expose the poles of an impoverished and dilapidated world of an urban slum juxtaposed to a chintzy and comfortable domesticity. The “divide” is accented where the fracture is written into the construction in the outline of the eastern coastline of Britain. In the finished work, a large intensely colored photograph of this scene, O'Donnell was manifestly reflecting upon notions of the North/South divide, the widening chasm between social classes, and the deleterious ramifications of a market-led economy. With these features the contents of “The Vigorous Imagination” exhibition offered an index of the qualities that were associated with Scotland's political and social history, mythic and cultural chronicle, and the complex narrative of Scottish “identity.”¹⁵

The celebration surrounding “The Vigorous Imagination,” however, was not altogether occasioned by its mooted “Scottishness.” In fact much of the impetus for the exhibition had been provided by Steven Campbell's success on the international stage. Following his training at Glasgow School of Art Campbell had taken a Fulbright Scholarship to New York. Working there from 1982–1986 Campbell had successful exhibitions at Barbara Toll Fine Arts and at the John Weber Gallery, as well as significant triumphs in Chicago, Munich, London, and Berlin. The layered references in Campbell's paintings, coupled with arcane associations, the conflated signatures of “high” and “popular” culture, and the open, ambiguous narratives based around the human figure, all provided for an interpretation that placed his work within the context of a fashionable postmodernism. With esoteric titles like *A Life in Letters: Idealised*

Portrait of the Wig'ed Foucault (private collection), and *English Landscape with a Disruptive Gene* (Centro de Arte Moderna, Lisbon), Campbell touched upon a zeitgeist that accented the collapse of modernism's meta-narratives and a taste for semiotic discourse. In the febrile atmosphere of the contemporary cultural marketplace this appeared as a vibrant and new source for institutional, intellectual, and financial investment. Consequently much of the display at "The Vigorous Imagination" could be framed within this postmodern dynamic; and artists like David Mach, Adrian Wiszniewski (b. 1958), Mario Rossi (b. 1958), and even Stephen Conroy (b. 1964) were to be loosely associated with this moment.

The coincidence of "The Vigorous Imagination" with the ethos of postmodernism was further complicated, or indeed complemented, by the debate surrounding "the return to painting." With the exhibition "New Image Painting," held at the Whitney Museum in New York during 1978, the sense of a reaction to dominant avant-garde forms based on installation and performance art was initiated. Internationally, exhibitions of figurative painting proliferated with landmark shows including "A New Spirit in Painting" held at the Royal Academy in London during 1981, and "Zeitgeist" in Berlin during 1982. The impetus behind the American show had been the example of Philip Guston's dramatic renunciation of abstraction and engagement with a consciously vulgar cartoon realism. This was combined with a revival of interest in Leon Golub's intensely political figure-based canvases. However, the credibility of an indigenous figurative painting had an even stronger foothold in Europe. In Germany a neo-expressionism had been consistently championed by George Baselitz and Markus Lupertz, while varieties of figurative painting were being heralded by artists as diverse as Jorg Immendorf, A. R. Penck, and Sigmar Polke. Likewise, the Italian "Trans-avant-garde" could boast Francesco Clemente and Sandro Chia. In England a revival of interest in the "School of London" would highlight the work of Frank Auerbach, Leon Kossoff, and Lucien Freud, and this would become the bedrock material for "A New Spirit in Painting" in 1981.

This international renaissance of figurative and, sometimes, narrative painting had a strong echo within Scottish art. The most resonant note was sounded in 1985 when the painter and teacher Alexander Moffat (b. 1943) curated an exhibition titled "New Image Glasgow." Clearly allied to the various "new image" exhibitions that were being showcased throughout Europe, the Glasgow display presented work by six younger artists most of whom had been students of Moffat's at Glasgow School of Art.¹⁶ In his catalogue essay for the show Moffat noted the new mood in European art circles:

The challenging nature of the new imagery, overloaded with the tensions and contradictions of our era, has had a liberating impact on the emerging generation of artists. After the void which characterised the art of the sixties and seventies these artists now present to us an emotional authenticity and a directness of expression which communicates with compelling immediacy.¹⁷

Equally, he recognized the relevance of these developments to the specific Scottish situation:

Glasgow has none of the power or glamour of busy capitalist centres like Düsseldorf and New York, nor any of the social benefits artists receive in advanced social democracies like Holland or Sweden. This, coupled with the profound problem of a Scottish national identity, produces a situation full of contradictions. For anyone exposed to these circumstances and the problems they entail, the task of finding an adequate means of expression, capable of producing a meaningful body of work, is enormous. It may well be that the most impressive achievement of all six artists has been to contribute a personal solution to these uniquely conflicting problems.¹⁸

Besides the sense of championing a new movement in Scottish art there is a degree of hand-wringing in these statements. Moffat was acutely aware of the potential for new figurative painting to be compromised by its associations with national “styles” resulting in a kind of cultural chauvinism, and by commercial exploitation resulting from a painting’s easy brokerage as a commodity. As a socialist painter himself Moffat looked for an art that might pursue the avant-garde mission of cultural resistance and opposition while remaining open to the widest audience. In the new image painters from Glasgow he thought that he had detected a group who were both radical and accessible; the punning comedy of their narratives, the touchstone of political history and legend, the diverse associations of popular culture, literature, and myth, all climaxing in a contemporary art that eschewed reification and elitism.

It might be argued that these were impossible ambitions for the art world of the 1980s welcomed the new figurative painting. It represented not simply a rejection of the arcane “meta-narrative” that was modernism, and hence might be usefully characterized as postmodern, but it afforded an opportunity for commercial exploitation often denied in the “dematerialized” art of the neo-conceptual avant-garde. In some degree this was the fate of new image painting from Scotland, but there is an irony that runs even deeper into the nature of Scottish art and culture and that is hidden within the celebrations surrounding both the “New Image Glasgow” exhibition and its apotheosis in “The Vigorous Imagination.”

Something like a “Tradition”

The idea that Scottish art stood at the center and front of developments in the international art scene in the late 1980s is locked into the two key contexts outlined above; that Scottish art represented a new vision within the competing forum of national styles, and that Scottish art was instrumental and prescient in an international “return to painting.” In fact, in the history of Scottish art, these have been insistent dynamics that have largely defined the visual culture from its inception.

In the first instance, in Scotland, there was not so much a “return to painting” as an acknowledgement of its persistent dominance within all cultural institutions. The primary institution, of course, was the Royal Scottish Academy. In a nation whose aristocratic and political class moved south to London following the Act of Union in 1707, and whose church actively mitigated against the production of “graven images,” the Academy acted as patron, broker, and professional body for Scotland’s artists. Since its establishment in 1826 the Academy has been dominated by painters. Moreover, the tendency has been to promote art that is acceptable to the professional classes who form the backbone of Scotland’s art-buying public. In this event the Academy has, historically, favored a conservative catalogue of images and styles; hence, the proliferation of portraits, landscapes, genre subjects, and still-life executed in a manner that privileged technical virtuosity and the *belle-peinture* manner.

If the Academy has been the dominant professional institution it was well-served by its handmaidens, the Scottish art schools. The four Scottish art schools, located in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen, and Dundee,¹⁹ have been deeply traditional in their syllabi and in their teaching programs. During the 1960s and 1970s, when European and the more metropolitan English art colleges moved into installation, performance, and environmental practices, the Scottish art schools maintained a system of academic training based upon drawing and painting. The four-year model for Scottish art education consisted of a first year spent sampling varieties of fine art and design practice. Even at this early stage students were introduced to the drawing class, working first with assembled objects, then marble casts, the clothed model, and the nude model. From year two students would specialize, primarily in fine art painting or sculpture but usually with a supplementary “craft” activity, and here too the life class was central to the learning process and the only compulsory part of the program. Indeed, throughout art school education, drawing the human figure was taken as the most fundamental training for fine artists, almost to the point of being a sacrosanct activity. There was certainly some loosening of this system by the 1980s, notably within the “mixed media” department at Glasgow School of Art. This latter was first established as an offshoot from the painting department and its liberal agenda encouraged interdisciplinary activity; indeed it was here that Steven Campbell first explored the territory of installation and performance before being assigned to the painting department. Despite these modest innovations it might be said that, in the middle years of the 1980s, Scotland engaged in something less than a “return to painting,” and something more like the continuation of a tradition that stretched back nearly 200 years.

Equally the national(ist) discourse in Scottish art remained part of a long lineage. If the complex multi-figure compositions that were evident in the “New Image Glasgow” exhibition were to be framed within an international “return to painting” their deeper context remained the paradigm of the Scottish national “tradition” in painting. This “tradition,” it might be said, was a function of historical event, cultural mythology, and civic character; that is to say, the tapestry

of “identity.” The distinctive nature of this tradition can be traced back to, at least, the earthy naturalism of David Wilkie (1785–1841).

Whereas Steven Campbell gained intercontinental recognition in the period circa 1985, and so provoked a maelstrom around Scottish art, Wilkie would do the same in the years after 1805. Indeed, Wilkie’s signature painting, *Pitlessie Fair* (National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh) of 1804–1805, is a multi-figured comic invention, full of open and closed narratives and semiotic ingenuity, that bears some comparison with Campbell’s work. Wilkie, however, was working within the genre tradition. From a rural background, and trained at the Trustees’ Academy in Edinburgh, he established his reputation with his studies of peasant life; images that accented the idea of community, the spirit of commonality, and the ideal of equanimity. With his first success, the triumphant celebration of the rich diversity and carnival excess seen in the rustic holiday gathering that was *Pitlessie Fair*, he removed himself to London.

Wilkie was, of course, following the marketplace. He was engaged in an activity that was, in the early nineteenth century, becoming increasingly professionalized along capitalist lines and so looked for a secure and affluent client-base. Arriving in London in the summer of 1805, still at the tender age of 20, he would move towards the dominant professional body by joining the Royal Academy Schools and quickly become a central figure in the thriving art world of the time. Interestingly, his introduction to this urbane British art scene was his lauded painting, *Pitlessie Fair*, a tribute to rural Scottish life and values, and it was in this genre style that Wilkie would make his mark in the metropolitan center. The flow of successful paintings that followed his arrival in London, *Village Politicians* (private collection) from 1806, *The Blind Fiddler* (Tate Gallery, London) of 1808, *Village Festival* (Tate Gallery, London) of 1812 and *Blind-Man’s-Buff* (Royal Collection) from 1813, were, in some degree, subtle pastiches of the various incidents and episodes in *Pitlessie Fair* but they established Wilkie as an eminent figure in the British capital city. He would be elected a full member of the Royal Academy in 1809.

The success of Wilkie remains a fascinating case study in the history of British painting, and its relation to Scotland and Scottishness. Wilkie was a powerful painter, without doubt, strongest, perhaps, when working within the genre convention but also praised as a portraitist and as a history painter.²⁰ Despite working in the British capital city, his most successful paintings concerned Scottish rural life. Certainly, anxieties surrounding the authenticity of Old Master paintings imported into Britain encouraged patrons to collect local works by known artists, and there was a developing taste for seventeenth-century genre painting from the low countries, but the attraction of this Scottish genre convention ran deeper still. Wilkie’s narratives of rural life in the lowlands of Scotland spoke of closed and stable communities. The ethical boundaries of these worlds were set by village elders, by the church and only at the furthest distance by the state. Neighborhoods were established by local populations tied by kinship and native identity. In London these were not only “foreign” values, but anachronisms. In a period of

social change and urban development these values could be presented as “ideal types” and so offered a kind of solace in the midst of metropolitan life. More significantly, however, Wilkie presented a constant and settled landscape where the memory of uprising and revolt remained moot. As Wilkie painted it was barely 100 years since England had taken Scotland into a British state, and only 60 years since rebellious Scots had threatened to overthrow the Hanoverian monarchy.²¹ Wilkie, alongside a fellow Unionist like his friend Sir Walter Scott,²² presented a vision of contemporary Scotland to a British audience that accented the romantic and settled nature of the country.

In fact Wilkie would make one of his infrequent returns to Scotland in 1822, there to see his prospective patron, George IV, march in glorious procession through Edinburgh. This pageant, designed by Walter Scott, saw the Hanoverian king in full Highland dress (with pink tights to guard against the Edinburgh chill) and accompanied by an army of kilted “Highlanders.”²³ Wilkie, with others, would commemorate this event in commissioned works and it was the sense of a Scotland at once romanticized and pacified that was presented in this vision. In some degree this was a simple fact but the idea of a unique and distinctive “identity” remained deep within this construct. Wilkie would go on to paint some prosaic views of Highland life and thereby accent a key dialectic of Scottish history; the distinctive character and history of “Highland” and “Lowland.” Equally, he would, in the late 1830s, reflect upon the nature of Scottish religious history with his meditations on Presbyterianism, notably in *John Knox Dispensing the Sacrament at Calder House* (National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh) painted in 1839. While, simultaneously, he would be inspired by the novels of Walter Scott and the rustic vernacular poetry of Scotland’s national bard, Robert Burns.

The career of David Wilkie touched upon the key tensions for Scottish artists working within a British context. While he was driven to move to the cultural center to pursue commissions and a ready clientele he looked back to his homeland for a significant subject matter. Though he found himself patronized by a mercantile and aristocratic class he was most respected as a painter of the Scottish vernacular and the peasantry. As he flattered the Hanoverian monarchy and celebrated British triumphs on the battlefield he still looked to the distinctive history of the Scottish state and church for intellectual sustenance and motive. With these contradictions Wilkie, it might be said, had developed as an archetype of the conflicted Scot; the Union that he represented he also recognized to be subtly fractured and riven.

In essence, at the core of Wilkie’s art, there still lay the powerful presence that was the sense of a distinctively Scottish democratic belief. It was characteristic of the Scottish Enlightenment that the commonality of human life was sacrosanct and that “common-sense” discourse remained the foundation of civic society.²⁴ This was echoed in vernacular poetry, most especially in the works of Robert Fergusson, Allan Ramsay Snr, and Robert Burns. In the visual culture it saw an apotheosis in the work of David Wilkie, but he was not alone in promoting this democratic sensibility. Wilkie’s pathway had been first settled in the work of David

Allan (1785–1841). Allan, having trained with the Scottish neo-classicist Gavin Hamilton (1723–1798) in Rome, would return to Scotland following a failed career as a portrait painter in London and establish himself as a teacher and painter of genre subjects, in Edinburgh, from 1781. Allan's comic vernacular took, as its model, the seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish example of Adriaen van Ostade and David Teniers, and his genre subjects became vital celebrations of ordinary life in Scotland. Notably, Allan was rejecting the dominant ethos of Italian and neo-classical art, and promoting the earthy realism of the low countries in northern Europe. This split from a hegemonic European style was also a fracture within the paradigm of British art, one where the Scottish artist claimed difference through an alliance with the colloquial discourse of the north. It was this exemplar that Wilkie would develop, and Wilkie's extraordinary success found a host of acolytes and followers.

Whereas portraiture and landscape had been the stock-in-trade of Scottish artists prior to Wilkie, the undisputed triumph of genre became his bequest. This developed as a British phenomenon but it was championed by Scots working both in London and in Edinburgh. One of the most representative was Thomas Faed (1826–1900). Faed remains interesting not only because of his spectacular success in London, but because of his use of Scottish genre subjects designed to appeal to Victorian sentiment and taste. Though elected an associate of the Royal Scottish Academy in 1849, he was a frequent exhibitor at the Royal Academy in London from 1851 and, in 1852, he became resident in the British capital. There, he would become a full Academician in 1864 having rescinded his membership of the northern academy. His repertoire of genre subjects ran through the range of emotion from mawkish to maudlin, but could be tinged, like Wilkie's work,²⁵ with an element of critical realism. This last is noted in the suite of paintings, including *The Scottish Emigrants' Sunday in the Backwoods* (Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal), 1859, that reflect upon the process of Highland emigration and the memory of the Clearances that had so traumatized the Gàidhealtachd. However, his most popular work, *The Mitherless Bairn* (National Gallery of Australia, Melbourne) from 1855, was the epitome of Victorian genre sentiment realized in a Scottish rural subject.

The Mitherless Bairn remains a music-hall ballad of a painting that was nevertheless greeted with a florid fanfare at the Royal Academy when exhibited in 1855. The scene shows an itinerant orphan boy, welcomed to the hearth of a peasant cottage, there to beg for charity. The room, slightly disheveled but not impoverished, is occupied by an extended family of women and children. The grandmother cups her ear the better to hear the orphan's sorry story, the children gather behind the protective skirts of the adults, while the mother, a peasant Madonna with child in arms, looks forlornly at the visitor. The father, by implication, is in the public realm, working in the fields, and so the eldest son adopts a protective posture against the supplicant. This is a narrative designed to trigger an evident set of emotions, but also created in order to highlight a distinctive pattern of virtues. These would include; the principle of charity as an

act of necessity and responsibility; and, the notion of a bonded community, a shared responsibility, signaled in an obligation to others. Overlapping these imperatives there is an appeal to notions including: the integrity of family life; the usefulness of work where this is possible; the sense of a moral, indeed religious, compulsion; and, clearly designated gender roles. Evidently these are “Victorian values” and are politically retrogressive, but they do signal a communitarian vision at a point where this notion of collectivism and cooperation was vulnerable. *The Mitherless Bairn* was, after all, first exhibited some four years after “The Great Exhibition,” which was created to celebrate industrialization, urbanization and colonial expansion; processes in which the virtues of community and human compassion were marginalized.

None of this makes Faed a “radical” painter, rather he was a moderate conservative who looked to preserve and celebrate rural values for commercial ends. However, at least one dimension of his practice does represent that deposit of vernacular culture and communitarian values that have been mooted as an aspect of Scottish “identity.” These were the strata of social history, intellectual life, and political culture that informed a distinctive national character and that ran everywhere in the visual arts. The triumph of this type of genre painting, narrative and representational, commonplace and colloquial, set the conditions for a tidal wave of Scottish artists, working at home and abroad, who would ride the crescent of this favored style. While Edinburgh-trained Scots like William Quiller Orchardson (1832–1910) and John Pettie (1839–1893) made successful professional careers at the Royal Academy in London, others like Hugh Cameron (1835–1918) and George Paul Chalmers (1833–1878) would find some prosperity in the smaller marketplace that was Scotland. The model for their genre painting remained Wilkie, but behind him the Dutch tradition of seventeenth-century genre and increasingly the painters associated with The Hague School, notably Josef Israels and the Maris Brothers who were much exhibited in Scotland.²⁶ Despite the appeal to Holland, Scottish artists in the 1870s remained committed to a distinctive “Scottish” vision. John Morrison has, acutely, observed how George Reid, a confidant and collaborator with Cameron and Chalmers and later President of the Royal Scottish Academy, believed that “a painting held its nationality as a birthright and bespoke that identity unconsciously and inevitably.” There was, what Reid termed, an unbreakable “law of parallelism between the national life, literature and art.”²⁷ However, if this was characteristic of academic painting in the second half of the nineteenth century it would be tempered, and challenged, by the momentum of an international modernism emerging from Paris.

Being Scottish, Being British, Being Internationalist

It is notable that artists emerging from Scotland, in the nineteenth century, had an ambivalent relationship with the idea of being British and of “Britishness.” They certainly recognized the central marketplace, London, as

the crucial forum for their profession and business activity but viewed their background and experience, the particular history of Scotland, as the focus of their art. Where Scottish artists looked for inspiration and succor outside their native land it was as likely to be in the low countries of northern Europe as to be in England. This speaks to a kind of internationalism, a collaboration or alliance with smaller and independent nations who shared something of Scotland's economic, religious, and cultural history. Toward the end of the nineteenth century the momentum of an international modernism, centered upon the French capital city, would re-orientate the most dynamic components of the Scottish art world, though the sense of a conflict between the "local" and the international would remain moot.

Evidence of a modernist internationalism emerged in Scotland during the middle years of the 1880s when a loose group of artists working from Glasgow, and so referred to as "The Glasgow Boys" or less provocatively "The Glasgow School," began to explore the potential of impressionist and symbolist painting. The marker for this development was set down by one of the foremost figures within this large and disparate group of artists, James Guthrie (1859–1930). Two paintings, completed within one year, signaled this sea-change; one the markedly genre image *A Funeral Service in the Highlands* (Glasgow Art Galleries and Museums, Kelvingrove), 1882, and the other the *plein-air* impressionist painting *Hard at it* (Glasgow Art Galleries and Museums, Kelvingrove), 1883. *A Funeral Service in the Highlands* remains a fascinating work primarily because its temper comes close to realism. Guthrie, perhaps more than any other Scottish genre painter, positioned his genre subjects within a near political frame that would have been recognized by Courbet. Generally the appeal to sentiment, so characteristic of the style in Britain, was tempered by a disposition that recognized the social conditions and genuine hardship experienced by the peasantry and those on the margins of urban life. By 1883, however, and largely through the influence of the academic impressionism of Jules Bastien-Lepage,²⁸ Guthrie was painting a reflective portrait, *Hard at it*, that depicts the artist painting the effects of light on water on an uncharacteristically sun-drenched Clyde coast. From this point there is a marked shift, amongst the more ambitious Scottish painters, toward a loosening of paint effect and a lighter palette.

Elements of genre and narrative, however, remained contingent in the painting of the Glasgow group. Guthrie, himself, vacillated between recognizably impressionist subjects and recidivism to a sometimes mawkish depiction of the peasantry. This was characteristic, also, of his esteemed peers, William York Macgregor (1855–1923), George Henry (1858–1943), Edward Atkinson Hornel (1864–1933), *et al.* Notably, despite the nomenclature of "The Glasgow School" these artists rarely painted the city and urban themes. Nevertheless, the issue of "modernity" was not altogether ignored. William Kennedy (1859–1918) explored the contemporary subject of commuter traffic and communication in his painting *Stirling Station* (private collection), 1888, and this nocturnal view of the railway platform was much influenced by James McNeill Whistler. John

Lavery (1856–1941), who had travelled with Kennedy to paint in the artists' colony at Grez-sur-Loing, specialized in scenes of contemporary middle-class leisure including the risqué *Woman on a Safety Tricycle* (Government Art Collection, London), 1885, and *The Tennis Party* (Aberdeen Art Gallery), 1885. Moreover, Edward Arthur Walton (1860–1922) would reject the genre disposition of his *A Berwickshire Fieldworker* (Tate Gallery, London), 1884, for the decidedly modern view of liberated and fashionably dressed women strolling in the roadway *En-plein-air* (private collection), in 1885.

Of course, this group of painters from Glasgow were contemporaries of Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868–1928) and the circle of symbolist and art nouveau designers whose internationalism was widely recognized. In fact the trajectory of the Glasgow painters described an arc through genre, to impressionism, and on to symbolism. Significantly, these symbolist images took their themes from Scottish folklore and mythology. Just as Mackintosh's art nouveau style was rooted in symbolic Celtic form so, for example, did Henry and Hornel tap in to the folklore of the Galloway region in the south-west corner of Scotland in order to exploit a native symbolism. Equally a cohort of Edinburgh artists, grouped around the organizing figure of the radical polymath Patrick Geddes, would explore the mythic system of Celtic religion in search for an art that was both national in its subject and international in its form.²⁹

This dual ambition became a feature of Scottish modernism in general, and echoed the polarities of that conflict evidenced in the aesthetic of David Wilkie and his peers. When the Scottish colorist John Duncan Fergusson (1874–1961) first traveled to Paris in 1896 he remained convinced that he was negotiating a "Celtic" aesthetic consciousness. His search for a modernist ethos, which would travel within the territory of impressionism, fauvism, and a painterly expressionism, was consistently framed within a sense that his work remained distinctively "Scottish." Consequently when he later reflected upon his art, and the nature of modern Scottish painting, he would claim that "it must have the essentials of the Scottish character, and not merely the Scottish character at this moment or of recent years, but something that we feel is and has been inherent in the Scots character all through its history."³⁰

Whatever the ambiguities of this proclamation, the mood of this ambition filtered through the work of Fergusson's contemporaries. Fellow Scottish colorists like Samuel John Peploe (1871–1935) and Francis Boileau Cadell (1883–1937) aspired to a French expressionist style while painting Scottish landscapes and episodes in Edinburgh drawing rooms. Meanwhile a more radical modernist like William Johnstone (1897–1981) would visit André L'hôte's studio in Paris during 1925 before travelling to California where he taught at The School of Arts and Crafts in Carmel. Johnstone's subsequent paintings, styled as a modernist abstraction with surrealist and biomorphic influences, took the memory of the landscape as its theme and addressed this in a pagan, "Celtic," manner. At the other extreme William McCance (1894–1970) would move south to London to be inspired by the avant-garde works of Wyndham Lewis and his circle of vorticist

dissidents. McCance established an impressive “machine aesthetic” in the 1920s, but was careful to freight this with a Scottish identity. His correspondence with the champion of “The Scottish Renaissance Movement,” the poet and activist Hugh MacDiarmid, saw him load his imagery with a context that referenced the industrial culture of Scottish urban life and the nationalist aspirations of MacDiarmid’s manifesto.

Importantly all of these modernist visions, for all their internationalist affiliations, were rooted in the narrative of the Scottish nation. Fergusson would rejoice in painting the Celtic goddess *Danu: Mother of the Gods* (The Fergusson Gallery, Perth) in 1953, an image that represented the apotheosis of his Franco-Scottish ideal. Equally Johnstone’s definitive abstract work *A Point in Time* (Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh), 1929–1937, represented a mystical memory of the landscape of his borders childhood. And, McCance’s extraordinary linocut, the neo-cubist *The Engineer, his Wife, and Family* (Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh), 1925, referenced the context of Scotland’s industrial culture. Myth, land, and common history, these remained the touchstones of Scotland’s art even at the point of a rigorous engagement with international modernism. Revealingly all three of these artists would ally themselves to the Nationalist cause during the 1930s, and beyond, so that the sense of a relationship with English and British culture would remain conditional.

In the period after the Second World War, and particularly at the moment of “The Vigorous Imagination” exhibition in 1987, it was these near 200-year-old fixations that would come to be significant in Scottish art. The appeal to narrative, and to a figurative painting, was far from being a straightforward connection to contemporary developments in the arts. Rather, it was the recognition of a recurrent trope in Scottish art; one that would continually surface and sometimes submerge within the flow of a Scottish “tradition.” Here, the sense that art carried an ethical responsibility, one that was connected to ideas of community, social practice, and common custom, was dominant. Equally, the projection of a view of art that privileged the vernacular and allied this to a political discourse focused on issues of identity and history, remained a governing principle. Certainly, the impetus of a postmodern return to painting gave instant credibility to images that conjured with fractured signs and appropriated styles, but underlying this there remained the constant of artistic convention and custom. Moreover this convention was hardened, in 1987, because of the very real political and ideological threats to Scottish identity. The failure of the devolution project, the threat from a market-orientated conservatism, the disintegration of familiar communities, and the sense of a marginalized culture, all contrived to heighten the commitment to an identifiably Scottish art. In this respect the alliance to “Britishness” became strained and Scottish artists, as well as critics and academics, looked to project an indigenous culture that recognized the integrity of small nations within a broad international context.

Festival Times

Internationalism, meanwhile, was a key element in the contest of “Scottish” and “British” constructions. Those who were most eminent in “The Vigorous Imagination” were celebrated because they had established reputations internationally; in London, certainly, but more importantly in New York and Berlin. Moreover, the appeal to an audience outside of Britain was an established feature of the postwar scene in Scotland. In 1947 a group of eminent figures looked to rescue European civilization from the traumatic revelations exposed at the end of the Second World War by initiating an international festival of the arts.³¹ The Edinburgh International Festival of the Arts was a projection of the idea that culture was a humanizing force and that a cultural celebration might salve the fractures and despond released in the period 1933–1945. Initially a festival that focused on music, and especially opera, it quickly developed a “fringe” of contributors from a wide range of the arts. As a forum where international impresarios, artists, and visitors congregated to champion cultures from around the world it also encouraged a sense that the visual culture was engaged in a dialogue that was intercontinental.

It was during the period of festival activity in 1963 that Alexander Moffat and his fellow student at Edinburgh College of Art, John Bellany (b. 1942), would exhibit their paintings in the open air on the Castle Terrace. This “Salon de Refusés,” a self-conscious homage to Courbet and a rebuff to the conservatism of the Royal Scottish Academy, would be repeated on the steps of The Mound, adjacent to The Scottish National Gallery and The Royal Scottish Academy buildings, at the festivals of 1964 and 1965. Encouraged by the febrile atmosphere of festival celebration, these young painters looked to accent the northern European connections of Scottish art by sourcing their work in a narrative expressionism. This was, in part, a renaissance of the narrative and figurative conventions that sat at the core of Scottish art generally, but also prefigured the release of metaphor and allegory explored in “The Vigorous Imagination.” Bellany, whose early work was based on the social nexus of his native community, the fishing village of Port Seton in south-east Scotland, would find international success as he developed these themes in a quasi-abstract expressionism. While Moffat, besides his ingenuity as a painter of literary portraits, would encourage the key artists of “The Vigorous Imagination” through his role as Head of Painting at Glasgow School of Art in the early 1980s.

The impetus of the Edinburgh Festival, however, was to further encourage a Scottish connection to an international modernism. In the immediate postwar years Alan Davie (b. 1920) would travel from Edinburgh to Venice, there to encounter his first significant patron, Peggy Guggenheim.³² With this access to the world of abstract expressionist painting, Davie developed a gestural abstraction, at first dark and solemn, and later tinted with the exuberant colors and symbolic motifs of world religions, that placed him at the center of an American-led

modernism. His meeting with his fellow Scot, William Gear (1915–1997),³³ encouraged a radical abstraction in one quarter of Scottish painting that produced a moment of metaphysical aspiration within the parameters of Scottish visual culture. Gear, who was affiliated to the CoBrA (Copenhagen, Brussels, Amsterdam) group of northern expressionists would, like Davie, find himself championed in exhibitions at the Edinburgh Festival, and both would, despite the internationalism of their abstract style, consistently reference a Scottish dimension to their practice. This mooted “Scottishness,” allied to an internationalist style, further fractured the construct of a “British” art wherein those artists from Scotland represented a contingent element. In fact, the configuration and development of the Edinburgh Festival was to further rupture this chimera such that the very sense of a national, “British,” art was fundamentally challenged.

From the early 1960s the Edinburgh festival was to become a forum for experimental and neo-conceptual art, much of it centered upon a confluence of drama, performance, and the visual arts. In 1963 Mark Boyle (1934–2005) helped create the “Theatre of the Future” on the festival fringe. Essentially a “happening” this project was much influenced by the pioneering performance art of the American Allan Kaprow. Indeed, Kaprow was invited to the festival of 1963 and instigated his “Exit Play”; an inclusive “performance” wherein the audience was requested to leave the theatre via a narrow corridor strewn with used car tyres. The festival gained some reputation for audacity and experiment through these types of events and this was accented by the establishment of the Traverse Theatre, in the Lawnmarket area of the Old Town. The Traverse was founded in 1962 with performances beginning in 1963, and it became a center for the kind of experimental drama that would overlay theatre production with avant-garde performance, “happenings,” and multi-media art.

An early collaborator in the Traverse project was the arts impresario Richard Demarco. Demarco would hold exhibitions within the cramped rooms of the Traverse Theatre Club and gave a first show to the dada-inspired “junk reliefs” of Mark Boyle.³⁴ He would go on to open his first independent gallery in 1966 and subsequently played host to the European avant-garde, most especially radical artists from eastern Europe. In 1970 Demarco would promote the seminal exhibition “Strategy: Get Arts,” where the palandromic title caused nearly as much consternation as the array of artists included in the show. The exhibition was staged at the Edinburgh College of Art and chiefly featured experimental artists from Düsseldorf including Bernd and Hilla Becher, Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter, and Joseph Beuys. Beuys would become a frequent visitor to Scotland, under Demarco’s patronage, and from this point an underground influence of the Fluxus group would become a coordinate of some Scottish art.

In essence the activities of the Edinburgh festival opened out the parameters of Scotland’s visual culture such that a performance, environmentalist, and multi-media dynamic would become one pole in an increasingly complex geography. From this point there emerged the most dynamic of neo-conceptual

experimentalists including Mark Boyle, Bruce McLean (b. 1944), and, the individual who remains perhaps the most esteemed of Scotland's artists, Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925–2006).

It is important to recognize this internationalist dynamic in Scotland's art in order to situate the sense of "renaissance" that was promoted in respect of "The Vigorous Imagination" exhibition in 1987. The return to narrative and painting in the early 1980s was not, exclusively, a revival of the "essence" of Scottish art and identity, but rather a recovery of one significant element in a complex landscape of shifting boundaries. Within this landscape the issue of "Britishness" had remained a troubled frontier, but the aspiration to an internationalism was consistent; more particularly, the recognition of an historic association with conceptual and neo-conceptual programs of art helps position the "triumph of conceptualism" championed by Scottish artists in the 1990s. In some degree this development has been presented as a reaction to the bravado that was trumpeted in the critical acclaim given to the figurative painters of the 1980s, but its roots were, evidently, deeper and more convoluted.

When Douglas Gordon (b. 1966) accepted the Turner Prize in 1996 he famously thanked the "Scotia Nostra." Here, he was recognizing the network of neo-conceptual artists and critics who had marked a substantial terrain in Glasgow's competitive art world. These artists primarily emerged from Glasgow School of Art's Environmental Art department, which was established in 1986 with a "public art" remit. In fact this proposal quickly shifted from a concern to create "public art" to the creation of "art in public spaces." In respect of this the "Billboard Project," initiated in 1990 by graduates of the Environmental Art department, marked a moment of transition. With this project an advertising hoarding, situated in Glasgow's East End, was periodically decorated with text and image artworks each designed to confront and challenge the passing commuter traffic. Ross Sinclair (b. 1966), for example, produced the piece titled *Four Letter Word*, 1990, which displayed the word "hate" alongside a representation of the "Union Jack."³⁵ Other site-specific works for the "Billboard Project" were created by Douglas Gordon and Julie Roberts (b. 1963), as well as the wide cohort of related neo-conceptual artists. Significantly this project signaled the advent of artist-initiated projects and exhibitions that would become a feature of the new economy in Scottish, and indeed British, art.

In accounting for this, and in an ingenious thesis, Neil Mulholland has proposed the moment of Conservative-inspired policy on the "economic viability" of university and college programs as the point at which younger artists were, paradoxically, liberated from the marketplace and conventional systems of patronage.³⁶ Forced to evaluate the nature of their production in material terms, "art in Scotland was increasingly made for a public situation" and "Scottish Neo-Conceptualists produced the kinds of engineered work most eminently compatible with the audience-orientated programming commitments needed to keep public institutions afloat."³⁷ This is less damning than it sounds for, initially at least, neo-conceptual artists looked to promote self-initiated exhibitions in artist-run spaces.³⁸ The most significant of these was the "Windfall 1991" exhibition held in The Seamen's Mission building on



FIG. 12.2 Douglas Gordon: *A Divided Self I and II*, 1996; video installation, sponsored by Channel 4, Turner Prize 1996.

Source: Photo: Marcus Leith © 2012 Studio lost but found. Courtesy of the Gagosian Gallery.

the banks of the River Clyde. Often viewed as a riposte to “The Vigorous Imagination,” “Windfall 1991” was the signature statement of the younger neo-conceptualists. With some 26 participants, roughly half of whom were from continental Europe, the exhibition showcased the work of those Glasgow artists who had emerged from the Environmental Art program; notably, Claire Barclay (b. 1968), Martin Boyce (b. 1967), and Nathan Coley (b. 1967). As an exhibition that was largely shaped and curated by its participants the “Windfall 1991” show became celebrated as the platform for the contemporary avant-garde, and eponymous “Scotia Nostra.” Predictably, it was also a stalking ground for curators of contemporary art, fashionable dealers, and art-industry speculators.

The significant feature of these developments remains the impact for the sense of a “Scottish” art. Given the international profile of these neo-conceptual artists it is possible to believe that their sense of a Scottish or British identity is irrelevant. However, Douglas Gordon’s work (see Fig. 12.2) has consistently referenced those dark dualisms that are evident in Scottish literature, especially in the writings of James Hogg and Robert Louis Stevenson; Christine Borland (b. 1965) has been unfailing in her interrogation of taxonomic and classification systems, a feature of Enlightenment and empiricist thought; while Jim Lambie (b. 1964) has been near comprehensive in his re-visualization of the artifacts from popular culture. In truth, there is a substantial overlap in subjects and themes between

Scotland's more radical painters and the neo-conceptualists embedded in the contemporary scene; it is, to a large extent, only the means of production that is contested. In all this, and throughout this story, the temperament of these arts, genre and Victorian, modern and postmodern, painterly and conceptual, has shown a disposition to reflect a contested national and nationalist character.

Mapping and Remapping

This outline of Scottish art is shaded by its highlands and lowlands, glens and grasslands, plains and vistas. Yet it remains a topography shaped, not by natural forces, but by a particular history. Scottish art has been fundamentally determined by its relationship to England and to Britain, and, in consequence of this contest, by international dynamics. Whereas the construction of a British identity has aspired to be pervasive, Scotland's artists have looked to challenge this official paradigm. In this respect they have, historically, sourced work within a distinctive culture and value system; accenting those tropes that were believed to be characteristic of Scottish life and custom. In this sense, at least, it might be suggested that a nationalist dynamic is implicit in art from Scotland. It might be assumed that with the advent of a globalized economic system, complete with an undifferentiated and homogenous culture, the concern with local and national styles might dissipate. In fact the opposite may yet be the case. With the majority of the Scottish people voting for devolution in the referendum of September 1997, and the re-establishment of a Scottish parliament in May 1999, the issue of the relationship with the United Kingdom has, once again, become moot. This is not an issue that will be resolved at the level of visual culture, but, as is evidenced above, it has remained part of public consciousness because of visual practice.

Notes

- 1 The curators were the art critic Clare Henry, the art director of The British Council, Henry Meyric Hughes, and Keith Hartley, who was then Assistant Keeper at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art. Each also contributed an essay to the generous catalogue and they were joined by Anthony Jones from the Art Institute of Chicago who had previously acted as Director at Glasgow School of Art. The exhibition was sponsored by Shell UK.
- 2 Henry, C. (1987) "Personal Recollections," catalogue essay for *The Vigorous Imagination – New Scottish Art*, Edinburgh, 19.
- 3 Henry, C. (1987) "The Vigorous Imagination – New Scottish Art," *Studio International* (Special Supplement), September, 37.
- 4 Henry, C. (1987) "The Vigorous Imagination – New Scottish Art" *Studio International* (Special Supplement), September, 43.
- 5 Griffiths, J. (1987) "Heroes and dreamers: Scottish figurative art in the 80s," *Art and Design*, 13, 718, 69.

- 6 Brotherstone, T. (1987) "Imagination and the working class in recent Scottish art," *The Workers Press*, September 12.
- 7 Graham-Dixon, A. (1987) "The Scottish at play," *The Independent*, August 21.
- 8 Hyman, T. (1987) "Edinburgh: The Vigorous Imagination," *The Burlington Magazine*, October, 688–689.
- 9 Macmillan, D. (1987) "British art in the 20th century: the modern movement," *Alba, National and International Contemporary Art from Scotland*, 4, Summer, 28.
- 10 This, of course, was the thesis of Benjamin Buchloh's influential essay "Figures of authority, ciphers of regression" published in October in the spring of 1981. Though this development might equally be read as a means by which the leadership of the avant-garde might be wrested from America and re-located in Europe.
- 11 See, for example, Beveridge, C. and Turnbull, R. (1989) *The Eclipse of Scottish Culture: Inferiorism and the Intellectuals*, Edinburgh: Polygon Press.
- 12 The Scottish National Party gained 11 of Scotland's Westminster seats in the 1974 election, the high point of their success in a British election.
- 13 The history of conservatism and the Conservative Party in Scotland is well documented but it is notable that the conservatives moved from a position where they polled over 50% of the Scottish vote in 1955, and consequently held over 50% of Scottish seats in Westminster, to the position where they fell off Scotland's political map in 1997.
- 14 Mach's *Parthenon* was illustrated in the catalogue for "The Vigorous Imagination," though it was no longer extant at the time of the exhibition.
- 15 The contents of "The Vigorous Imagination" exhibition can be viewed in the catalogue *The Vigorous Imagination – New Scottish Art*, Edinburgh: The National Galleries of Scotland, 1987.
- 16 These were Stephen Barclay (b. 1961), Steven Campbell, Ken Currie, Peter Howson, Mario Rossi, and Adrian Wiszniewski. All but Rossi were students of Moffat, and all but Barclay would appear in "The Vigorous Imagination." "New Image Glasgow" was held at the Third Eye Centre, later the Centre for Contemporary Arts, in Glasgow. It subsequently travelled to London, Milton Keynes, Ayr, and Nottingham.
- 17 Moffat, A. (1985) "Telling stories: a new figuration in Glasgow 1980–1985," *New Image Glasgow*, catalogue, Glasgow: Third Eye Centre, 6.
- 18 Moffat (1985), 11.
- 19 Edinburgh College of Art developed from the Trustees' Academy founded in the city during 1760, Glasgow School of Art grew from the city's School of Design founded in 1845 and presently exists in the building designed by Charles Rennie Mackintosh in two stages during 1899 and 1909, Gray's School of Art in Aberdeen was established in 1885, while Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art in Dundee was founded in 1909.
- 20 Following his election to the Academy in London Wilkie's career blossomed. With mercantile and aristocratic patrons, including the Duke of Wellington, he would attract admiration from his fellow academicians and further afield on the continent – Gericault was an admirer. By the 1820s George IV was his patron and he was made the King's Limner for Scotland in 1823.
- 21 Of course, the Act of Union was 1707, and Jacobite rebellions had been at their most dangerous in 1715 and in 1745.

- 22 Wilkie would famously paint a robust portrait of Scott and his family, *The Abbotsford Family*, in 1817.
- 23 For a good account of this event see Morrison, J. (2003) *Painting the Nation*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- 24 For a fine account of ‘common sense’ philosophy and its importance for Scottish art of the period see Macmillan, D. (1986) *Painting in Scotland: the Golden Age*, Oxford: Phaidon Press.
- 25 There are potential readings of Wilkie’s *Distraint for Rent*, 1815, and *The Letter of Introduction*, 1814, that would highlight a concern with social class and class conflict; a feature of Ken Currie’s work in “The Vigorous Imagination.”
- 26 Artists of The Hague School, which prospered in Holland in the second half of the nineteenth century, were supported by the new class of industrialist patrons emerging from British industrialization and colonial expansion. As “self-made-men” these entrepreneurs bypassed historical and classical arts preferring the nostalgia of rural genre. Israels was first invited to work in Scotland by the Aberdeen-based mill-owner John Forbes White in 1870.
- 27 Morrison (2003), 161.
- 28 Bastien-Lepage was immensely popular in Scotland and exhibited at The Glasgow Institute in 1883. Evidence supports the thesis that Guthrie had viewed Bastien’s work earlier than this date, notably in the French artist’s representations in London during 1882.
- 29 See Fowle, F. and Thomson, B. (eds) (2004) *Patrick Geddes: the French Connection*, Edinburgh: White Cockade Publishing.
- 30 Fergusson, J. D. (1943) *Modern Scottish Painting*, Glasgow: W. MacLellan, 20–21.
- 31 Besides the Edinburgh City Council, which supported the idea of a festival as a revenue stream in the difficult times after the Second World War, the founders of the festival included Rudolf Bing, the Director of the Glyndebourne Opera, and Henry Harvey Wood, then attached to The British Council.
- 32 Guggenheim first purchased Davie’s work in 1948, and he was exhibited in the USA from 1956.
- 33 Davie would visit Gear in his Paris studio during his travels of 1948.
- 34 Boyle had turned to poetry and the visual arts, chiefly assemblage, while studying at Glasgow University. His on-going project – as The Boyle Family – continues as the remarkable neo-conceptual triumph “Journey to the Surface of the Earth.”
- 35 Objections to this work led to its being censored; initially where Sinclair changed the text to the less political “hat” and then, still deemed controversial, had the piece withdrawn.
- 36 A quote from Douglas Gordon would seem to augment this argument: “There is no (absolutely no) private gallery scene here (in Scotland), which we all recognise as the downside of this remoteness, but this also means that there is an atmosphere of freedom for people to work with ideas that might be more difficult in a more commercial sense.” Douglas Gordon, *Flash Art Magazine*, May/June 1996.
- 37 Mulholland, N. (2003) *The Cultural Devolution*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 147–148.
- 38 In this respect the establishment of Transmission Gallery, founded in 1983, and The Tramway, established in 1988 are significant events in the history of neo-conceptual art from Glasgow.

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Retrieving, Remapping, and Rewriting Histories of British Art

Lubaina Himid's "Revenge"

Dorothy Rowe

In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. (Walter Benjamin)¹

The origin of the so-called "Black Arts Movement" in Britain is generally understood as having begun and gained momentum during the 1980s.² This was the decade that saw the first generation of postcolonial artists who had been born to migrant black and Asian families in the 1950s and 1960s, and who were raised in Britain during the 1960s and 1970s. This was the generation whom Stuart Hall has described as being "profoundly alienated by racism from any sense of belonging to, or recognition by, British society," the generation who "were haunted by questions of identity and belonging."³ This was also the generation for whom the experience of the British art school system further inscribed positions of marginalization and alterity but for whom practices of art making and exhibiting were the political tools through which "black" subjectivities could be articulated, vocalized, and legitimized in the visible realm. The concerns of this generation were real, deeply felt, and eloquently visualized and, with the benefit of hindsight, much of their work can be seen as a catalyst for the re-visualization of the borders of nationalism, identity, and nationhood in British art that has characterized the shift to transnationalism within both art and curatorial praxis in recent years. Yet the hegemonic discourses that continue to contextualize the art of this era remain deeply problematic for the discipline of academic and institutional art histories.⁴ This in turn has led to the art being marginalized from the disciplinary discourses that ought to be its home. This chapter will be an attempt to identify what some of the epistemological problems might be and how one might begin to address them in a "remapping" of the boundaries of both "British" art and the concomitant practices of art history.

Thinking Conjuncturally

There have been a number of attempts to posthumously map the field of “Black British” art produced during the 1980s and 1990s by those who were directly and indirectly involved. A series of published debates conducted through the pages of the journal *Third Text* during the early 1990s by Rasheed Araeen, Eddie Chambers, Paul Gilroy, Kobena Mercer, and Gilane Tawadros among others, attempted to ensure that the ideological precepts that underpinned the discourses around “black art” in Britain remained part of a “living archive” available and relevant for a new generation of artists and thinkers.⁵ The concept of a “living archive” recalls a Foucauldian understanding of the archive as “a practice that causes a multiplicity of statements to emerge.”⁶ The archive thus understood is transformed from a passive library or repository of past records “outside time and place” to an active system of enunciation “between our own discursive practices” which “establishes that our reason is the difference of discourses, our history the difference of times, our selves the difference of masks.”⁷ In 2005 a further contribution to this archival impulse was produced by David A. Bailey, Ian Baucom, and Sonia Boyce in a co-edited collection of variously authored essays, reflections, and interviews entitled *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain*. The book stemmed from a series of discussions, debates, and conferences that had been conducted a few years earlier in which Stuart Hall had been an active participant. Hall’s 2004 Raphael Samuel Memorial Lecture, delivered in London and subsequently published in *History Workshop Journal* in 2006, was part of his on-going contribution to the construction of “an outline genealogy of post-war Black British diaspora arts.”⁸ In “Black diaspora artists in Britain: three moments in post-war history,” Hall set the explosion of radical activity by black diaspora artists in the 1980s within a wider historical framework of the development of “black arts” in Britain since the postwar era. He also explained what it meant for him to think “conjuncturally” about the pre-histories, legacies, and impact of those decades, alluding to both Gramsci and David Scott, in his efforts to elucidate the contradictions, fault lines, and divergences that characterized the decade:

the late 1980s, a moment of explosive creativity in the black arts, is characterized by deep fissures which in turn set in train new trajectories that diverge rather than add up. That is why the 1980s remain so contested, a focus of unfulfilled desire. They can be “mapped” only as the “condensation” of a series of overlapping, interlocking but non-corresponding “histories”... Artists of the same generation do different kinds of work. They go on working, across different moments, often in radically different ways from how they began. Or they continue to follow a trajectory long after its “moment” has passed.⁹

Such a pluralist way of thinking about the practices undertaken by black artists during the 1980s is extremely suggestive for trying to assess the legacies of their

achievements in light of the current wave of critical and curatorial interest in contemporary transnational art practices within an era of globalization. Hall suggests that “black diaspora arts stand in a more engaged position in relation to contemporary art practice because the art world itself has been obliged to become more ‘global’.”¹⁰ While this is a logical proposition, it appears to be overly optimistic in its assumption. Contemporary discourses concerning transnational art practices within a global context have accelerated in Europe and America since the beginning of the twenty-first century, prompted in part by the major curatorial shifts of high profile international exhibitions such as “Documenta” and the “Venice Biennale,” and one-off shows such as “Global Feminisms” (Brooklyn Museum New York, 2007). In Britain, the 2006 *British Art Show 6* exhibited a plethora of émigré artists selected as signifiers for new curatorial focus on art produced within a global and transcultural rather than a hegemonically white and western, context. Yet within Britain, the irony of all of these more recent, some might even call them progressive, curatorial tendencies is the doubled erasure of work by some significant black and Asian British women artists who began their careers within the context of the politicized struggles for recognition as part of the “Black Arts Movement” during the 1980s but for whom that era now appears to have archived them – not in the dynamic, transactional “living archive” alluded to above but in a rather less reflexive, more “inert” one. As Lubaina Himid has commented:

We created something, named it and then allowed it to be un-named and thus de-funded. It certainly does not exist now. All of us destroyed it. We cannot revisit it except as a dead thing to worship or be nostalgic about.¹¹

Himid was an active participant in the politicization of visible black female subjectivities during the 1980s; her measured, powerful, and affective critique of the “failure” of the black arts movement to impact in any enduring way upon the major institutions and centers of ideological power of the British arts establishment (including the national museums, the arts council, discourses of academic art history, and art publishing) appeared in *Shades of Black* under the title “Inside the invisible: for/getting strategy.” In many ways, the living proof of her argument was, somewhat ironically, the establishment of the charity Institute for International Visual Arts (InIVA) in London in 1994, the explicit aim of which was to “address an imbalance in the representation of culturally diverse artists, curators and writers.”¹² Whilst InIVA continues to provide a much-needed space and resource for the research, curating, and exhibition of culturally diverse arts in Britain, it remains an isolated example of the enforced separatism from extant historically rich national institutions of British art and culture such as Tate Britain, the British Museum, and the Victoria and Albert Museum amongst others. Himid’s essay can be read as a continuation of her practice as an artist, curator, academic, and writer concerned with the historical (in)visibility of gendered black subjects within hegemonic western discourses of

arts and histories. Such a politically inflected praxis was the basis of what postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak identified as a form of “strategic essentialism,” operative in the work of a number of black and Asian women artists (Zarina Bhimji, Sutapa Biswas, Sonia Boyce, Lubaina Himid, Chila Kumari Burman, Roshini Kempadoo, Ingrid Pollard, Veronica Ryan, and Maud Sulter among them) who began their artistic careers in the 1980s. Many of these women actively participated in the political and aesthetic debates of the era that avowed the power of black subjectivities in the face of postmodernist declarations of authorial demise that were simultaneously being declared by advocates of Barthesian poststructuralism. What they demonstrated instead, through a range of diverse practices, was the contingency of subjectivity rather than its death. As Spivak notes, “there are many subject positions which one must inhabit; one is not just one thing.”¹³ It is with such contingent pluralities in mind, then, that I wish to retrieve and re-map the legacies and impacts of some of the works, ideas, and strategies produced by Lubaina Himid “against the grain.”¹⁴ I have decided to focus on Himid as a case study of a black woman artist who has worked in Britain since the 1980s, in order to continue the politically inflected art historical project of thinking “otherwise,” an on-going process that was begun by Jane Beckett, Deborah Cherry, Rosemary Betterton, and Griselda Pollock in the same era and continues to be heralded by them. As feminist interlocutors they have continued to regenerate the discursive field around the visibility of work by black and Asian women artists in Britain but which 20 years on still remains tangential to the institutional mainstream of British art’s histories. I intend to pick up their baton in a consideration of Himid’s work made for the 1992 exhibition “Revenge,” which I engage with not as the inorganic matter accruing the dust of the archive but rather as the organic roots that continue to foster the growth of an expanded field of British art but that has yet to be properly attended to in the *jetztzeit* of contemporary discourses of transnational visual cultures.¹⁵ As Sonia Boyce already pointed out in 1992, “when attention has been paid to black British art, there hasn’t really been a discussion of the work, there’s been a discussion of things *around* the work.”¹⁶ Indeed more recently Kobena Mercer has echoed her sentiments when he noted that, “the reading of the aesthetic autonomy of the diaspora art object has been continuously over-determined by a discourse about identity and institutions.”¹⁷ I would add that because the methodological basis of this discourse has been essentially sociological, it has held little interest for the dominant practices of western art history in Britain. The challenge for the art historian who wishes to consider the contributions, legacies, and lessons to be learned from the experiences of black and Asian women artists practicing in Britain since the 1980s is to move beyond the stasis of debates concerning racial identity and consider instead what Mercer, after Michael Fried, has referred to “art’s condition of objecthood” within the structures and discourses of history.¹⁸ I hope that my consideration of Himid’s work will operate as a case study for subsequent and continued retrieval of other

artworks that were made by black and Asian women in Britain that can be built into a corpus for future teaching, research, and re-mapping of British art's histories.

Writing eloquently about Lubaina Himid's exhibition "Revenge: A Masque in Five Tableaux," held at Rochdale Art Gallery in 1992, Griselda Pollock asks whether "understanding historically" can "mean a tactical insertion of the present into a historical field by means of a critical quotation from art's histories to signify the historical formation of the present?"¹⁹ She asks such a question specifically in relation to Frederic Jameson's delineation of *pastiche* as one of the strategies of postmodernism that serves to undermine historical understanding, erasing and replacing it with a contemporary form of superficial historicism; history deployed as pastiche becomes an empty sign with no referent.²⁰ As both Pollock and Gilane Tawadros have argued, Himid's work "challenges this tendency" to erase history, by attending to a new form of history painting that politically reanimates the genre from within as an address to the colonial violence against Africa, African subjects, and the subjects of African diasporas, on which the structures of western modernism were founded.²¹ Using the quintessentially modernist medium of painting as her main tool, Himid wrests it from its traditional function as the instrument for white western canon formation and re-deploys it in a dialogical relation to its origins. As Tawadros indicates, "the citation by Himid and other black artists of pre-existing art forms from the history of Western art can be seen to be part of a coherent political and aesthetic strategy based on an interrogation of Western history *through* history" – or, one might add, through *global histories*.²² Indeed, it is also significant that a number of black and Asian women artists in Britain who first rose to prominence during the 1980s not only challenged the dominance of western art history via recourse to the familiar traditions of its iconography but also deliberately foregrounded their own transcultural references within their artwork at a time when access to an understanding of and engagement with the visual languages of non-western cultures was not readily available within mainstream arts education in Britain. In doing this, many began to challenge extant definitions of what constituted British art and national identity. As Indian-born artist Sutapa Biswas explained in 1986 of some of her artworks that were based on the iconography of Hindu mythologies, "I want people to research into my culture, as I've been doing into European and Western culture."²³ The idea of multiple and active exchanges between artist, object, and viewer within the contexts of transnational and global visual cultures is one that is now central and certainly not unusual to a multitude of contemporary globalized art practices, but it is one that was still being fought for only a few decades ago. It is the visual language of that struggle, then, that I should like to address in the rest of this chapter via a selection of artworks by Lubaina Himid. By attending to the content of her works and her divergent aesthetic strategies, I hope to be able to retrieve some of its legacies from the archives of the past, in the present, for the future, in a move that I hope will

continue to reiterate her engagement as an artist with concerns well beyond the stasis of visible identity politics and toward an expanded field of British art's histories.²⁴

At the Water's Edge

I want to change the order of things and take back the art which has been stolen.
Lubaina Himid "We Will Be," 1987²⁵

In a short educational film entitled "Open Sesame: a Making Histories Visible Project" directed by Lubaina Himid in conjunction with Susan Walsh and Tate Liverpool in 2005, Himid points out that all four Tate galleries (Liverpool, Modern, Britain, St Ives) are "slightly oddly placed" at the water's edge – the Mersey, the Thames, and Porthmeor beach, respectively.²⁶ As Deborah Cherry reminds us "location hovers between the generic and the specific, it entangles particular sites and larger spaces, the imaginary and the actual, the virtual and the material, memory and history."²⁷ Himid's focus on the watery location of all of the galleries is not accidental; water as a conduit for movement, travel, passage, colonialism, migration, exile, displacement, loss, slavery, and death have been among some of the recurrent tropes of her work over a number of years. The site of the four galleries at the water's edge is also metaphorically suggestive of the many different journeys made by the people who visit them for the multiple and divergent reasons that the film explores. Significantly, the first of three paintings from the "Revenge" series by Himid to have been bought for the Tate collections, *Between the Two my Heart is Balanced*, depicts the passage of two black women sailing the seas in a small boat, while tearing up a pile of navigation charts. The work was presented to Tate Britain by the Patrons of New Art in 1995 having been painted in 1991 and exhibited as part of the 1992 Rochdale exhibition cited above. The exhibition consisted of nine large paintings, 16 smaller studies, an installation, and accompanying elegiac texts that formed the tableaux. Read collectively the paintings, studies, installation, and writings continue to offer a powerful set of propositions for black women's present, future, and continuing agency in the postcolonial west, set against the legacies of the violent, colonial pasts of their enslaved African ancestors. Paintings and scripts constitute the warp and weft of a rich historical tapestry in which sails, robes, cloths, highly colored fabrics, tents, canopies, flags, patterns, rugs, and textiles operate literally and metaphorically to activate multiple meanings from within the formal structures of the objects and texts. Tableau One and a corresponding painting, *Carpet* (1992), stages the complexity of the masque in visual dialogue with the modernist abstraction of Matisse's cut outs. Visual allusions to the blocks of vibrant color deployed in Matisse's *The Snail* (1953) are recalled, yet as in Matisse's work, "pure" abstraction is resisted. Jill Morgan has commented that "the Black women in *Revenge* ... sit upon multi-coloured, overlaid rugs to discuss strategy in their

abstract form.”²⁸ The abstract forms in *Carpet* are figured oppositionally as black and white, symbolic of the entwined colonial histories of Africa and Europe that are being interrogated. The vibrant red, yellow, pink, green, orange, and blue palette of *Carpet* is repeated in the rhythm of colors across the series as a whole, suggesting that color and form are deliberately deployed to belie the impulse to read these canvases either chronologically or monologically. Rather, a conception of synchronic, dialogical time is structured through Himid’s formal choices as a painter. A project to memorialize the horrors of the Middle Passage alluded to in the texts of tableaux three and four and the corresponding artworks, *Memorial to Zong*, *Six Studies for a Fountain* and *Ten Studies for a Monument*, is conceptualized as part of a political imperative for a different set of future relationships between Africa and Europe in which black women will be agents for remembering, interrupting, and changing the course of events. In Himid’s catalogue statement about the paintings, she comments that “their language is more akin to the call of the birds or the growth and blossoming of flowers.”²⁹ Indeed, such evocations of temporally recurring cycles are redolent of Julia Kristeva’s re-conceptualization of “women’s time” in which she points out that whilst female subjectivity is traditionally structured by its relationship to cyclical time (via menstruation, pregnancy, repetition) and monumental time (via motherhood and reproduction), the time of history and of language (the realm of phallogentric social order) is structured as linear and that women’s relationship to it is one of sacrifice and enslavement. While remaining alert to individual differences between women, Kristeva asks “how can we reveal our place, first as it is bequeathed to us by tradition, and then as we want to transform it?”³⁰ Likewise *Revenge* asks comparable questions as they pertain to the past, present, and future roles for black women as subjects within western histories. In tableau one:

Patterns, colours, cloth flapping, beating in the wind. Robes wrapped against the sun and the cold of the night. Fabric highly coloured, woven, sewn together. Umbrellas tent canopies flags banners. The patterns on the cloths hold the clues to events.³¹

As the “Masque” progresses, this visually rich semiotic field constitutes a signifying system in which the relationships between signs are structured both aesthetically and politically, binding the five tableaux and the corresponding paintings together in an active cycle of memory and change. By tableau five, the abstract forms have been transfigured into two black women who are cast in multiple, dialogic roles as necessary agents for historical revolution set against the legacies of the traumatic histories of invasion, slavery, colonization, and murder that have been alluded to in the preceding tableaux.

The references to the painterly modernism of Matisse in *Carpet* are part of a wider network of allusions to the aesthetic practices of many other avant-garde artists within the “Revenge” series, including J. M. W. Turner, Mary Cassatt, James Tissot, Gertrude Stein, and Pablo Picasso. Like Matisse, Picasso was enthralled by the radical “difference” he perceived in the formal properties of

African sculpture that had been imported into France during colonial rule since the late nineteenth century and which was readily available to view at the Trocadéro Museum and for Picasso and his circle, in Matisse's own collection. The dependence on plunder from Africa endemic to both economic and aesthetic modernity is also at the heart of Himid's painterly re-working of these colonial pasts. Yet as well as references to modernism, the literary structure of dramaturgy suggested by the concept of the "Masque" also activates other layers of historical, aesthetic, gendered, racial, and cultural signification. Within English literary tradition, one of the most well-known authors of courtly masques was seventeenth-century Jacobean dramatist Ben Johnson (1572–1637), but a variety of masque traditions can also be found in Africa, for example in the Egungun masquerade cult of seventeenth-century Yoruba, the ritual events of the Dogon people from the Bandiagara and Douentza districts of Mali, or the Tabwa masks from the Democratic Republic of Congo, to cite just a few.³² In both western and African traditions, masques were enacted through allegorical and mythological references, rather than via chronological narratives. In thinking about Himid's praxis, this dual tradition of allegorical signification is particularly resonant since a central tenet of her work involves answering back to the hegemony of white western cultural forms, interrupting them and steering another course. In both English and Yoruban traditions of masque, the masqueraders' main function was a patrilineal one designed to entertain the King and confirm his status as monarch.³³ However, as Kathryn Schwarz has observed, between 1604 and 1609 English Jacobean court masques somewhat unusually "staged the bodies and intentions" of the Queen.³⁴ In 1603 King James I had ascended to the throne of England with his wife, Queen Anne of Denmark. Yet according to several commentators, Anne held a marginal, liminal position at court, "representing power once removed."³⁵ It was only through the commissioning of and acting in a specific series of masques, that Anne was able to perform a set of disruptions and displacements of male power through dramatic fiction on stage via the racialized body of feminine excess, in counterpoint to the Jacobean norm. Three of the five masques, *The Masque of Blackness* (1605), *The Masque of Beauty* (1608), and *The Masque of Queens* (1609) were a trio written by Ben Johnson in response to direct requests from Queen Anne and designed by Inigo Jones. Kathryn Schwarz traces Jonson's tropes of racial and gendered disorder in all three of the masques via the role of alterity as figured in Jacobean concepts of the female Amazonian body. Yet Johnson is also shown to distance himself from the disruptive intent of the masques via both his explanatory notes, particularly in *The Masque of Blackness* and via his introduction of the anti-masque for the third *Masque of Queens*. The anti- or ante-masque was a rhetorical device invented by Johnson in which subversion, liminality, disruption, and the grotesque could be played out as a preliminary to the restoration of legitimate monarchical order that was to be performed during the main masque. When *The Masque of Blackness* was performed to hostile critical response in 1605, the anti-masque had not yet been devised. The plot of *The Masque of Blackness* developed from Queen Anne's request to

perform herself and her attendants disguised as Africans using black body paint (instead of the usual deployment of masks). Set amidst the waves of the sea, Oceanus, guardian of the realm of Albion, is approached by Niger “in forme and colour of an Aethiope.”³⁶ Following Niger, “twelve nymphs, negroes and daughters of Niger” enter “in a great concave shell, like mother of pearl, curiously made to move on those waters and rise with the billow.” Niger explains to Oceanus that his daughters, “Aethiops” who were once “as fair as other dames” before the sun scorched their skins, were “now black, black with despair” and in search of a remedy that Oceanus reveals to them can be found in “Britania” (*sic*) which is “ruled by a Sunne” (King James) who can “blanche” them.³⁷ The overt racism and allusions to the potential colonial “redemption” of black Africa through the light of Britannia, are self-evident and as such do not need anachronistic elucidation from me. As Liz Prettejohn has observed, the temptation of contemporary cultural analysis to apportion retrospective blame to cultural forms from the past that are found wanting in their ideological assumptions when compared against today’s standards is not especially insightful, particularly since such critical strategies frequently serve to reveal more about contemporary side-stepping of the same prejudices within our own culture than they do to provide new understandings of the objects they purport to analyse.³⁸ What the recall of Jonson’s masque in this context does do however, is to further excavate the archaeology, impact, and effect of *Revenge* as a series of artworks already in dialogue with a re-visioning of the aesthetic traditions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century European modernism cited above. While Jonson’s *Masque of Blackness* deploys the bodies of blacked-up white women to probe the boundaries of hegemonic patriarchal order within the British Jacobean court, Himid’s “Revenge” recuperates the visualization of black women’s bodies as signifiers for a whole new system of visual representation within British art’s histories. As Jane Beckett and Deborah Cherry observe, “*Revenge* is not a celebration of imperial expansion, monarchic authority or aristocratic hierarchy,” in the Renaissance masque traditions of Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones but “rather it is a lamentation, a monument to the survival of African people and the transformations of African culture.”³⁹

In *The Mansa of Mali* the visual economy of signs hinted at in tableau one is incisively deployed in a metaphorical depiction of invasion. Although modernist precursors such as Franz Marc’s *Fighting Forms* (1914) or El Lissitzky’s *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (1920) used color symbolically in order to structure antagonistic relationships between forms, in *The Mansa of Mali* Himid figures the invasion as a one-sided take over, “the epistemic violence of the imperialist project.”⁴⁰ Yet the title of the painting also metonymically recalls accounts of West African histories before colonization, in particular the prosperity of the fourteenth century Empire of Mali which came under the leadership of Mansa Musa from 1312 to 1337.⁴¹ During his reign, Mansa Musa famously went on pilgrimage to Mecca via Cairo, accompanied by a huge retinue of thousands of followers amongst whom were 500 slaves bearing gold. Several Arabic chronicles based in

part on eye witness testimonies, recount the impact of Musa's pilgrimage in establishing Mali's reputation as a powerful economy based on the control of major trade routes, the establishment of cities with universities and mosques, a programme of territorial expansion within West Africa and the exploitation of Mali's natural gold resources.⁴² By referencing Mansa Musa, Himid is neither judging nor romanticizing Mali's past but remembering it as an example of West African history that was not pre-determined by the subsequent decimation wrought on it by the violence of the transatlantic slave trade and European colonization. In *The Mansa of Mali* the colonial assault through which West Africa is "broken" is depicted "formally through the picture structure; the jutting in to the canvas of the different pattern, flowing in on the tide with the Portuguese Man of War."⁴³ The gold ground of the violated canvas bears a grid-like weave in black and red: the gold of Africa, the pattern of its textile traditions, the color of its people. The red ground of the invading canvas is divided by gridlines of white and pink: the red blood of Africans imprisoned within the structures of the white European's imperial project. A further canvas, *Invasion*, completes the attack. Africa remains the golden ground but the land is now surrounded on both sides and in the middle, by a pink multitude of abstract forms – the invading Europeans. Both *The Mansa of Mali* and *Invasion* can be read in conjunction with tableau two, an epigrammatic account of Africa's demise at the hands of Europe:

Sails straining in the wind. Flags flapping at the bow. Sea Voyages wind currents
maps navigations charts water ships gold tobacco sugar slaves. Division of land.
Murder. Theft. Guns greed gold. Sails straining in the wind.⁴⁴

Whilst tableaux one and two set the scene of the Masque, its "mercurial heart" is exposed in the texts and accompanying images for tableaux three and four.⁴⁵ *Memorial to Zong* and *Ten studies for a Monument* comprise a poignant visual eulogy to the lost lives of the people enslaved from West Africa in 1781 and then murdered by being thrown overboard the British slave ship *Zong*. As indicated above, the practice of slave-owning was endemic to all Imperial civilizations ranging from Ancient Greece and Rome, fourth century Ghana, fourteenth century Mali and beyond. However, this does not mitigate the fact that within any civilization the captivity of one human being by another is a crime against humanity and against all forms of social democracy as we understand it today. The particular flashpoint here is that African slavery was still deemed a legitimate practice in late eighteenth-century Europe, during the same era in which the economic, social, and epistemological foundations of our own era were first established and the legacies of which we are still living with. The *Zong* was a ship from Liverpool that had taken on more slaves than it could safely transport in its journey from Africa to Jamaica. After two months at sea, overcrowding, malnutrition, and disease had killed 7 of the 17 crew members and 60 of the 440 slaves on board. The captain decided to throw the remaining 132 sick slaves overboard in order to claim the £30 insurance money per slave that he could

legally claim as lost cargo.⁴⁶ When the *Zong* massacre became publicly known, partly as a result of a subsequent court case over the insurance claim rather than over the abhorrently inhumane concept that the murder of the enslaved Africans constituted a legal disposal of “property” and partly because Olaudah Equiano had brought it to the attention of abolitionist campaigners, it became a buttress in the subsequent battles for the abolition of the slave trade. When Himid began painting the works for “Revenge” in 1991, there was very little widespread public knowledge, understanding, information, or remembrance of *Zong* and its legacies in Britain. Paul Gilroy was amongst those few commentators who did raise it publicly in an important essay for the *New Statesman* published in 1990 as part of his response to Rasheed Araeen’s controversial exhibition “The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Britain,” held at the Hayward Gallery in 1989. In his “Art of darkness: black art and the problem of belonging to England” Gilroy drew on the critical reception of J. M. W. Turner’s famous painting of the *Zong* massacre, *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon coming on* (1840) to articulate the ways in which English thinking about race had been integral to English art and aesthetics for a much longer period than suggested by Araeen’s narrative. Writing about the existence of aesthetic representation of black suffering in the nineteenth century, Gilroy comments that:

These images were not an alien or unnatural presence that had somehow intruded into English life from outside. They were an integral means with which England was able to make sense of itself and its destiny. The picture and its strange history pose a challenge to the black English today. It demands that we strive to integrate the different dimensions of our hybrid cultural heritage more effectively... In doing this, we may discover that our story is not the *other* story after all but *the* story of England in the modern world.⁴⁷

Subsequent accounts of the *Zong* massacre such as Ian Baucom’s 2007 *Specters of the Atlantic*, situate the event in Ernst Bloch’s terms as “noncontemporaneously contemporary,” as not simply “an act of past violence but an event that encapsulates a wider capitalist logic that has only been perfected and intensified in our present historical moment.”⁴⁸ Fred D’Aguir’s 1999 novel *Feeding the Ghosts* was an imaginative attempt to rewrite the tragedy of *Zong* for contemporary readers through the traumatic fictional story of one black woman’s survival of the incident. Although not directly inspired by it, his choice of a female heroine could be seen as an act of metaphorical recuperation of the disembodied leg that is being devoured by fish in Turner’s *Slavers*. Many commentators identify the leg as belonging to a woman, presumably because of the delicacy of the surviving foot – there are very few other visual clues readily available within the painting that allow for such a firm identification. Yet for Andrew Opitz in his 2008 review of Baucom’s text, “remembering Atlantic slavery is not about political correctness or about exorcising ghosts from the past; it is about salvaging a liveable future from the soiled wreckage of history.”⁴⁹ In 1991 Himid had already been wrestling



FIG. 13.1 Lubaina Himid: *Study for a Memorial to Zong*, acrylic on paper, 1991, Private Collection, from “Revenge: a Masque in Five Tableaux” first exhibited at Rochdale Art Gallery May 1992.
Source: © Lubaina Himid.

with these particular challenges for a number of years in her activities as a painter, writer, and curator seeking strategies for getting what she terms “inside the invisible.” In *Memorial to Zong*, the invisible are the African bodies forever lost to the waters of the Middle Passage. As she commented to Alan Rice over a decade later:

I’m interested in the politics of representation and how when something is there you talk about it or you think about it or you write about it – but when something isn’t there, what do you say, how can you make something of that, how can it not have been in vain? So that idea of memorialising really came from trying to visibilise the invisible.⁵⁰

In *Study for a Memorial to Zong* (Fig. 13.1), the duality of water as a potential agent of either destruction or salvation at sea is

evoked in a beautifully economical sketch in which a single brown hand emerges from a deep blue ocean. The hand holds up its five fingers and whilst we know that within the context of *Zong* it is “not waving but drowning,” the visual economy of the work, its art historical differencing of Turner’s iconography in *Slavers*, its symbolic link to one of the final “Revenge” paintings, *Five* (Fig. 13.2) and Himid’s overall Benjaminian philosophy of history, all point to its exceeding a purely memorializing function in favor of a more fluid, dynamic, dialogical, and non-linear “poetics of relation.”⁵¹ Edouard Glissant’s concept of a “poetics of relation” is extremely evocative in thinking about Himid’s visual strategies here since it is specifically concerned with destabilizing monolithic language in order to “deategorize understandings and establish new relations.”⁵² Developed from his particular experiences as a black French-Caribbean subject of Martinique, a “poetics of relation” is a self-consciously rhizomatic form of thought which eschews both essentialism and assimilation; it is concerned with the historical contingency of encounters between cultures and the potential of “poetics as a transformative mode of history.”⁵³ It is this possibility that is also explored so astutely in the visual economy of “Revenge.”



FIG. 13.2 Lubaina Himid: *Five*, 1991, collection of Griselda Pollock on permanent loan to Leeds City Art Gallery, from “Revenge: A Masque in Five.”

Source: Tableaux first exhibited at Rochdale Art Gallery May 1992; © Lubaina Himid.

J. M. W. Turner’s 1840 representation of the events of the *Zong* massacre, *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On*, has been the subject of intense critical debate since it was first exhibited at the Royal Academy, a debate that has been thoroughly explored by Marcus Wood in *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America 1780–1865*, amongst other more recent accounts. As is well recorded, Turner’s painting was championed by its first owner, John Ruskin, who notoriously focused on its aesthetic and painterly qualities, relegating commentary about its subject matter to a footnote in which he described it as a “guilty ship ... a slaver throwing her slaves overboard. The near sea is encumbered with corpses.”⁵⁴ For William Makepiece Thackeray, the sublimity of the painting, in particular its coloring, which he admires as “the most tremendous piece of colour that was ever seen,” could not be reconciled with the baseness of the subject matter, the drowning slaves in the foreground.⁵⁵ Wood devotes extensive commentary to such ambivalent critical reception as well as to a number of possible iconographic sources for the

painting. He also dwells on the representation of the disembodied leg in the left foreground, still shackled by its ball and chain while being eaten by seagulls and different varieties of fish. For Wood, the disembodied leg belongs “to a female falling slave” and he considers it in the context of the act of falling as “a figuration of traumatic memory.” Yet he also acknowledges that “the leg has disproportionate narrative power” and as such it became the discomforting occasion for laughter when the work was exhibited.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, Wood works hard in his attempts to situate the painting as “a monument to the slave trade ... a monument without names which at least inaugurates the act of mourning.”⁵⁷ His exhaustive consideration of Turner’s *Slavers* wavers between recognition of the bathos and inadequacies of Turner’s rendition of the actual slaves and his insistent desire to recuperate the painting as a commemoration of the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade, despite his recognition that “the painting is paradoxical, abstract, difficult.”⁵⁸ In 1993 David Dabydeen published an epic response to *Slavers* in a 600-verse poem, *Turner*. In the poem, Dabydeen casts the artist in the role of the slave captain, suggesting Turner’s complicity in the continued signification of Afro-Caribbean people within British culture as dead victims of slavery since *Slavers* was painted in 1840, 60 years after *Zong* and two years after the end of slavery across the British Empire, during a period when archival evidence suggests that there was a steady increase in the population of post-slavery black citizens living in Britain.⁵⁹ Abigail Ward certainly reads it in this way arguing that “*Slavers* points deliberately to the previous century in order to detract attention away from the then current position of black people within Britain.”⁶⁰ In his defence of the work, Wood contends that “Turner’s great painting of the slaver was not engraved for the abolition market” since “apart from the fact that it was technically untranslatable, it was not engaged with propping up white mythologies which combine sentimentality with eroticism, and overcoat all with a varnish of philanthropic patriotism.”⁶¹ However as Ward points out, “the chains that float somewhat unconvincingly on the surface of the water make explicit the enslaved status of the drowning, and the hands reaching up from Turner’s waves are an overlooked aspect of the work” which can “be seen as correlating to the imploring hands of slaves depicted in abolitionist images, reaching out for salvation to the white audience.”⁶² For Ward, the painting reads more “as a monument to *forgetting* the black person’s role in contemporary Britain by focusing on the past” of abolition that “perpetuates the image of black people as suffering victims.”⁶³ Whichever way one chooses to read the multivalent significations available to an interpretation of Turner’s work, and taking heed of Prettejohn’s observations on the responsibilities of our contemporary cultural analyses of artworks from the past, what is significant about Himid’s *Study for a Memorial to Zong* is her subtle but powerful re-signification of Turner’s iconography for her own era. Himid shifts the visual focus from Turner’s disembodied leg to the smaller, more frequently “overlooked” area of the chained hands. In a form of visual palingensis, Himid releases a single drowning hand from its chains, unhooking one of the standard hegemonic tropes of European art historical

representation that depicts black people as either slaves or servants. Himid's hand is central and clear – it is not overwhelmed by the forces of sublime nature and within the vocabulary of her iconography in “Revenge,” it signifies dialectically. It is re-embodied in one of the final paintings *Five*, a canvas that corresponds with the last tableau in which the re-situated hand is no longer drowning in a deep blue ocean but emerges against a vibrant yellow ground, “the colour of Africa.” In *Five* it now belongs to an animated black woman who wears the mantle of radically disruptive modernism in the form of Gertrude Stein's coat who debates future strategies with her friend.⁶⁴

If the visual economy of *Study for a Memorial to Zong* operates dialectally in a nexus between past, present, and future, the larger painting *Memorial to Zong* also functions as both an act of visible closure in the process of mourning for deceased ancestors and as a distinct “call to action.”⁶⁵ The painting consists of a traditional classical memorial plinth being tilted over by the force of a sail on which is painted “a bowl that collects water composed of numerous closely packed human figures ... human cargo and its survival despite the horrors of the voyage.”⁶⁶ On top of the plinth rests a white jug painted with the portrait bust of an African man: black inscribing white in an inversion of the color symbolism of colonial encounter. As Alan Rice observes, “the jug leaks water from its spout” symbolizing “the dispersal of African lives in this incident and numerous others.”⁶⁷ *Memorial to Zong* corresponds with the text of tableau four, which poetically transforms the agonising and deathly “water, deep water salty” of tableau three into a rush of renewed energy; the rhythm of its uninterrupted prose materializes its metaphorical resonance:

Water cascading falling spouting sparkling frothing whooshing trickling spurting foaming running pouring falling pooling puddling raining filling overflowing. A fountain a monument a memorial to people for water. For water to people wasted in water, wasted for water. A memorial to Zong. Singing buried treasure. *After the mourning comes revenge.*⁶⁸

As I have indicated above, for Marcus Wood, if it does nothing else, Turner's *Slavers* “at least inaugurates the act of mourning,” but for Himid the closure and stasis implied via such an act is inadequate to the task of thinking through a more active engagement for black subjectivities in the present: for this reason “after the mourning,” must “come revenge.” For a contemporary western viewer, the trope of revenge within the context of the masque is likely to recall the retribution and potentially endless cycle of blood-revenge also made popular in English Renaissance literature via plays such as *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1606) or Middleton's *Women Beware Women* (1657) in which masques are used as ironic plot devices to “exploit the trick of appearances” through which the characters can enact their murderous schemes of revenge.⁶⁹ In *Women Beware Women*, as its title suggests, women work against each other and as such “they all die as victims,” whereas in Himid's conception, differences between women are acknowledged as

constituting the necessary processes of dialogic engagement to enact political change.⁷⁰ As she explained recently:

This theme of re-writing history is at the centre of all of the work in the series but it also refers to the reality of my sharing a project to change the world with other black women and understanding that this can only succeed if we agree that there are many different ways to do this... In all the *Revenge* paintings we are arguing. In our house we are arguing.⁷¹

Himid's is a fluid and dynamic revenge of presence, process, and dialogue in which black "women take revenge" by still being here and still being creative.⁷² Whilst multiple contexts from English Renaissance drama are evident in the aesthetic structuring of and rupturing by *Revenge*, frameworks that have been elegantly and sensitively explored by Beckett and Cherry, it may also be that a consideration of some of the performative conventions of West African masquerade might further illuminate the philosophical complexities of this art historical project of interruption.⁷³ In particular, I am thinking of the rituals of lamentation and mourning that have been historically central to the masquerades of the Dogon people of Mali. As an ethnic group, the Dogon have endured but survived several centuries of incursion from slave raids beginning in the fifteenth century to French colonization from the late nineteenth and first six decades of the twentieth centuries, both significant historical contexts for "Revenge."⁷⁴ For the Dogon people, *dama* or "the end of mourning" consists of a complex of elaborate and costly performances of masks. According to cultural anthropologist Walter E. A. van Beek, "mask festivals function as second burials resituating the recently deceased as ancestors."⁷⁵ Beek also comments that Dogon symbolism is fragmented, "carried by ideas and objects," thus stressing the importance of material culture to the success of the ritual performances. In *Memorial to Zong*, Himid's focus on the materiality of objects for the transmission of ideas concerning memory, history, and identity has already been noted by Beckett and Cherry as referencing one of her earlier installation pieces, *Mirror/Cloth/Bowl* (1986), which was shown as part of "A Room for MaShulan" in 1987, a joint exhibition undertaken with Maud Sulter.⁷⁶ Himid has explained of the earlier pieces that they were "the method" she was using to speak with her grandmother, as a woman, as a female forebear and as her ancestor, in order to gain strength from her memory. The production of the work was also compelled by Himid's desire "for her to speak to me and give me the strength to go home and have home within me."⁷⁷ Interestingly, according to Shawn Davis, "the symbolic smashing of a gourd over the deceased's hoe, wooden bowl and burial blanket announces the arrival of the masks" within the Yincomoli ceremony of the Dogon *dama*.⁷⁸ Germaine Dieterlen has also observed that the colors with which Dogon masks are painted have symbolic value and that "for the Dogon, a mask that is not painted brilliant colours ... is nothing but a piece of wood, elegantly sculpted but devoid of life, without any

value.⁷⁹ As Himid also explains of *Revenge* “colour is a vital element, a wild, bold and tumultuous brushing on of a wide palette.” Morgan elaborates:

Our conversation with these paintings is through the psychologically loaded palette of colour. Juxtapositions, choice of earthy colours, ermine blacks, reds, turquoise blues, oranges, a re-claiming of the colour palette of Africa and a dipping of the brush into the history of Western Art. Lubaina has understood the importance of colour in the control of meaning.⁸⁰

While I am not suggesting that Himid is undertaking a literal or even a conscious re-enactment of the extremely complex performative rituals of the Dogon people within either *Mirror/Cloth/Bowl* or “Revenge,” the symbolic resonances of her richly woven visual tapestry clearly registers on multiple levels of cultural, historical, and geographical signification that suggest new transcultural possibilities for Glissant’s “poetics of relation.” Himid’s address is not only an interruption of the literary traditions of the English Renaissance, a reclaiming of the cultural forms of European modernism, and an interrogation of the politics of race and gender in both arenas; it is also a re-fashioning and re-positioning of a role for both Africa and its people within those narratives in an imaginative reconfiguration of a sustainable future for black British women’s cultural agency. So it is then that the last act, tableau five conjures a myriad of symbolic threads around its own end that paradoxically lead us back to the beginnings; a labyrinthine circle of Kristevan time. The number five is multiply deployed, layering in on itself repeatedly, rocking our visual memories back and forth from the five-fingered hand of the “study” for *Zong* to the five scenarios for “two women” imagined in the text of tableau five, to one of the final corresponding paintings, *Five* and perhaps, not insignificantly, to the recall of *Five Black Women* – the site of Himid’s own beginnings as a professional artist, a group exhibition shared between five black women: Sonia Boyce, Lubaina Himid, Claudette Johnson, Houria Niati, and Veronica Ryan, held at London’s Africa Centre in 1983. Himid’s professional beginnings in *Five Black Women* fostered expanded networks of collaboration between black and Asian women artists that were to continue throughout the 1980s as the express effect of Himid’s and Sulter’s passion as artists, writers, and curators actively concerned with getting inside the invisible, “making images of black women because there are not enough of them” and sharing their space for dialogue with other black women.⁸¹ Tableau five continues that project:

Two women standing ankle-deep behind banners in front of cloths shredding maps; fragments float away. Two women sit in a small boat tearing up navigation charts; how many died crossing the water. Two women sit in a theatre box ripping up maps; can the past be replayed. Two women sit at dinner forming strategy; can the future be different better. Two women sit on rugs reliving history and planning the future; magic carpet fly.⁸²

Ankledeep inaugurates the next phase of palingenesis that began with *Study for a Memorial to Zong*. The deep blue ocean from *Study* has transformed into the cascading waters issuing from the *Memorial* jug and in *Ankledeep* they crash onto the shores of a new era, bearing with them two black women seeking their revenge from the fabric of history. The women shred and scatter the colonial maps of the past before searching for new robes and debating new directions. In *Between the Two My Heart is Balanced*, the “ankledeep” women, *dramatis personae* inhabited by Sulter and Himid, have donned richly colored, deeply woven robes adapted from the wardrobe of Tissot’s *Portsmouth Dockyard* (1877) but transformed into the fabric of African textiles; the women navigate their small boat and continue to shred their charts until water and maps are finally left behind and a new narrative can begin.⁸³ Thus *Act One No Maps* sees our heroines ousting Renoir, Cassatt, and Morisot from their *Loges* and gazing at the empty stage before them, waiting perhaps for a new, post-revenge *Masque* to unfold. Sulter and Himid hijack the spaces of masculine urban modernity and, while nodding in the direction of their white female precursors, temporarily but necessarily eject them, placing themselves in the frame. Finally, the alluring color palette of *Five* returns the viewer to the Matissean origins of *Carpet* in tableau one in a circular dance of origins, debts, and new beginnings. *Five* places Sulter and Himid round the table of European modernism interpolating modernism’s debts to Africa and discussing strategies for recuperation. The jug and bowl from *Memorial to Zong* are refigured as accoutrements on the Parisian café table, a modernist still-life rendered in the style of Vanessa Bell. Yet the presence of the bowl continues to signify the absence of the African people who were lost to the horrors of the Middle Passage, the murderous foundations of European and American modernity. The bowl is placed between two plates bearing maps – Africa on the right, America on the left, the bowl in the center, the jug positioned to viewer’s side. According to Morgan, the flowers in the vase are Egyptian, further embedding the fabric of Africa into this contested and re-possessioned space.⁸⁴ As Griselda Pollock observes, borrowing Gertrude Stein’s coat “suggests that the mantle is being passed from avant-garde outsider, a Jewish lesbian, *the Mother of Modernism*, to women who will, as radically as she, realign culture through what they make.”⁸⁵ Pollock considers *Five* in some considerable detail, noting that “the space is not closed off to the viewer. Others may pull up a chair” but that the protagonists “claim and occupy a space, and they do it as two.”⁸⁶ By multiplying their presence Himid subtly but resolutely refuses to let them carry “the burden of representation” for all black women, in a deliberate counter-move to the prevailing monological economy identified in Sonia Boyce’s sardonic observation that if you’re a black woman “in the art world ... one is enough.”⁸⁷

Conclusions

My research into the visual resonances of Lubaina Himid’s “Revenge” has taken me on a visually, culturally, and historically rich journey that resists the closure that the concept of drawing conclusions seems to suggest. What I hope

this chapter has done is to continue the dialogue with her work in the present in an attempt to rethink the borders, boundaries, and maps of British art's histories and concepts of national identity as constructed in the visual field. My intention is a politically motivated one designed to contribute to the existing but as yet still relatively small corpus of feminist art historical writing about the visual and aesthetic legacies of artworks produced by black and Asian women artists who have been active in Britain since the 1980s but whose contributions to the re-mapping of British art's histories during the last 30 years are still being realized.

Acknowledgements

We do not choose our birthing/nor perhaps our death
Maud Sulter, *Blackwomansong*, 1989⁸⁸

This chapter has benefited immeasurably from the generosity, insight, and dialogue offered by Lubaina Himid about her work, as well as from my art historical generational debts to Jane Beckett, Deborah Cherry, Rosemary Betterton, Gill Perry, and Griselda Pollock. It is dedicated to the memory of Maud Sulter (1960–2008) who died prematurely during the course of this research.

Notes

- 1 Benjamin, W. (1968) "Theses on the philosophy of history" (1940) in H. Arendt (ed.) *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken Books, 255.
- 2 The term "Black Arts Movement" is highly contested, as is the label "black art." The terms are deployed here with caveats as short hand for a set of debates that emerged during the 1980s that have retrospectively, although not unproblematically, come to be applied to the era. In key texts such as *Shades of Black*, Keith Piper in particular expresses his reservations about the "profoundly unreflective use of [the] two grand narrative terms" with which I am inclined to agree. See Bailey, D., Baucom, I. and Boyce, S. (eds) (2005) *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 36. One of the most pressing concerns in the British context is the use of the term "black" as an all-encompassing signifier for artists of very different ethnic backgrounds including those of Chinese, Korean, South Asian, Pakistani, Indian, African, and Afro-Caribbean origins. Indeed, the instability of "black" as a signifier is a symptom of the much larger problem inherent in trying to discuss the art produced during this era as in anyway homogenous of identity-based politics at all.
- 3 Hall, S. (2005) "Assembling the 1980s: the deluge – and after," in D. Bailey, I. Baucom and S. Boyce (eds) *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 12.
- 4 As with most academic disciplines, there are many diverse ways in which one can define the disciplinary boundaries of the field, but in a general sense I am referring

to a basic understanding of art history as a discipline that privileges a concern with the visual field and in particular with the specific operations of artworks within that field.

- 5 See for example the series of *Third Text* debates that began in the later 1980s and continued into the early 1990s between Rasheed Araeen and Eddie Chambers, e.g. "Black art: a discussion" number 5, Winter 1988–1989, 50–77 and "Black art now" number 15, Summer 1991, 91–96. See also Gilroy, P. (1993) *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures*, London: Serpent's Tail, which includes a collection of his major essays on the subject of black art and culture first published in *Third Text* in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in particular "Cruciality and the frog's perspective: an agenda of difficulties for the black arts movement in Britain" *Third Text* number 5, Winter 1988–1989, 33–44. See also Kobena Mercer's response to Gilroy's "Cruciality" essay, "Black art and the burden of representation" *Third Text* number 10, Spring 1990, 61–78, reprinted in Mercer, K. (1994) *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*, London: Routledge. Gilane Tawadros has consistently supported and written about the work of black and Asian women artists in Britain since the late 1980s, see for example Tawadros, G. (1989) "Beyond the boundary: the work of three black women artists in Britain," *Third*, number 8/9, Autumn/Winter, 121–150; Tawadros, G., (1991) "Black women in Britain: a personal and intellectual journey," *Third Text*, number 15, Summer, 71–76 and Tawadros, G. (1993) "Sutapa Biswas: Remembrance of things past and present," *Third Text*, number 22, Spring, 47–52. The concept of a "living archive" was also debated in *Third Text* at the beginning of the new millennium in Boyce, S. and Bailey, D. A. (2001) "The living archive papers: an introduction," *Third Text*, number 54, Spring, 87–88 and Hall, S. (2001) "Constituting an archive," *Third Text*, number 54, Spring, 89–92.
- 6 Foucault, M. (1969) "The historical *a priori* and the archive," in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, London and New York: Routledge, 130.
- 7 Foucault (1969), 130–131. See also Lane, R. (2003) *Functions of the Derrida Archive: Philosophical Reception*, Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 20–21.
- 8 Hall, S. (2006) "Black diaspora artists in Britain: three 'moments' in post-war history," *History Workshop Journal*, 61, 1, 1–24.
- 9 Hall, S. (2006) "Black diaspora artists in Britain" *History Workshop Journal*, 61, 1, 3. See also Scott, D. (2004) *Conscripts of Modernity: the Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- 10 Hall in *History Workshop Journal*. 2006, 15.
- 11 Himid, L. (2005) "Inside the invisible: for/getting strategy," in D. Bailey, I. Baucom and S. Boyce (eds) *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 41.
- 12 For further information and mission statement see http://www.iniva.org/about_us/about_iniva.
- 13 Chakravorty Spivak, G. ([1986] 1990) "Questions of multiculturalism" in S. Harasym (ed.) *The Postcolonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, London and New York: Routledge, 60.
- 14 Benjamin, W. ([1940] 1968) "Theses on the philosophy of history," in H. Arendt (ed.) *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken Books, 257.

- 15 When I began my research in 2008, the only painting by Himid owned by the Tate collections, which also happened to be from “Revenge,” was in storage where it had been since October 2006 with no immediate plans for its future display. However, in 2009 Tate Britain acquired two more paintings from the “Revenge” series, *Ankle Deep* 1991 and *Carpet* 1992. Himid was also asked by Tate Curator Paul Goodwin to re-create her 1981 exhibition “The Thin Black Line” as an “in focus” display during Tate Britain’s 2012 “Migrations” exhibition. Goodwin’s curatorial and educational work at Tate Britain is doing much to redress some of the lacunae in the cultural memories of British art that I also address in this article. I borrow the term *jetztzeit* (present time) from Walter Benjamin’s deployment of the term. In general terms *jetztzeit* refers to the importance of the past in the present for the future and potentially to our responsibility in the present as agents for determining the shape of that future. It is therefore distinguished from the German term *gegenwart*, which refers simply to the immediate present. Benjamin, W. ([1940] 1968) “Theses,” in H. Arendt (ed.) *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken Books, 261.
- 16 Boyce in Diawara, M. (1992) “The art of identity” *Transition*, 55, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 194–195; also reprinted in Baker, H. A., Diawara, M. and Lindeborg, R. H. (eds) (1996) *Black British Cultural Studies: a Reader*, Chicago, IL and London University of Chicago Press, 307.
- 17 Kobena Mercer “Iconography after identity” in Bailey *et al.*, (2005), 58.
- 18 Kobena Mercer “Iconography after identity” in Bailey *et al.*, (2005), 57. See also Mercer, K. (ed.) (2008) *Exiles, Diasporas and Strangers*, London: InIVA and MIT Press for a series of multi-authored essays that begin to attend to the specific conditions of a variety of artworks produced since the 1970s (by Adrian Piper, Mona Hatoum, and Sonia Boyce amongst others) within a framework of diaspora aesthetics.
- 19 Pollock, G. (1999) “*Revenge*. Lubaina Himid and the making of new narratives for new histories,” in *Differencing the Canon*, London and New York: Routledge, 172.
- 20 Jameson, F. (1984) “Postmodernism or the cultural logic of late capitalism,” *New Left Review*, 146, July–August, 53–93, cited in Pollock, G. (1999) *Differencing the Canon*, London and New York: Routledge, 196 note 8. Pollock provides a detailed and sensitive reading of “some paintings in *Revenge*” and considers their political imperative in relation to her position as a white feminist art historian engaged in a project to “difference the canon” of art history through considerations of race and gender. While I do not cite extensively from Pollock’s account in my own reading of Himid’s series below since it seemed unnecessary to repeat her well formulated and persuasive interpretative arguments, I would like to acknowledge their importance as part of the on-going responsibility that academic art history in Britain has to the legacies of “black” British women’s art practices since the 1980s within a discipline that seems otherwise likely to continue its critical silence of them.
- 21 Pollock (1999), 172 and Tawadros, G. (1989) “Beyond the boundary: the work of three black women artists in Britain” *Third Text*, 8/9, Autumn/Winter, 121–150 reprinted in Baker *et al.* (1996), 240–277.
- 22 Tawadros, G. (1989) “Beyond the boundary: the work of three black women artists in Britain” *Third Text*, 8/9, Autumn/Winter, 121–150 reprinted in Baker *et al.* (1996), 255.

- 23 “Reworking myths: Sutapa Biswas interviewed by Yasmin Kureishi,” *Spare Rib*, 173, December 1986 reprinted in Robinson, H. (ed.) (1987) *Visibly Female: Feminism and Art Today. An Anthology*, London: Camden Press, London, 37–42. Sutapa Biswas was born in India in 1962 from where she emigrated with her family in 1966. She studied fine art at the University of Leeds from 1981–1985. She currently lives in London.
- 24 Identity politics that had defined and given meaning to the black arts movement during the 1980s had relied principally on visible signs of difference (gendered and racial) to achieve its goals. The power of institutional racism in Britain (that had for so long marginalized artists who weren’t white), created a homogenous response by those who identified themselves with the struggle for recognition at the expense of their individual aesthetic differences as artists and ethnic differences as individual subjects. However, the investment in the visible as a sign of presence and authenticity (an investment that has underpinned the philosophy of much of the identity politics practiced by sexual and racial minorities globally since second wave feminism in the 1970s), was rapidly shown by a number of theorists to be tactically problematic, in part because it relied for its effects upon the very system of representation that it sought to undermine. Yet as Coco Fusco observes, the mind/body relationship for descendants of colonized or enslaved peoples is “not in synch with the euphemistic characterizations of disembodiment that dominate the present moment” and that “the psychic formation of subaltern subjectivity differs from the Freudian Oedipal model which relies on an actual family unit” whereas black people’s entry to the symbolic order of western culture hinged on the theft of their bodies. See Fusco, C. (2001) *The Bodies That Were Not Ours*, London and New York: Routledge, xiv and 5, and Phelan, P. (1993) *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance*, London and New York: Routledge, 6.
- 25 Himid, L. (1987) “We will be,” in R. Betterton (ed.) (1987) *Looking On: Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media*, London: Pandora, 263.
- 26 Himid, L. and Walsh, S. (eds) (2005) *Open Sesame: a Making Histories Visible Project*, DVD, University of Central Lancashire and Tate Liverpool.
- 27 Cherry, D. and Cullen, F. (2006) “On location,” *Art History*, 29, 4, 533.
- 28 Morgan, J. (1992) “Women artists and modernism,” in L. Himid, *Revenge: a Masque in Five Tableaux*, Rochdale Art Gallery, 25.
- 29 Himid, L. (1992) *Revenge: a Masque in Five Tableaux*, Rochdale Art Gallery, 32.
- 30 Kristeva, J. ([1979] 1986) “Women’s time,” reprinted in T. Moi (ed.) *The Kristeva Reader*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 199.
- 31 Himid, L. (1992) *Revenge: a Masque in Five Tableaux*, Rochdale Art Gallery, 6.
- 32 See for example, Adedeji, J. (1978) “The poetry of the Yoruba Masque Theatre,” *African Arts* 11, 3, 62–100, Roberts, A. F. (1990) “Tabwa masks: an old trick of the human race” *African Arts*, 23, 2, 37–103, or Dieterlen, G. (1989) “Masks and mythology among the Dogon,” *African Arts*, 22, 3, 34–88 (however, also see note 79 below for more information about the provenance of Dieterlen’s research).
- 33 Adedeji (1978), 62.
- 34 Schwarz, K. (1995) “Amazon reflections in the Jacobean Queen’s masque,” *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900*, 35, 2, Tudor and Stuart Drama, 293.

- 35 Aasand, H. (1992) "To blanch an Ethiop, and revive a corse": Queen Anne and *The Masque of Blackness* *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900*, 32, 2, Tudor and Stuart Drama, 271–285 and Schwarz (1995), 293.
- 36 Jonson, J. (1605) *The Masque of Blackness* from <http://www.luminarium.org/editions/maskblack.htm>.
- 37 The act of blanching by the "sunne" (King James) occurs off-stage and the nymphs do not re-appear until three years later in *The Masque of Beauty* (1608), thus subverting the usual form of public and visible homily to the monarchical power of the King, central to the normative function of the Jacobean Masque. It was this subversion that discomforted Jonson and led to his invention of the strategically placed antemasque, at the margins of the main Masque.
- 38 See Prettejohn, E. (2000) *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites*, London: Tate Publishing, 207.
- 39 Beckett, J. and Cherry, D. (1994) "Clues to events," in M. Bal and I. E. Boer (eds) *The Point of Theory: Practices of Cultural Analysis*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 51.
- 40 Beckett and Cherry (1994), 52.
- 41 There are conflicting dates given for Mansa Musa's death, with some accounts putting it at 1332. For more information see Bell, N. M. (1972) "The age of Mansa Musa of Mali: problems in succession and chronology," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 5, 2, 221–234.
- 42 For further information see Levtzion, N. (1963) "The thirteenth and fourteenth century kings of Mali," *The Journal of African History*, 4, 3, 341–353 and Davidson, B. (1970) *The Lost Cities of Africa*, New York: Little Brown and Co.
- 43 Morgan (1992), 24. In a more recent interview, Himid talks of "the juddering history" that Africa has always had since the slave trade: "it judders along, having been broken, not functioning quite as it should," in Rice, A. (2003) "Commemorating abolition interview with Lubaina Himid" *Wasafiri*, 40, 22.
- 44 Himid, L. (1992) *Revenge: a Masque in Five Tableaux*, Rochdale Art Gallery, 8.
- 45 I borrow the phrase "mercurial heart" from Jill Morgan's evocative description. Morgan (1992), 18.
- 46 Accounts referring to the exact number of slaves who drowned vary. Some accounts indicate that 133 slaves were thrown overboard over the course of several days (10 of whom voluntarily jumped in an attempt to evade being murdered) and that one managed to climb back aboard unnoticed which is presumably why 132 is the number often cited to refer to those who drowned. For further information see Rupprecht, A. (2007) "Excessive memories: slavery, insurance and resistance," *History Workshop Journal*, 64, 1, 13.
- 47 Gilroy, P. (1993) *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures*, London: Serpent's Tail, 84.
- 48 Baucom, I. (2005) *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery and the Philosophy of History*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, cited in Opitz, A. (2008) "Atlantic modernity and the wreckage of history," *Cultural Critique*, 68, University of Minnesota, 252–253. See also Bloch, E. (1991) *Heritage of Our Times* (first published 1935; edited and translated by Martin Jay and Anton Kaes) Los Angeles and Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- 49 Opitz (2008), 254.

- 50 Rice (2003), 22.
- 51 Glissant, E. (1997) *The Poetics of Relation* (first published in French in 1990; translated by Betsy Wing) Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- 52 Wing, B. (1997) "Translator's introduction" in E. Glissant *The Poetics of Relation* (first published in French in 1990; translated by Betsy Wing), Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, xii.
- 53 Wing (1997), xii.
- 54 Ruskin, J. (1897) *Modern Painters*, 5 volumes (1843) I: *Of General Principles and of Truth*, London: George Allen, 405.
- 55 Thackery cited in Wood, M. (2000) *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America 1780–1865*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 43.
- 56 Wood (2000), 48.
- 57 Wood (2000), 46.
- 58 Wood (2000), 45.
- 59 See Fryer, P. (1984) *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*, London: Pluto Press; Ramdin, R. (1999) *Reimagining Britain: Five Hundred Years of Black and Asian History*, London: Pluto Press, or Myers, N. (1996) *Reconstructing the Black Past: Blacks in Britain 1780–1830*, London and New York: Routledge.
- 60 Ward, A. (2007) "'Words are all I have left of my eyes': Blinded by the Past," in J. M. W. Turners' *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying* and David Dabydeen's (2007) *Turner's The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 42, 1, 49.
- 61 Wood (2000), 45.
- 62 Ward (2007), 50.
- 63 Ward (2007), 50–51.
- 64 Morgan (1992), 22.
- 65 Rice (2003), 74.
- 66 Rice (2003), 73.
- 67 Rice (2003), 73.
- 68 Himid, L. (1992) *Revenge: a Masque in Five Tableaux*, Rochdale Art Gallery, 13.
- 69 Golding, M. R. (1973) "Variations in the use of the masque in English revenge tragedy," *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 3, 50.
- 70 Golding (1973), 51.
- 71 E-mail correspondence with Himid, 20 March 2008.
- 72 Himid, L. (1992) "Artist's statement" from *Revenge: A Masque in Five Tableaux*, Rochdale Art Gallery, 32.
- 73 Beckett and Cherry (1994), 51–55.
- 74 See Falola, T. (2002) *Key Events in African History*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- 75 van Beek, W. E. A. (1991) "Dogon restudied: a field evaluation of the work of Marcel Griaule," *Current Anthropology*, 32, 2, 146.
- 76 Sulter, M. and Himid, L. (1987) "A room for MaShulan," in L. Himid *New Robes for MaShulan*, Rochdale Art Gallery.
- 77 Himid cited in Sulter, M. (ed.) (1990) *Passion: Discourses on Blackwomen's Creativity*, London: Urban Fox Press, 222.
- 78 Davis, S. R. (2002) "Dogon funerals," *African Arts*, 35, 2, 73.

- 79 Dieterlen, G. (1989) "Masks and mythology among the Dogon," *African Arts*, 22, 3, 34. Dieterlen was a co-worker with notorious French colonial anthropologist Marcel Griaule who died in 1956 having spent most of his career since the 1930s publishing on the Dogon. In 1991 Walter E. A. van Beek caused some considerable controversy with a critique of Griaule's findings in his article "Dogon restudied" (cited above, note 75). More recently Andrew Apter has reconsidered the limits of both Griaule's approach and van Beek's critique, via an enriched and attentive analysis to both of their texts, based on his own experiences of Yoruba fieldwork as being "context-specific, not stable and timeless." In his assessment, he acknowledges the problems of "Griaule's colonial epistemology, his ahistoricism, the violence of his strategies and tactics, and the paternalism of his 'sympathetic' quest – problems" as he laconically notes "that belong to anthropology's history more generally." However, through such acknowledgement he also attempts to re-balance the scales that were emotively tipped by van Beek perhaps without sufficient interrogation. See Apter, A. (2005) "Griaule's legacy: rethinking 'la parole claire' in Dogon Studies," *Cahiers d'Études africaines*, XLV, 1, 177, 95–129 as well as some of the responses to van Beek made by Susan Preston Blier, Mary Douglas and others (1991) in *Current Anthropology*, 32, 2, 158–163.
- 80 Lubaina Himid in Maud Sulter "Without tides, no maps" and Jill Morgan "Women artists and modernism" both in Himid, L. (1992) *Revenge: a Masque in Five Tableaux*, Rochdale Art Gallery, 31 and 23–24.
- 81 Himid, L. (1987) "We will be," in R. Betterton (ed.) *Looking On*, London: Pandora, 263.
- 82 Himid, L. (1992) *Revenge: a Masque in Five Tableaux*, Rochdale Art Gallery, 14.
- 83 Griselda Pollock has written gracefully and comprehensively about "Revenge," focusing in particular on *Between the Two My Heart is Balanced, Act One No Maps and Five*. In her reading of all of the works she traces their modernist points of insertion and departure, through Tissot, Cassatt, Gertrude Stein, and the general context of 1920s Paris, as well as their differencing of the painterly paradigms of modernism in Himid's strategic reclaiming of spaces for black women's agency within art's histories; since her reading of the relation to modernist sources is so comprehensive it seems unnecessary to repeat it in detail here. See Pollock (1999), 169–198. In Sulter, M. (2003) *Jeanne Duval: a Melodrama*, Edinburgh: National Gallery of Scotland, 14, Sulter claims herself as inhabiting both *Between the Two* and *Five*, a point which Himid also confirms in e-mail correspondence, March 20, 2008.
- 84 Morgan (1992), 22.
- 85 Pollock (1999), 197 note 33. Stein can be seen wearing her mantle in a photograph from the Ernest Hemingway collection in which she is seated outdoors at a Parisian café table with Hemingway's baby son, one arm stretched around the baby (EH 5134P John "Bumby" Hemingway and Gertrude Stein. Paris, 1924. Photograph in the Ernest Hemingway Photograph Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston). Furthermore, the stars and stripes depicted on one of the plates in *Five* also recall Carl Van Vechten's iconic 1935 portrait of Stein, photographed with the American flag as a backdrop (*Portrait of Gertrude Stein, with American Flag as Backdrop* (1935 January 4) Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Van Vechten Collection, reproduction number LC-USZ62-103680).

- 86 Pollock (1999), 183. Pollock bought *Five* in the 1990s and donated it to Leeds City Art Gallery on long-term loan.
- 87 Boyce in Diawara (1992), 194–195; also reprinted in Baker *et al.* (1996), 307.
- 88 Sulter, M. (1989) “Blackwomansong,” in *Zabat: Poetics of a Family Tree*, London: Urban Fox Press, 74.

Part 5



Landscape

Defining, Shaping, and Picturing Landscape in the Nineteenth Century

Anne Helmreich

Defining Terms

Landscape is both noun and verb. This chapter, which both introduces terms and issues of landscape representation and surveys topics in nineteenth-century landscape representation, will consider first the diversity of connotations of the term landscape before explaining how the twinned aspects of landscape manifested in the nineteenth century, focusing on the domestic scene.

The first, and oldest, denotation of landscape as noun, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is that of “a picture representing natural inland scenery, as distinguished from a sea picture, a portrait.”¹ Thus landscape is perhaps best known as *a genre* of painting. The second denotation refers to a particular type of landscape as well as what might be pictured in a landscape: “a view or prospect of natural inland scenery, such as can be taken in at a glance from one point of view; a piece of country scenery.” This definition is instructive for several reasons. First, it includes a variety of ways of describing landscape – view, prospect, and scenery – and, second, it emphasizes the act of seeing in deriving landscape; both the language of landscape and modes of visualizing the landscape proved to be highly charged in the British context.

Over time, artists and scientists developed tools to enable and to structure ways of seeing, such as the camera obscura, telescope, or the Claude glass, as well as to record landscape and structure compositions, such as perspective.² Thus science and technology became implicated in the concept of landscape. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in particular, witnessed an intensification of investigations into the intersection of optics, technology, science, image making, and landscape production: for example, Alexander Pope, upon the completion of a tunnel and grotto upon his estate of Twickenham, excitedly reported in 1725

that when the doors were closed, the grotto became a camera obscura “on the walls of which all the objects of the River, Hills, Woods, and Boats, are forming a moving Picture;” Philippe-Jacques de Louthembourg initially constructed his *Eidophusikon* in 1781 for his London home where visitors could be entranced by colored transparencies of changing landscapes; Thomas Gainsborough painted glass slides to produce a “showbox” into which a viewer would peer to witness dazzling effects; Cornelius Varley, in 1809, invented a Graphic Telescope – borrowing from the technologies of camera obscura and camera lucida – in order to translate three dimensional space onto a two dimensional space in an unified field; painter J. M. W. Turner eagerly followed discussions of contemporaneous scientists, and recent investigations into magnetism and electricity conducted by Mary Somerville and Michael Faraday arguably informed his painting *Snow Storm- Steam-board off a Harbour’s Mouth Making Signals in Shallow Water, and Going by the Lead. The Author was in this Storm on the Night the Ariel left Harwich*, 1842 (Tate Gallery); and John Constable famously declared “Painting is a Science.”³

The second denotation of landscape as “a view or prospect of natural inland scenery” also points to an ongoing debate throughout the history of landscape – to what degree is the representation of landscape obligated to be mimetic or ideal? The role of the artist’s imagination came to the fore, for example, in debates about the work of painter J. M. W. Turner; and John Constable wrestled with the question of the relation of the particular or detail to the generalizing, unified whole.⁴ The terms of naturalism and realism were particularly highly contested in the nineteenth century, even after the birth of photography, proving that this medium did not end debates about the nature of representation but instead problematized them.⁵ But landscape images, because they draw upon the materials of nature, often naturalize the act of representation, masking the work, for example, of technologies or imagination so that the image seems already given, derived directly from the motif.

Another key denotation of landscape according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* is “a tract of land with its distinguishing characteristics and features, especially considered as a product of modifying or shaping processes and agents” – a concept closely related to landscape as view as well as landscape as verb. The *Oxford English Dictionary* adds here that these agents are “usually natural,” but, in many of the cases discussed below, the agents were human, using available tools and labor. The processes associated with agricultural change, urbanism, development of transportation networks, and manufacturing as well as the politics of land ownership and empire building played definitive roles in establishing what would become “distinguishing characteristics and features.” The act of demarcating landscape became particularly pertinent by the close of the eighteenth century with the rise of typing landscape into pictorial modes, such as the picturesque or sublime, and intense arguments, both contentious and easily acculturated, on behalf of landscape as a form of identity, whether personal, regional, national, or imperial.

As a verb, the term landscape could refer to picturing the landscape as well as laying out a garden. Garden design was often described in language associated with landscape painting as evidenced by J. C. Loudon's description of H. Repton's garden design "as consisting of the union of an artistical knowledge of the subject with good taste and good sense."⁶ These two modes of consuming the landscape changed dramatically over the centuries in accordance with the expansion of wealth and leisure to a wider spectrum of classes. Within this trajectory of broader accessibility are significant nodes of contestation around gender, race, ethnicity, and class that prove, at the very least, the highly charged nature of landscape as both physical entity and representation.

Situated in the Social Realm

Such definitions might imply that the understanding of the term landscape was easily agreed upon; but, in fact, the term has proven to be contentious and ambiguous. Archaeologists C. Gosden and L. Head argue that landscape can be unclear because it refers to both the "conceptual and the physical."⁷ Landscape is a physical entity that is worked upon by both human and natural forces as well as a conceptual entity that can be mapped, claimed, parceled, granted, bought, or sold in commercial transactions, and thus owned and marked as such, whether by an individual or corporate entity, including the nation. Even in the early medieval period, land figures prominently in extant Anglo-Saxon charters. Entail, another instrument dating back to the medieval period, allowed estates to be passed down, undivided, from father to eldest son or nearest recognized heir and fostered the growth of the landed aristocracy. A quick perusal of the historical definitions proffered by the *Oxford English Dictionary* indicates that the use of the term landscape gained apace with the rise of capitalism.

The commodification of land, cultural geographer Denis Cosgrove argued, allowed for the aesthetic perception of landscape as both require an individual who positions him or herself as distinct from his or her surroundings, which can then be gazed upon, transacted, or reshaped at will.⁸ Thus landscape is inherently ideological; Cosgrove persuasively states "it represents a way in which certain classes of people have signified themselves and their world through their imagined relationship to nature, and through which they have underlined and communicated their own social role and that of others with respect to nature."⁹

J. B. Jackson, a cultural geographer who focused on the vernacular landscape, was less emphatic about the notion of ideology, but likewise pointed to the social role landscape plays in his definition of the term as "a composition of man-made or man-modified spaces to serve as infrastructure or background for our collective existence."¹⁰ The idea that landscape is not a predetermined given but is the product of human perception and representation is re-emphasized by Denis Cosgrove, writing with fellow cultural geographer Stephen Daniels: "a landscape is a cultural

image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolizing surroundings.”¹¹ Shaping might be an even more appropriate verb to use here as shape is the root of the ending “scape.” Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan stresses this point when he explains landscape as “a land shaped by a people, their institutions and customs.”¹²

Thus landscape is embroiled in language used to describe people, institutions, and customs, such as country or nation – that is, terms describing the body politic. Kenneth Olwig makes the political uses of the term explicit when he defines “landscaping” as a “means of training the mind to envision the country in particular scenic, spatial terms. It can mindscape a people, or at least some of the people, so that they think of their homeland as Britain, rather than England, Scotland, Ireland, or Wales.”¹³ Indeed, investigating how landscape representations articulate issues of national identity has been a major preoccupation of recent scholarship.¹⁴

Literary theorist W. J. T. Mitchell also argues that landscape should be conceptualized as a verb or “process” in order to call attention to its role in social practice, particularly identity formation. He recommends further to:

ask not just what landscape “is” or “means” but what it *does*, how it works as a cultural practice. Landscape, we suggest, doesn’t merely signify or symbolize power relations; it is an instrument of cultural power, perhaps even an agent of power that is (or frequently represents itself as) independent of human intentions. Landscape as a cultural medium thus has a double role with respect to something like ideology: it naturalizes a cultural and social construction, representing an artificial world as if it were simply given and inevitable, and it also makes that representation operational by interpellating its beholder in some more or less determinate relation to its givenness as sight and site.¹⁵

This chapter explores landscape as a cultural medium by examining two key sets of cultural products – pictures and gardens – with the aim of investigating both as objects – the modes and techniques used to present the landscape – and as processes partaking in ongoing debates and questions about identities, specifically how nineteenth-century Britons envisioned their relationship to their natural environment.

Modes of Landscape Representation

Nineteenth-century landscape producers inherited ways of describing landscape and its representation from the previous centuries. One of the most prevalent was topographical, which is closely related to map-making because it refers to conveying accurate visual information about a place. Map-making had a long history in Britain, signaling the recognition of land as a legal, bounded entity, subject to ownership, in the post-feudal era and extending the reach of the British empire.¹⁶ Queen Elizabeth, for example, commissioned maps of both the English counties and atlases of territories explored by Sir Francis Drake.¹⁷



FIG. 14.1 Samuel Prout: *Arch of Constantine, Rome*.

Source: From Thomas Roscoe (1830) *The Tourist in Switzerland and Italy*, London.

For nineteenth-century practitioners in the topographic mode fidelity to nature did not trump artistic choice, although the sense of a personal sensibility informing an image might be downplayed. Samuel Prout (1783–1852), for example, developed a distinctive calligraphic line for rendering architecture. Yet, he nonetheless adopted techniques that deemphasized his role as individual maker so that the viewer would concentrate on the scene itself. Prout ensured the clarity of his views, emphasized outline in order to insist upon the particularity of the represented object, and endowed viewers with the sense that the landscape spread before them like a stage set, thus allowing them to vicariously experience Prout's travels to spots favored on the Grand Tour or places in Great Britain freighted with historic or aesthetic value. Moreover, Prout's drawings were often reproduced, as in Thomas Roscoe's *The Tourist in Switzerland and Italy* (1830), and his personal sense of touch was often lost in the process of mechanical translation (Fig. 14.1).

The Grand Tour was a key source for both landscape images and ideas about landscape. The Grand Tour refers to travels throughout continental Europe, and perhaps the Greek Isles, undertaken primarily by aristocratic young men; it was considered a form of hands-on education and visited sites were typically chosen for their cultural and artistic values. Some aristocrats even hired artists to accompany them in order to produce souvenir sketches or provide sketching lessons on the spot.

The topographical was a predominant form of landscape production, at least at the beginning of the nineteenth century; but, from the point of view of some fine artists it held little aesthetic value, despite its popularity, because of its possible utilitarian functions. Henry Fuseli (1741–1825), a figure painter who was the professor of painting at the Royal Academy in the early nineteenth century, for

example, belittled the topographical in favor of the work of handful of well-known artists who emphasized the role of imagination in rendering landscape views:

These [topographical views], if not assisted by nature, dictated by taste, or chosen for character, may delight the owner of the acres they enclose, the inhabitants of the spot, perhaps the antiquary or the traveller, but to every other eye they are little more than topography. The landscape of Titian, of Mola, of Salvator, of the Poussins, Claude, Rubens, Elzheimer, Rembrandt and Wilson, spurns all relation with this kind of map-work.¹⁸

Fuseli's list includes the work of only one British painter, Richard Wilson (1713/1714–1782), who had travelled to Italy in the 1750s and became influenced by the Italian scenery he saw as well as the work of artists associated with this place, namely Claude Lorrain and Nicholas Poussin, who had helped to set in place a durable tradition in landscape painting rooted in classicism and governed by a strong sense of structure and order. The influence of the classical landscape persisted into the nineteenth century, as in the early work of J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851), as can be seen in *Crossing the Brook*, exhibited 1815 (Tate Britain), and the watercolors of John Sell Cotman (1782–1842), as in the case of *Greta Bridge*, 1806–1807 (British Museum, London).¹⁹

Wilson, when working in Great Britain, was also known for his estate paintings or country house views, which often deployed a “commanding” prospect; that is, a sense of breadth that provided the viewer with a sense of surveying over and thus controlling and possessing the land displayed.²⁰ Such associations were perhaps even more readily apparent in the panorama – a term coined at the close of the eighteenth century to refer to a British invention that allowed “a picture of landscape or other scene, either arranged on the inside of a cylindrical surface, to be viewed from a central position ... or unrolled or unfolded and made to pass before the spectator, so as to show the various parts in succession.” Panoramas, as Michael Charlesworth has demonstrated, had ideological overtones as they enabled surveillance and thus control as in the case of a series of drawings by Thomas Sandby (1721–1798).²¹ The panorama was also a commodity, a form of public spectacle that dazzled and enthralled viewers as in the case of visitors to Robert Barker's panorama in London, who found themselves illusionistically transported to famous tourist spots, spread before them in 360 degrees.²² The commercial availability of such panoramas – the entrance fee for Barker's was a shilling – meant that, as Ann Bermingham has observed, “the visual domination of the landscape associated with the privileged and proprietary viewpoint of the landowner became a mass visual experience.”²³ The panorama, Jonathan Crary argues, is “one of the places in the nineteenth century where a modernization of perceptual experience occurs.”²⁴

The panorama had its origins in theatre as did another key term used to describe landscape – scene or scenery – which devolved from descriptions of background decoration before which a drama was staged. Indeed, the origins of landscape painting lay in the representation of landscape as backdrop to figurative action.

Eventually, the landscape took center stage so that by the eighteenth century it was a recognized genre.

Scenery, perhaps more than any other landscape descriptor, came to be associated with the rural and agricultural. Indeed, the two became nearly synonymous as literary historian Elizabeth Helsinger explains:

Unlike English places invoked as “Nature” or presented simply as “landscape,” “rural scenery” always signifies a countryside both inhabited and cultivated. Fields, footpaths, villages and groves that may appear obscurely or distantly in the maps and landscapes representing other conceptions of Britain are here of primary interest, and “scenes” of the generic activities that take place in these largely agricultural landscapes are as much the focus as the land itself.²⁵

Like landscape, the term scenery was nonetheless ambiguous for it was also closely aligned to the concept of the picturesque as demonstrated by the third denotation for scenery cited by the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “the general appearance of a place and its natural features, regarded from the picturesque point of view; the aggregate of picturesque features in a landscape.” The picturesque was part of a constellation of terms – sublime, beautiful, pastoral, and georgic – used to type and describe landscape and which carried connotations derived not only from art theory but also literature and philosophy.

The nineteenth-century concept of the picturesque owed much to the writings of the Reverend William Gilpin (1724–1804), who developed the concept over a series of treatises and travel guides and in reference to both the physical landscape and its pictorial representation. He deployed the term to describe those landscapes he regarded as distinct from the beautiful or the sublime. The beautiful was, according to Gilpin, characterized by serenity, as in the case of gently rolling, smoothly curved hills. The picturesque, by contrast, was full of irregularity, variety, curious details, and interesting textures. These effects could be produced by a combination of objects, such as rocks, trees, and water, and/or differing light effects. Most importantly, a picturesque scene should “please from some quality, capable of being *illustrated in painting*.”²⁶ Printing technology, made possible by the rise of industrialization, facilitated the rapid dissemination of this concept and soon so-called Picturesque tours and illustrated travel guides proliferated, and amateurs from the wealthy classes quickly adopted the practice of picturesque sketches, aided by numerous instructional manuals.²⁷ Although the rhetoric of the picturesque “naturalized” its pictorial strategies, recent scholarly investigation has recovered the political work of the picturesque, which, in rendering the agrarian or metropolitan scene agreeable for viewing, typically aestheticized and thus neutralized “motifs ... which in other circumstances are the indicators of poverty or social deprivation,” and was also enmeshed in the imperial project.²⁸

Philosopher Edmund Burke (1729–1897) was responsible for the most pervasive notion of the sublime, which he described as a counter to the beautiful in his treatise *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of our ideas of the Sublime*

and Beautiful, 1757. For Burke, the sublime described those objects or scenes “productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” such as awe mixed with terror, as in the case of the vastness of a mountain or the power of an avalanche.²⁹ Henry Fuseli thought such scenes should be the task of the landscape painter; referring to a painting of the biblical flood by Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665), in which small-scale figures, adrift in boats, fight for survival against rocky cliffsides, waterfalls, snakes, lightning, and torrential downpour, he announced “The Winter, or Deluge ... places Poussin in the first rank of art.” Landscape painter John Constable (1776–1837), nearly 30 years later, echoed such sentiments when he stated:

in the awful sublimity of the conception of his picture of Winter, generally known as the Deluge, he has surpassed every other painter, who has attempted the subject; nor can there be a greater proof of the effective power of landscape than that this portentous event should have been best told by landscape alone, the figures being few and entirely subordinate.³⁰

The sublime was distinguished from two other landscape modes with origins in classical literature, namely, the pastoral and the georgic. Virgil’s poetry was an oft-quoted source for both concepts: the pastoral denoting the adoration and



FIG. 14.2 John Constable: *The Hay Wain*, 1821, oil on canvas, 1302×1854 mm.
Source: National Gallery, London/The Bridgeman Art Library. Presented by Henry Vaughan, 1886.

idealization of the life of the rural shepherd and the pleasures of a fertile landscape, and the georgic referring to a working agricultural landscape. The latter was closely related and, indeed, could be subsumed within the concept of the rural scene, particularly in the early nineteenth century when British farming helped the nation survive the Napoleonic blockade of the continent.³¹ (Fig. 14.2.) Christina Payne rightly points out that over the period of 1780 to 1890, the British countryside underwent tremendous technological, economic, social, and political change, fueling artistic responses in a genre that she labels “agricultural landscapes,” which ranged from representations of mythic harmony to recognition of social conflict and hardships endured by the rural working poor.³² The georgic was also translated to the context of the imperial project; Beth Tobin has investigated the “imperial georgic” that facilitated the exchange of plants between such locales as the tropics and Britain, stimulated new garden collections and designs, and engendered reinvention of the garden conversation piece.³³

Social-Historical Framework

One last paradigm helps to explain the framework in which nineteenth-century landscape, as both noun and verb, was embedded: that of the opposition between natural and artificial. The artificial, perhaps best concretized by the effects of urbanism and industrialization, was typically conceived as forces threatening the preservation of nature, often conflated with agriculture. Before 1760 the British economy primarily derived from agricultural, small-scale production (with an emphasis on wool), and trade. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the economy had switched to manufacturing, with the cotton industry leading the way. Likewise, the concentration of population shifted from the countryside to the growing urban centers. The growth of the manufacturing sector of the economy was predicated on new means of production utilizing innovative forms of technology, such as the steam-powered machine, which in turn relied on the transformation of iron and engineering industries as well as new means of transporting raw materials and finished goods. A network of canals, new roads, bridges, and, eventually, railroads criss-crossed Britain, particularly in the southern counties, and harbors and ports developed or expanded. These new forms of transportation helped to facilitate the shift in population to these new centers of production, such as the new northern industrial towns of Liverpool, Manchester, and Leeds.

Although the Industrial Revolution is commonly associated with manufacturing and urbanism, agricultural production was likewise transformed by new technologies, such as threshing machines. Improved knowledge about soil and animal husbandry led to increased yields and also helped to fuel the enclosure movement. The latter refers to a reorganization of land holdings that occurred in the early nineteenth century leading to the demise of the older open field system, the loss of common lands, and the consolidation of larger tracts of land

under individual ownership. Parliamentary acts staunched opposition; indeed, such acts increased ten-fold between 1760 and 1844.³⁴

The Industrial Revolution and these rural changes focus attention on the domestic environment, and this chapter follows suit, but it is important to recall that both the manufacturing and agricultural economies were part of a larger circuit of capitalist exchange, namely colonialism. Although Great Britain had lost the American colonies, Britain's overseas trade nonetheless flourished from the late eighteenth century onward. Mercantile interests drove the development of trading posts, and eventually colonies, in the South Seas islands, New Zealand and eastern Australia. India was the lynchpin of this mercantile philosophy and until the Indian Mutiny of 1857 the East India Company was the face of Britain in India, benefiting economically from the trade in tea and textiles. Although a corporate entity, the East India Company, like other overseas trading bodies, profited from the rapid expansion of the British navy necessitated by the Napoleonic wars; British naval supremacy was secured by the defeat of France and the well-oiled naval machine protected ocean-going trade.³⁵

These descriptions of broad-sweeping economic and technological forces perhaps made change seem inexorable; however, as historian Walter Arnstein has noted, "growth was intermittent" and was accompanied, particularly in the 1830s and 1840s, by "distress – falling profits, falling wages, mass unemployment, and concomitant political unrest."³⁶ Representations of the land were caught up in this dialectic between prosperity and poverty, between complacency and discontent, between the haves and the have-nots. In many cases nature came to stand for older ways of being, relying on the association of the natural as inherent, as that which existed before the intervention of humanity.

But, in point of fact, both nature and artifice are the product of the intervention of humanity for it requires human mediation to determine a particular landscape to be natural or artificial. The recognition of the natural is not, this chapter argues, inherent. Rather, it is a learned or acquired behavior, a way of seeing or a set of lenses that determines perception and knowledge. For the nineteenth century, it was a behavior acquired from the eighteenth century – epitomized by the convex mirror of the Claude glass, promoted by the Rev. William Gilpin for rendering the ideal frame in which to see, over one's shoulder, the landscape, now readily pictorialized. Such modes of sight, and the resulting images, were reworked and refined to fit the needs and concerns of the new century. Moreover, the desire to see a particular scene spurred gardening and garden design.

Technological change in industry and agriculture went hand in hand with scientific change, encouraged by learned societies. Investigations of sight and the eye conducted over the course of the nineteenth century, in keeping with the belief, articulated in a volume of essays devoted to the eye published in 1856, that of all the senses "sight is the most important, whether we view it in reference to the extent of its range, the value of its lessons, or the structure of its organs" helped fuel changes in pictorial representation, including the birth of photography.³⁷

Related to experiments concerning vision and the location of visual processing – debated to be either in the retina or the mind – were explorations of the perception of color, the composition of color (related to the designation of primary, secondary, and tertiary colors as well as contrasts and harmonies), and the relationship between light and color.³⁸

Gardening and Garden Design

Garden designer Humphry Repton (1752–1818) linked his distinctive “red books” – bound portfolios of drawings and accompanying texts showing prospective clients how he might reshape their grounds – to his powers of sight:

In every place in which I was consulted, I found that I was gifted with the peculiar faculty of seeing almost immediately the way in which it might be improved and I only wanted the means of making my ideas equally visible, or intelligible to others. This led to my delivering my reports in writing, accompanied with maps and such sketches, as at once showed the present, and the proposed portraits of the various scenes capable of improvement.³⁹

In turn, Repton’s red books guided his attempt to “form a complete system of *Landscape Gardening*, classed under certain *general rules*, to which this art is as much subject as *Architecture*, *Music*, or any other of the *polite arts*.”⁴⁰ In short, Repton helped to raise up the status of landscape design or architecture to the level of a fine art.

The picturesque

With this enhanced status came higher stakes, so that when Repton weighed in on how best to create a picturesque landscape in his book *Sketches and Hints on Landscape Gardening*, published in 1795, he was greeted with retorts by leading aestheticians Richard Payne Knight (1751–1824) and Uvedale Price (1747–1829).⁴¹ Repton agreed with the prevailing concept that the art of landscape gardening reflected the state of the nation:

The neatness, simplicity, and elegance of English gardening, have acquired the approbation of the present century, as the happy medium betwixt the wildness of nature and the stiffness of art; in the same manner as the English constitution is the happy medium betwixt the liberty of savages, and the restraint of despotic government.⁴²

Nonetheless, he profoundly disagreed with the idea of using paintings by such artists as Salvator Rosa (1615–1673) as the model for garden design, arguing that such theories dissuaded the designer from recognizing the actual uses of a garden: “Places are not to be laid out with a view to their appearance in a picture, but to

their uses, and the enjoyment of them in real life; and their conformity to those purposes is that which constitutes their beauty.”⁴³

Repton’s design precepts continued to have relevance well into the nineteenth century, despite the fact that the picturesque controversy had died down, through the reinterpretation of his work by garden designer John Claudius Loudon. Loudon had initially carved out a space for his expertise by devaluing Repton and aligning himself with the aesthetic theories of Uvedale Price. Yet, by 1839, when he published *The Landscape Gardening and Landscape Architecture of the Late Humphry Repton Esq.*, Loudon elevated the work of Repton once again, recognizing the degree to which his own theory of the gardenesque rested upon Repton’s interest in beauty without the constraint of picturesque theories.

The gardenesque

The gardenesque, while indebted to Repton, was nonetheless distinctive in both its scope and intent for it was, in essence, a planting scheme as opposed to an over-riding aesthetic intended for acres of ground. According to Loudon, the chief characteristic of the gardenesque, was:

the display of the beauty of trees and other plants individually... All the trees and shrubs are arranged in regard to their kinds and dimensions, and they are planted ... such distances apart as may best display the natural form and habit of each.

The aim of the gardenesque, Loudon concluded, was “to add all those [charms] which the sciences of gardening and botany, in the present advanced state, are capable of producing.”⁴⁴ (Fig. 14.3) The materials of the gardenesque drew heavily upon the exports of empire, thus providing continuity with the work of the previous generation of landscape designers such as Capability Brown, whose broad sweeping landscapes might initially appear antithetical to the introduction of new species but, in fact, relied heavily on the introduction of new trees and shrubs, naturalized to the scene.⁴⁵

Garden as art

Perhaps what is most important to remember, squabbling aside, is the degree to which Repton and Loudon subscribed to the notion of improvement, that is, that a landscape in either its natural or cultivated state might not yet reach its full potential expression of beauty, which required the designer to recognize and draw forth through such elements as “gravel walks, and neat mown lawns, and, in some situations, straight alleys, fountains, terraces, and ... parterres and cut hedges.”⁴⁶ Thus Repton and likewise Loudon could forcefully advocate that “Gardens are works of art rather than of nature.”⁴⁷ In other words, gardens used the materials of nature, but the deliberate re-working of these materials re-inscribed garden

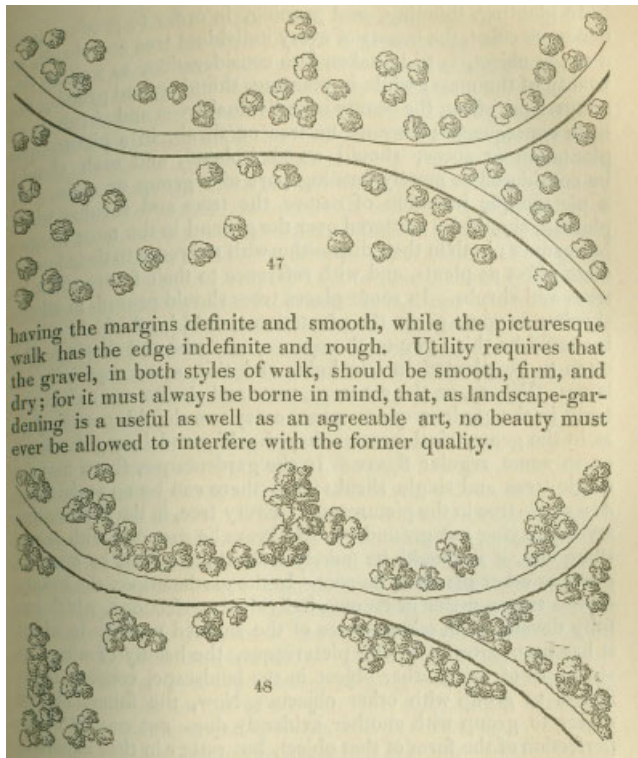


FIG. 14.3 “In fig. 47 the trees are arranged in the gardenesque manner and in fig. 48 in the picturesque manner.”

Source: From J. C. Loudon (1838) *The Suburban Gardener, and Villa Companion*, London, p. 165.

landscapes as art. Garden writer Shirley Hibberd made precisely this point in his mid-century text *Rustic Adornment*:

It should be borne in mind by every cultivator of taste in gardening, that a garden is an *artificial* contrivance, it is not a piece scooped out of a wood, but in some sense a continuation of the house. Since it is a creation of art, not a patch of wild nature ... so it should everywhere show the evidence of artistic taste, in every one of its gradations from the vase on the terrace, to the “lovers’ walk” in the distant shrubbery.⁴⁸

This philosophy suited the Victorian age well as the newly wealthy middle classes typically did not possess the large landed estates associated with the great gardens of the eighteenth century, which attempted to bridge the natural and the artificial. With a smaller scope of ground at hand, Victorian gardeners increasingly espoused the artifice of gardening. Technological and scientific developments assisted in this enterprise; with the lessening cost of glass and improvements in wrought iron, glasshouses became an ever-increasingly popular feature of the



FIG. 14.4 Shrubland, designed by Charles Barry.

Source: Photograph: author.

Victorian garden, allowing for the cultivation, and even transplantation during the warmer season, of species previously considered rarities. Indeed, the key motif of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, held in London in 1851, was the glasshouse writ large, or Crystal Palace, which housed the exhibits.⁴⁹ Trade with the colonies brought an ever-expanding variety of species and a correspondingly diverse color palette to Victorian gardeners and the flower bed or flower garden gained in prominence in garden design.

The flower garden proved to be elastic. It could take pride of place in the garden designs of Charles Barry, George Fleming, and William Andrews Nesfield, who worked out elaborate parterre designs, loosely based on historic precedents, for formal gardens – architectonic gardens typically positioned adjacent to the house – to accompany the monumental revivalist country houses built at mid century (Fig. 14.4)⁵⁰ It was also promoted to the villa and small country house gardener, and even the cottage gardener, although the cottage owner in this case was likely to be middle class. Shirley Hibberd's *The Amateur's Flower Garden* reached just such an audience and in the pages of this journal readers found complexly patterned garden plans carefully worked out in terms of bed or border design and color placement (Fig. 14.5). Hibberd insisted that:

certain principles must be followed to insure a satisfactory result. The strong colours must be spread pretty equally over the whole scheme with neutral and intermediate tints to harmonize and combine them. The colours containing the most light, such

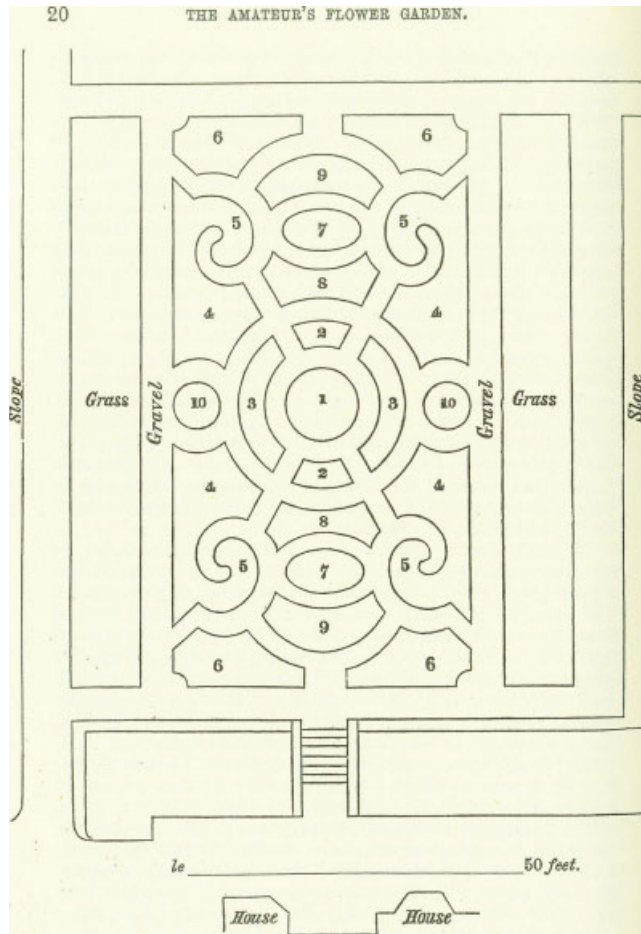


FIG. 14.5 Panel Garden.

Source: From Shirley Hibberd (1871) *The Amateur's Flower Garden*, London: Groombridge and Sons, 20.

as yellow, white, and pink, should be placed in the outer parts of the design, to draw it out to its fullest extent; and the heavier colours, such as scarlet, crimson, and purple, should occupy the more central portions of the scheme.

Such deliberations reflect Hibberd's notion that garden design was a "fight against Nature."⁵¹

Like the earlier picturesque, theories of weighted and complementary colors in garden design had their counterpart in fine art, and, indeed, treatises by J. W. von Goethe (translated as the *Theory of Colours* in English by Charles Eastlake in 1840) and Michel-Eugène Chevreul (translated in English as *The Principles of Harmony and Contrast of Colours, and their Application to the Arts* in 1854) were read by both garden designers and painters, and heavily disputed. Drawing on these sources was a key means by which designers could assert their artfulness – as

J. C. Loudon argued, “Any creation, to be recognized as a work of art, must be such as can never be mistaken for a work of nature” – and claim scientific legitimacy for their practice.⁵² John Lindley, for example, editor of the *Gardener’s Chronicle* and chair of botany at University College, London, drew upon Sir Gardener Wilkinson’s *On Colour*, 1858, for validation of his theories that complementary colors did not necessarily produce harmonious designs.

A nation of gardeners

By the mid-nineteenth century, middle class gardeners were well served by a plethora of gardening magazines that had taken advantage of new printing technologies to develop this growing market. Gardener and writer William Robinson (1838–1935) was a key player in this new market, founding a number of journals, perhaps the best known of which was *The Garden, an Illustrated Weekly Journal of Horticulture in all its Branches* (1871–1927). The longevity of this journal can, in part, be explained by the values attached to gardening; an essay published in 1900 in *Country Life* indicates how gardens were conceived as both foci for patriotic sentiment and a means by which to solve social problems attendant upon capitalist growth, industrialization, urbanism, and the struggle to maintain the *Pax Britannica*:

that love of flowers which seems ingrained in our national character, and which, in these days of unrest, or wars and rumours of wars, of fierce competition and striving for the mastery, has a soothing, refining influence, permeating to the nation’s advantage its home life. We are transforming ourselves into a nation of gardeners.⁵³

Natural gardens

Robinson had taken on the task of revealing the great mysteries of Nature in his journal as well as the series of books he published over roughly the last quarter of the nineteenth century. His writings were driven by a desire to reform garden design, which he argued had become overly ornamental, artificial, and architectural; he called for a new form of garden design that could take advantage of an increasing range of exotics available to British gardeners while nonetheless achieving a more “natural” appearance in the garden. His resulting system, dubbed the “wild garden,” was predicated upon “naturalizing or making wild innumerable beautiful natives of many regions of the earth in our woods, wild and semi-wild places, rougher parts of pleasure grounds, etc. and in unoccupied places in almost every kind of garden (Fig. 14.6).”⁵⁴ The placement of plants, unlike Loudon’s gardenesque, was intended to emulate nature so that a visitor to the garden would believe the homeowner “had indeed caught the true meaning of nature in her disposition of vegetation, without sacrificing one jot of anything in your garden, but, on the other hand, adding the highest beauty to spots hitherto devoid of the slightest interest.”⁵⁵ In this sense, Robinson had turned garden design in a completely opposite direction of Loudon and Hibberd, who explicitly espoused artifice, in favor of a natural



FIG. 14.6 Alfred Parsons, Coombe in west country with PRIMROSES, KINGCUPS, and DAFFODILS.

Source: From William Robinson (1903) *The Wild Garden* 5th edition, London, frontispiece.

principles of garden design as well as her own home of Munstead Wood, which one visitor, writing in 1900, praised:

because the marks of interference with Nature have been so artistically concealed. Nature has been compelled, so to speak, to group the trees... In fact, that wood is a perfect example of how much may be done to improve a thoroughly wild spot without depriving it of its essential wildness (Fig. 14.7).⁵⁶

Jekyll herself acknowledged that “no artificial planting can ever equal that of Nature,” yet, “one may learn from it the great lesson of moderation and reserve, of simplicity of intention, and directness of purpose, and the inestimable value of the quality called ‘breadth’ in painting.”⁵⁷ Jekyll’s naturalistic aesthetic, in other words, required

aesthetic – that is, using nature as a source of design, an argument put forth by the art critic John Ruskin whom Robinson greatly admired. Nonetheless, Robinson’s choice of plants was so wide-ranging – from exotics indigenous to Asia minor to “old-fashioned flowers” culled from country cottage gardens – that despite attempting to appear as an illusion of nature, the collected plants could only be the result of the intervention of humanity.

William Robinson’s mantle eventually passed to Gertrude Jekyll (1843–1932), who lacked the gardener’s passionate distaste for gardens designed by architects; in fact, she often collaborated with the architect Edwin Lutyens. Nonetheless, she shared Robinson’s predilection for a plant palette composed of exotics and species long since naturalized into British gardens. She, even more so than her mentor, turned to her local landscape – the heaths and cottage gardens of Surrey – for inspiration. Like her predecessor, she used her books and journal articles as a national platform for promoting both the values of gardens and



FIG. 14.7 Gertrude Jekyll, Daffodils among Junipers where Garden joins Copse.
Source: From *Wood and Garden*, new edition, London, 1900, facing page 51.

training to perceive and create and in her writings she repeatedly insisted upon the value of artistic knowledge for creating beautiful landscapes.

While the woodland and heath gardens were intended to be read as natural, the flower borders near the house were much more overtly artificial. Jekyll published plans for flower borders in her books and she became quite well known for her application of scientific color theories, particularly those of Chevreul, to garden design; from his writings she adopted the practice of placing more neutral colours, such as grays and purples, at the far ends of her main flower border, believing that the viewer's search for complementary contrast would propel the viewer toward the center of the border where the stronger colors of orange and scarlet would be found. To achieve these brilliant colors, Jekyll often relied on imported plants such as dahlias – native to Mexico – bigno-

nias – native to South America – and marigolds – native to Africa. Thus Jekyll's aesthetic continued the practice of embedding the British garden in a network of commodity exchange and overseas trade that can be traced back to at least the eighteenth century when John Bartram and then his son William combed the eastern seaboard of the United States for suitable specimens to send to subscribers in England, including Philip Miller, botanist and administrator of the Chelsea Physic Garden. Her gardens also knit together the two poles of Victorian garden design – artifice and nature – in such a successful manner that her gardening books went into successive editions.

Painting

The sublime

An important point of connection between gardening and painting was color theory, which was of crucial importance with respect to the descriptive modes of landscape. In other words, color choices could help code a landscape as beautiful,

picturesque, or sublime. This is vividly illustrated by the oeuvre of J. M. W. Turner, who was preoccupied with color theory and also emerged as one of the key practitioners of the landscape genre, with a particular expertise in the sublime.

Turner used the platform of his lectures, largely to the audience of the Royal Academy, and his paintings in oil and watercolor to advance his ideas about color theory, albeit without a rigid formulation. When Goethe's treatise was published in 1840, Turner studied it closely but had already formed many of his key concepts. Sustained by the arguments of scientist David Brewster, whom he met in 1831, Turner adopted the schema of three primary colors – red, yellow, and blue – as opposed to the seven primaries proposed by Sir Isaac Newton. He then reordered these primary colors in order “to distinguish separate systems for ‘aerial’ and ‘material’ colours,” which he then utilized in a schema of “weighting” colors by tonal value. He further correlated colors with times of the day; for example, yellow suggested morning whereas red registered evening.⁵⁸ Turner adroitly adopted his theories to both watercolor painting, which required the artist to take into account the white of the paper support when laying in colors, as well as oils, which were typically laid in glazes – or thin layers of paint – that allows for modification, blending, toning or breaking of color.

Turner's handling of color signified not only his technical facility, but also, as art historian Kay Dian Kriz has explained, “a certain ideal of ‘English genius’:

manifested via bravura displays of painting technique – the use of broad and often loosely applied swatches of highly keyed colour, dramatic tonal contrasts, and other devices associated on the one hand with the surface finish of the support (canvas or paper) and on the other hand with the “atmosphere” (both physical and emotional) of the scenes depicted.⁵⁹

This critical discourse emerged over the opening decades of the nineteenth century and was part of extensive discussions of nationalism fueled by the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars. At the close of the eighteenth century, such bravura technique was associated with France and discredited for its seductive, excessive, and feminine qualities. Yet British artists persisted with, and, in fact, enhanced their use of highly keyed colors and virtuoso brushwork so that their works would command attention on the crowded walls of art exhibitions. Critics began to express approval of such works, citing the artists' command of science – specifically the empirical observation of the natural scene – combined with an appropriate imaginative sensibility that could draw out the essential character of a place and excite the perceptions and emotions of the beholder. Such rhetoric suited the increasing nationalistic sentiment of the age and also served to cohere the nation in a time of social unrest triggered by the economic depression following the conclusion of the Napoleonic wars.⁶⁰

The anxieties attendant upon the close of the war were vividly expressed by J. M. W. Turner in his river scene of *The Fighting Temeraire Tugged to her Last Berth to Be Broken Up*, 1838 (National Gallery, London) that depicts the gun ship “Temeraire,” which had earned a distinguished reputation for its service at



FIG. 14.8 J. M. W. Turner: *The Fighting Temeraire Tugged to Her Last Berth to Be Broken Up*, oil on canvas, 907 × 1216 mm, 1838.

Source: National Gallery, London. © Bridgeman Art Library/SuperStock.

the Battle of Trafalgar, making its last journey, from Sheerness to Rotherhite, where it was to be decommissioned (Fig. 14.8). Turner uses color contrasts to great effect in this work. The ghostly white sailing ship, representing the zenith of British naval power as well as the traditional means of plying the waves, is set off against the darker, smaller steamboat that, despite its size, has the power to pull the larger sailing craft. The dirty red smoke plume of the tug, juxtaposed against the empty rigging of the sailing vessel, is matched by the fiery sunset, making a visual equation between sun and steam. But the painting is less a celebration of this new form of technology and more an expression of mourning for the ghostly past, limping into the sunset. The colors of the respective objects are enhanced by Turner's perceptive observation that shadows are not purely gray but possess a variety of tones so that "the deceptive grey shadow on the hull of the *Fighting Temeraire* ... acquires a violet tinge from the 'opposition' of cream light."⁶¹ He likewise varied his handling of paint to realize the forms in the painting; the sunset is rendered in thickly applied paint whereas the paint for the sailing ship is thinner and more delicate. But perhaps the strongest piece of evidence for Turner's willingness to depart from the actuality of a scene or event in order to convey his desired message is his decision to show the ships moving

to the left of the canvas, in tension with the sunset and its related orthogonals, even though, the shipyard to which the boats were headed was to the west of the starting point. The work has become one of the most popular paintings in the collection of the National Gallery, where the painting came to reside in 1856 through the terms of Turner's will, as demonstrated by the numerous requests over the decades to copy the painting.⁶²

Color contrasts clearly served Turner well in depicting the power of industrialization, as in his watercolor of Dudley, Worcestershire (Lady Lever), a town closely linked with the invention of the steam engine. Turner washes the hillside town on the left side of the watercolor with a gray blue tone set against the bright highlights illuminating the ruined castle on the hill in the center of the composition and the red tones washed over the harbor scene at the right of the composition. Likewise, color contrast enhanced his representation of natural phenomena, as in his watercolor of *Loch Coruisk, Skye* (National Gallery, Scotland) in which dark brown foreground rocks anchor the scene of rocky peaks touched with white highlights. The arcing curves of the mountain ridges convey an illusion of upward movement enhanced by the swirling clouds laden with moisture, dashing up against the rock cliffs like waves. The vibrant sense of the sublime is underscored by the diminutive scale of the two figures perched on the rock in the center foreground.

Turner's attentiveness to the sublime potential of both the natural and the industrial landscape was not unique; painter and scene designer Phillip de Loutherbourg (1740–1812), whose paintings likewise jostled for attention on exhibition walls, evoked the power of nature, as in *An Avalanche or Ice-Fall in the Alps*, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1804 (Tate Gallery), and industry, as in *A View of Coalbrookdale by Night*, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1801 (Science Museum, London). Such enhanced effects did not escape the sharp pen of critics; with regard to the latter work, a reviewer complained that the painter had attempted too much in the combination of the fiery red furnace of the foundry, the cool blue tones of the night sky, and the warm tones of the breaking day and disparagingly likened the painting to “*nocturnal Transparencies* which excite so much vulgar admiration in our *Print shops* [original emphasis].”⁶³

The natural and the personal

On exhibition walls, viewers would have found a third type of landscape – the agricultural or natural scene – that, like the sublime natural and the sublime industrial, gained further charge by being seen in relationship to the other two types. Although John Constable experienced great difficulty in achieving public recognition for his works early in his career, by 1819, his decision to paint the local landscape of the Stour Valley had paid off with the acclaim that greeted his large-scale oil the *White Horse* (Frick Collection). The significance of Constable's desire to “paint my own places best” must be underscored; most landscape artists, particularly those practicing the topographical idiom, focused on sites or events that carried

associations and values that could be appreciated by a broad audience, as in the case of Turner's print *View of Battle Abbey – the spot where Harold Fell* from the series *Views in Sussex*, 1820.

Nonetheless, Constable was not exceptional in this new direction; the Norwich school (nomenclature used to refer to three generations of artists working in this region) also worked from the local. John Crome, who helped to establish the reputation of this school, for example, represented the local waterways and broader landscape, as in the case of *Mousehold Heath*, an etching from c.1810–1813 (Cleveland Museum of Art). The work owes a debt to earlier Dutch landscape painting but is also attentive to the local in the sandy dunes that occupy the foreground and middle ground and the windmills highlighted against the wind-swept sky. The image is also nostalgic in that it represents the tract as an underutilized wasteland whereas at the close of the eighteenth century it had been enclosed, which entailed the erection of fences and the construction of new roads. What reformers regarded as “improvements,” Crome clearly saw as intrusions. It is worth remembering, as Andrew Hemingway reminds us, that the primary audience for such images was not the rural poor displaced from this land, but the urban middle classes, who valued the artist's marks of originality and personal perception as well as the representation of an idealized alternative to the hurly-burly of industry and urbanism.⁶⁴

Constable's appreciation for the local landscape of his childhood – his father was a prosperous miller, trader, and Commissioner of the River Stour Navigation – was closely linked to his education in the georgic, which, in the “British manifestation,” Michael Rosenthal explains:

was a social poetry, founded in a rural society in which all worked for the common good, and which divided workers into those who laboured, and those who dictated, their common “industry” directed to the shared end of national advancement and glory decided on by the latter.⁶⁵

Such sources fueled Constable's declaration to pursue “a natural painture,” which he conceived as the truthful riposte to the bravura painting he witnessed in London exhibitions. To achieve this end, he set himself to working in the open air in his home landscape of Bergholt, “where I shall make some laborious studies of nature – and I shall endeavour to get a pure and unaffected representation of the scenes that may employ me with respect to colour particularly and any thing else.”⁶⁶

What Michael Rosenthal has dubbed the “last georgic Stour Valley landscape,” *The Hay Wain*, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1821 (National Gallery, London), has proven to possess lasting significance (Fig. 14.2). The painting shows the river curving through the foreground, snaking past Willy Lot's house at left. A horse drawn carriage is shown in midstream; the arc of the driver's whip directs attention to the fields that lay beyond and the white dots of the laborers' shirts at far right. Overhead, clouds sweep across the sky; at left, the dark, moisture-laden clouds cast a shadow over the foreground that contrasts

with the patches of bright sunlight that mark the fields at right. Constable wrote a friend that the painting was intended for Londoners “who know nothing of country life,” so that they could enjoy vicariously the pleasures of rural life, represented as harmonious and peaceable. Indeed, this painting has come to stand for a vision of a cozy, domestic England, given added life at the end of the century by such painters as Helen Allingham, and which has persisted into the present day, reconfigured to reassure against today’s anxieties, such as nuclear arms.⁶⁷

As literary historian John Barrell has observed, such readings of harmony depend greatly on the small-scale, distanced figures of labor, who:

if they obtrude more, if they became less symbolic, more actualized images of men at work, we would run the risk of focusing on them as men – not as the tokens of a calm, endless, and anonymous industry, which confirm the order of society; and not as objects of colour, confirming the order of the landscape.⁶⁸

Constable’s natural painture thus allowed for number of paradoxes: the peaceable countryside at a time of agricultural uprisings that included arson and the destruction of farming machinery; an “impulse to record with naturalistic objectivity the scenes of his boyhood and an equally powerful desire to infuse these scenes with personal associative meaning;”⁶⁹ and pure, unaffected color based on observation of nature but equally influenced by knowledge of color theory.

Registering the personal and wrestling with color theory came to the fore in Constable’s later works, such as *The Leaping Horse*, 1825 (Royal Academy of Arts, London) and *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows*, 1832 (private collection), which were worked up from full-scale oil sketches. Both of these works display the thicker brushwork Constable adopted in these decades as well as his attention to the transitory effects of light, indicated by impasto touches. Critics, however, took the painter to task for “‘want of finish,’ ‘specky’ manner, ‘scattered appearance wanting unity and *point d’appui* [point of emphasis] and ‘busy and flickered’ brushwork, which was not to the public taste.”⁷⁰ Yet, this brushwork was crucial to Constable’s enterprise for it registered the artist’s personal presence and observation of the scene as opposed to the objective detachment associated with highly finished, that is, detailed oil paintings with a smooth glassy surface or the topographical print tradition.

Personal observation was also crucial for Constable’s rendering of skies, which he regarded as the principal “organ of sentiment” in a painting. He produced numerous studies of clouds, noteworthy in their accurate rendering of various typologies. Likewise, his attention was drawn to transitory meteorological effects such as rainbows, one of which occupies pride of place in *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows*. Yet, just as Turner altered east–west coordinates in *The Fighting Temeraire* in order to convey his message; Constable improbably placed the rainbow arcing over the Cathedral in a protective gesture that defies the laws of

optics. Moreover, the diagrams of rainbows that Constable produced in this period reveal that he was caught up in the debate then raging as to whether there were seven primary colors (Newton) or three (Brewster).⁷¹ Like Turner, Constable sought out guidance in science, but nonetheless pursued his poetic vision, strengthened by the knowledge he had gained from both personal observation and scientific study.

The notion of landscape serving as palimpsest for the artist's personal interpretation of the scene comes to the fore in the work of Samuel Palmer (1805–1881), who invested his local scene of Shoreham with his spiritual values. Like Constable, whose rendition of Salisbury Cathedral was produced during a time of religious conflict produced by debates about the practice of tithes, Palmer likewise responded to the religious crisis of his time. But whereas Constable shows the Cathedral swarmed with storm clouds, Palmer created calm scenes of figures gaining solace from contemplation and experience of the landscape as in *Cornfield by Moonlight, with the Evening Star*, c.1830 (British Museum). Palmer's writings from this period, namely his *Address to the Electors of West Kent*, 1832, reveal his opposition to the changes then swirling about him, such as the Reform Act of 1832 (lambasted as a product of France) and pressures to reform the Church of England, which he conceived as the lynchpin for the both the local and national community.⁷² Moreover, he conceived the agricultural landscape, particularly harvesting scenes, as charged with religiosity, revealing the beneficence of a Creator God who has maintained his contract with a dutiful people; such sentiment is demonstrated by his inscription of Psalm 65 on the mount to the sepia drawing *The Valley Thick with Corn*, 1825 (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford). Painters Peter DeWint and John Linnell ensured that the link between harvest scenes and spirituality persisted well into the Victorian age.⁷³

Without convention

Whereas landscape paintings produced during the early nineteenth century were frequently typed according to modalities, such as the topographical, picturesque, pastoral or georgic; some of the most innovative landscape painters at mid-century sought to escape the supposed confines of convention. Leading critic John Ruskin (1819–1900), in the 1851 edition of *Modern Painters*, largely devoted to the work of J. M. W. Turner, drew readers' attention to a "more earnest and able school of art than we have seen for centuries" that he saw demonstrated in the work of emerging artists John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt, whom he described as "endeavouring to paint, with the highest possible degree of completion, what they see in nature, without reference to conventional or established rules; but by no means to imitate the style of any past epoch," thus mollifying critics who feared that the artists wished to imitate the art before Raphael.⁷⁴ These young artists had banded together with Dante Gabriel Rossetti, James Collinson, F. G. Stephens, Thomas Woolner, and William Michael Rossetti in September 1848 to create the Pre-Raphaelite

Brotherhood. Their early work, largely figural and with strong religious associations, provoked controversy and John Ruskin stepped in as apologist. In his pamphlet *PreRaphaelitism* (1851), he attributed the genesis of the movement to his earlier *Modern Painters*:

Eight years ago, in the close of the first volume of *Modern Painters*, I ventured to give the following advice to the young artists of England: – “They should go to nature in all singleness of heart and walk with her laboriously and trustingly, having no other thought but how best to penetrate her meaning; rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing.” Advice which, whether bad or good, involved infinite labour and humiliation in the following it.⁷⁵

Ruskin’s phrase “no other thought” is a bit misleading, for he went on to explain that the role of art should be “to induce in the spectator’s mind the faithful conceptions of any natural objects whatsoever; the second, to guide the spectator’s mind to those objects most worthy of its contemplation, and to inform him of the thoughts and feelings with which these were regarded by the artist himself.”⁷⁶ The pre-Raphaelites were faced with the task of achieving such ends without resort to previous modalities, thus capturing, as Ruskin put it, “the innocence of the eye.”⁷⁷

Critic F. G. Stephens, writing in the pre-Raphaelite journal *The Germ* under the pseudonym of John Seward in 1850, pointed to the solution to this problem when he noticed:

a great change in the character of the productions of the modern school, a marked attempt to lead the taste of the public into a new channel by producing pure transcripts and faithful studies from nature, instead of conventionalities and feeble reminiscences from the Old Masters ... and whose productions undoubtedly surpass all others in the simple attention to nature in detail as well as in generalities.⁷⁸

Specificity in both form and color became the hallmarks of the pre-Raphaelites. As early as c.1843–1844, Millais, writing to Hunt, had questioned previous generations’ use of colors and postulated the benefits of using pure, as opposed to blended, colors:

For what reason is the sky in a daylight picture made as black as night? And then about colour, why should the gradation go from the principal white, through yellow to pink and red, and so on to stronger colours? Why all this subservience to early examples, when the turn of violet comes, why does the courage of the modern imitator fail?... If you notice, a clean purple is scarcely given these days, and pure green is as much ignored.⁷⁹

Hunt clearly took Millais’ queries to heart as can be seen in many of his paintings of this period, particularly *Our English Coasts 1852 (Strayed Sheep)* (Tate Britain), which rigorously observes the effect of natural sunlight on the color of objects. The commissioned painting was executed largely on site along the cliffs, at

a spot called Lover's Seat, along Covehurst Bay at Fairlight, near Hastings. Specific details, however, such as the butterflies, were executed indoors, although still working from a specific model. The viewer of the work feels plunged into the scene by virtue of the cropped foreground; the sheep vicariously crowd around the viewer's knees, gazing upward balefully. Sheep and viewer are precariously positioned along the cliff's edge and, to the left, below a series of descending ledges, can be glimpsed a wedge of blue sea. The sensation of bearing witness is enhanced by Hunt's attention to local color; the fur of the white sheep in the immediate foreground is a careful blending of local and reflected colors, including brownish-reds and blues. John Ruskin, recalling the work in 1883, claimed that the work:

showed to us, for the first time in the history of art, the absolutely faithful balances of colour and shade by which actual sunshine might be transposed into a key in which the harmonies possible with material pigments should yet produce the same impression upon the mind which were caused by the light itself.⁸⁰

The painting allowed for a number of interpretative possibilities. When the painting was first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1853, it was simply known as *Our English Coasts 1852*, and F. G. Stephens, writing in 1860, recalled that the work "might be taken as a satire on the reported defenceless state of the country against foreign invasion," referring to Napoleon III's purported intent to invade England that had led to a much debated Militia Bill calling for a volunteer force to assist in the regular army's defence of the coasts.⁸¹ When displayed at the Universelle Exposition in Paris 1855, Hunt appended "Strayed Sheep" to the title and the sheep were thus recast from volunteer soldiers to congregants, recalling Hunt's earlier *Hireling Shepherd*, 1851–1852 (City of Manchester Art Galleries), with its coded chastising of clergy for engaging in sectarian debates rather than caring for the needs of their followers. Curator Alison Smith has also observed that Hunt's choice of a coastline scene linked the painting to contemporaneous geological investigations led by Charles Lyell who pointed to the Sussex sea cliffs as evidence of continuous contact with the sea.⁸²

Art for art's sake

Ruskin's influence on landscape painting throughout the nineteenth century was profound, largely because of his allegiance to Turner and the pre-Raphaelites, although he became critical of John Everett Millais' late, pure landscapes for their breadth of treatment. But his command of the field was severely undermined by James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) who, in response to a highly critical review in which Ruskin excoriated the artist for "flinging a pot of paint in the public's face," charged the older critic with libel. The suit concluded with a pyrrhic victory for Whistler who won the argument but only received half a farthing in damages. Although the links between Whistler and Turner are well established, one can nonetheless easily imagine why Ruskin was so angered by Whistler's work. Here was an artist who wrote his sister-in-law from St. Ives, "Well – for dullness, this

place is simply amazing! – nothing but Nature about and Nature is but a poor creature after all – as I have told you – poor company certainly – and, artistically, often offensive.”⁸³ Indeed, the next year, in his “10 O’Clock Lecture,” he freed the artist from the task of adhering closely to nature and instead proposed that the artist see nature like the keyboard of a piano from which “the artist is born to pick, and choose, and group ... that the result be beautiful – as the musician gathers his notes, and forms his chords, until he brings forth from chaos harmony.”⁸⁴ Such theories legitimized Whistler’s use of musical titles for his paintings and were also important for the concept of “Art for Art’s sake,” a phrase deployed by late nineteenth-century art critics to describe painting that eschewed the fidelity to nature or realism associated with pre-Raphaelitism in favor of beauty and aesthetic harmony.⁸⁵ It also signaled a renewed interest in the status of the artist as author of the composition as opposed to faithful scribe of the natural scene.

Moreover, Whistler worked from memory, not from direct observation of the site. In addition, he eschewed finish; indeed, the thinned, highly liquid paint that Whistler used would not allow for the high level of detail registered in pre-Raphaelite paintings. His rebuttal of pre-Raphaelite technique was completed by the suffusing atmosphere of bluish gray, capturing the twilight gloom, found in many of his riverside landscapes, as in *Nocturne: Blue and Silver – Chelsea*, 1871 (Tate Britain), in which the artist only hinted at the construction on the far shore. This work also evokes the Japanese goods that Whistler, in keeping with the fashionable taste for Japonisme, had collected, specifically blue and white china and Japanese woodblock prints, which share with Whistler’s painting a simplified composition and use of silhouetted forms.

In his landscapes of the 1870s, Whistler favored the industrialized urban scene rather than the rural countryside. He typically rendered these scenes when light levels were low; evening was the ideal moment for the artist, he explained, the one moment when Nature “has sung in tune:”

when the evening mist clothes the riverside with poetry, as with a veil – and the poor buildings lose themselves in the dim sky – and the tall chimneys become campanile – and the warehouses are palaces in the night – and the whole city hangs in the heavens, and fairyland is before us.⁸⁶

The industrial pollution that cloaked late nineteenth-century London provided perfect fodder for the artist. Whistler’s capacity to perceive the possible beauty in the landscape of the urban metropolis seems to anticipate E. M. Forster’s claim, uttered by the narrator of *Howard’s End* (1910), that:

to speak against London is no longer fashionable. The Earth as an artistic cult has had its day, and the literature of the near future will probably ignore the country and seek inspiration from the town. One can understand the reaction. Of Pan and the elemental forces, the public has heard a little too much – they seem Victorian.

Yet, the rural scene and mountainous sublime persisted into the twentieth century. Rural artists' colonies were, according to Nina Lübbren, the "dominant mode of international art practice" "between 1870 and 1910."⁸⁷ Cornwall, in particular Newlyn, where the painters Stanhope Forbes and Elizabeth Armstrong eventually settled, and St. Ives, as well as Scotland and Wales were important sites for artists enacting the paradigm of re-locating close to their desired sites and models while remaining tethered to the urban sphere for the consumption, criticism, and exhibition of their work. Even Whistler was attracted to the idea of leaving behind the metropolitan experience and pursuing a new mode of painting provoked by nature; in St. Ives the broad blocks of sand, sea, and sky stimulated a rethinking of composition, alongside a re-contemplation of color and the artist's touch.⁸⁸ In the early twentieth century, J. D. Innes (1887–1914) set off for the mountains of Wales filled with the lessons of impressionism and post-impressionism. Like his early nineteenth-century predecessors, Innes sought a sense of self in the landscape and formed a romantic attachment to place (he buried a casket of love letters atop Mount Arenig) that resulted in numerous depictions, as in *Arenig, Sunny Evening*, c.1911–1912 (Tate Britain). Although his painting style was intentionally naïve and compositions simplified in order to convey the sense of a direct, unmediated vision, he nonetheless drew upon the work of his mentor Philip Wilson Steer, who, in turn, borrowed knowingly from J. M. W. Turner and John Constable. Such links were obvious to the organizers of the Innes retrospective at the Tate gallery in 1921, scheduled at the same time as the reopening of the Turner Basement at the Tate featuring a comprehensive selection of works from his Liber Studiorum. Moreover, Innes' biographer and tutor John Fothergill recalled that the artist "always travelled with books of reproductions of Turner and Constable."⁸⁹ Such anecdotes reveal that the nineteenth century had produced a landscape heritage with which the next century would repeatedly grapple and one that now dictates museum displays and blockbuster exhibitions.⁹⁰

Notes

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- 75 Ruskin, *PreRaphaelitism*, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, 339.
- 76 Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, 10.
- 77 "The whole technical power of painting depends on our recovery of what may be called the *innocence of the eye*; that is to say, a sort of childish perception of these flat tints of colour, merely as such, without consciousness of what they signify. We always suppose we *see* what we only know, and have hardly any consciousness of the real aspect of the signs we have learned to interpret." John Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing*, first published 1857, New York, 1971, 27.
- 78 [F. G. Stephens] Seward, J. (1992) "The purpose and tendency of early Italian art," February 1850, *The Germ, The Literary Magazine of the Pre-Raphaelites*, Preface by Andrea Rose, Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 58, 59, and 61.
- 79 Quoted in Townsend, J. H., Ridge, J., and Hackney, S. (2004) *Pre-Raphaelite Painting Techniques: 1848–56*, London: Tate Publishing, 26.
- 80 Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 33, 272–273.
- 81 Parris, L. (ed.) (1984) *The Pre-Raphaelites*, London: Tate Gallery, 107.
- 82 Staley, A. and Newall, C. (2004) *Pre-Raphaelite Vision, Truth to Nature*, London: Tate Publishing, 35.
- 83 James McNeill Whistler to Helen Whistler, January 20, 1884, Whistler Correspondence Project, <http://www.whistler.arts.gla.ac.uk/correspondence>.
- 84 Thorp, N. (ed.) (1994) *Whistler on Art, Selected Letters and Writings of James McNeill Whistler*, Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 84.
- 85 For further discussion of the term art for art's sake, see Prettejohn, E. (1999) 'Introduction', *After the Pre-Raphaelites, Art and Aestheticism in Victorian England*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1–14.
- 86 Thorp (1994), 85.
- 87 Lübbren, N. (2001) *Rural Artists' Colonies in Europe, 1870–1910*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- 88 Gruetzner Robins, A. (2007) *A Fragile Modernism, Whistler and his Impressionist Followers*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 9–31.
- 89 Fothergill, J. (1923) "James Dickson Innes," in *Watercolour Drawings and Paintings by the late James Dickson Innes*, Chelsea, 6. See also Holt, Y. (2003) *British Artists and the Modernist Landscape*, Burlington: Ashgate.
- 90 For consideration of aspects of continuity of nineteenth-century concepts in twentieth-century landscape production, see, for example, Peters Corbett, D. (2002) "The geography of *Blast*: landscape, modernity and English painting, 1914–1930," in

D. Peters Corbett, Y. Holt, and F. Russell (eds) *The Geographies of Englishness: Landscape and the National Past 1880–1940*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 115–140; Garlake, M. (1998) *New Art, New World, British Art in Postwar Society*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press; Holt, Y. (2003) *British Artists and the Modernist Landscape*, Aldershot: Ashgate; McConkey, K. (2002) *Memory and Desire, Painting in Britain and Ireland at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, Aldershot: Ashgate.

Theories of the Picturesque

Michael Charlesworth

The subject is, indeed, one of the most obscure of all that may legitimately be submitted to human reason; and the idea is itself so varied in the minds of different men, according to their subjects of study, that no definition can be expected to embrace more than a certain number of its infinitely multiplied forms¹.

John Ruskin on the picturesque

The term picturesque covers a category of aesthetic pleasure that can be obtained from land. Before writers began to discuss it at length, two other categories of landscape aesthetics had received codification: these were the beautiful and the sublime. At the risk of reducing these to caricature, we can sum them up by saying that the feeling of the beautiful was aroused by scenes and things that were small scale, generally smooth, featuring easy gradual transitions and gentle slopes. From beautiful scenes and forms the sense of an elongated S-shape could often be abstracted. The feeling of the sublime, by contrast, was stimulated by things dangerous in nature, such as high cliffs, regions perpetually covered in snow and ice, stormy seas, volcanoes: everything that could cause terror in humans. Edmund Burke, in particular, had linked the sublime to the instinct for self-preservation, and the beautiful to that for self-perpetuation (through love and reproduction).

So what, entering this context, was the picturesque? Scholars (including Ruskin in the epigraph to this chapter) agree that the picturesque is notoriously difficult to define.² Even if we take what looks as if it should be a central definition, and one possessing some strength, we find that in the end it is not up to the task of embracing the whole of this varied and manifold concept. The definition in question is

associated with all the early British picturesque theorists from William Gilpin (1724–1804) onwards, and is particularly emphasized by Richard Payne Knight (1750–1824). In a sequence of long essays published in the 1780s and 1790s these writers suggested that exposure to poetic descriptions of landscape and to excellent landscape art (paintings, prints and drawings) furnishes us with a series of mental patterns, or paradigms, of landscape beauty that we then take with us into the real countryside and use to judge the aesthetic merits of real terrain. As Payne Knight put it:

The spectator, having his mind enriched with the embellishments of the painter and the poet, applies them, by the spontaneous association of ideas, to the natural objects presented to his eye, which thus acquire ideal and imaginary beauties; that is, beauties which are not felt by the inorganic sense of vision; but by the intellect and imagination through that sense.³

This seems a central idea in the history of picturesque theories. It is one that Jane Austen takes up in her novel, *Northanger Abbey* (written by 1803: published 1818). In chapter 14 the protagonist, Catherine Morland, accompanied by Henry Tilney and his sister, walks up a hill outside Bath called Beechen Cliff. The Tilneys are versed in picturesque principles: they view the countryside “with the eyes of persons accustomed to drawing, and decided on its capability of being formed into pictures.” Henry “talked of fore-grounds, distances, and second distances – side-screens and perspectives – lights and shades; – and Catherine was so hopeful a scholar, that when they gained the top of Beechen Cliff, she voluntarily rejected the whole city of Bath, as unworthy to make part of a landscape.”

Jane Austen has some fun at the expense of the picturesque, which depends on a specialized vocabulary of terms (“side-screens,” “second distances”). The picturesque rejects the city of Bath: in his *Observations on the River Wye*, Gilpin had stated that he liked the odd cottage or mill in his views, but not too many: “when houses are scattered through every part, the moral sense can never make a convert of the picturesque eye.”⁴ Here Gilpin admits that the picturesque is amoral, which is to say less concerned with worthy thoughts of social equality, housing for all, and prosperity derived from economic exploitation of land, than with aesthetic pleasure, and this amoral character is a property of the picturesque that still vexes critics in the early twenty-first century.⁵ However, there is an exciting freedom in this amorality, for Gilpin. In the face of a huge panoramic view of the valley of the River Severn from the Cotswold edge, he finds that “The eye was lost in the profusion of objects which were thrown at once before it, and ran wild over the vast expanse with rapture and astonishment, before it could compose itself enough to make coherent observations.”⁶

In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine has no prior experience of the picturesque, and so her conversation with Henry Tilney lapses into silence. Instead of filling her mind with the best patterns of landscape beauty derived from poetry, paintings, and prints, she has been filling it with lurid macabre melodramas of

human wickedness: in other words, she has been reading Gothic novels. And so instead of judging real countryside by the best mental paradigms derived from landscape art, she approaches everyday life with the worst mental paradigms formed by her reading. She has expectations of real-life murder and wanton cruelty: those expectations lead her into misunderstandings with Henry and his family. Jane Austen therefore uses this particular theory of the picturesque as a conceptual structure for her entire novel. At the same time, she shows exactly why Payne Knight's theory will not do as an entire definition of the picturesque. For all generations after Gilpin's own, the subject's first exposure to the picturesque is much more likely to be (as it was for Catherine) a trip to the country during which a friend or family member points out certain terrain as picturesque, than exposure to the beauties of landscape in visual art and poetry. Yet what happens to the prime pattern in that case? And what happens in future generations after tastes in reading matter and art have changed? When Payne Knight was writing, the best landscape art was deemed to be that of Claude Lorrain, Salvator Rosa, Gaspard Dughet, and Nicolas Poussin. The poets to be admired would have included British ones – Milton, Shakespeare, Pope, and Thomson, but also Latin (Virgil, Lucretius, Horace, Ovid) and Greek (Homer, Theocritus). What happens to Payne Knight's pattern when people of Catherine Morland's age are less likely to have admired the work of Homer, Virgil, and Claude Lorrain than that of Tolkien, J. K. Rowling, and Turner together with the impressionists? Does the picturesque fade away? The word is very much still with us, and not simply used in an antiquarian sense.⁷ Does it remain unchanged? Does it persist in a changed form?

Payne Knight seems to offer a solution to such a difficulty – if it is a difficulty – by also advancing the idea that the picturesque works by an association of ideas. He uses the phrase in the passage quoted above. He believes that we feel pleasure in picturesque scenes and objects because they become associated in our minds, through resemblance, with high art, classical culture, and the best poetry. However, if, as he insisted in the face of objections raised by the third of the early theorists of the picturesque, Uvedale Price (1747–1829), association of ideas is the only mechanism by which the picturesque acts, then such associations would have to be allowed to occur in childhood, and be associations of happiness, rather than always being ideas associated with landscape artists and poets. Indeed, this is what the landscape painter John Constable claimed, stating that he always loved

The sound of water escaping from old Mill dams ... old Willows, Old Rotten Banks, slimy posts, & brickwork... As long as I do paint I shall never cease to paint such Places. They have always been my delight... Painting is but another word for feeling. I associate my "careless boyhood" to all that lies on the banks of the Stour. They made me a painter (& I am grateful)⁸

What has Constable's list of objects to do with the picturesque? To understand this better we need to turn to Uvedale Price, who equally offers a way out of the

difficulty seemingly posed by Jane Austen. He took the view that certain types of objects were inherently picturesque, and in purveying this view he was writing in harmony with statements made by William Gilpin. For both Gilpin and Price it was variety itself that emerged as the essential defining property of picturesque subject-matter. Scales can change in this view: details emerge as newly important: ragged banks along roadsides, dilapidated farms, scruffy people, old willows, bony and rough-furred animals are especially prized. Cows, for example, are better picturesque objects than racehorses (eighteenth-century cows were bony) especially in spring when their winter coat was falling out. Price bases his theory of the picturesque on a physiological point. He states that we are stimulated by “irritation” of the “organs of sight.”⁹ (He means the word “irritation” in a neutral, scientific sense, so that up to a point it will be experienced as pleasure). Thus variety in visible things is naturally more satisfying than uniformity, as it provides greater stimulus (irritation) to the organs of sense. Furthermore, our response is not purely confined to the one sense of sight. There is a synesthetic element involved in the picturesque. Price is aware that in early childhood there is a strong link between the senses of sight and touch. He knows that we cannot interpret certain things as rough, smooth, or even possessing some three dimensional form, before we have tested them with our organs of touch (which in young babies include the mouth as a prime organ, although this is not mentioned by Price).

Price also states that irritation to the optical organs based on texture in turn provokes the mental activity of curiosity.¹⁰ Through his theory the picturesque finds a place alongside Burke’s beautiful and sublime as an aesthetic pleasure closely tied to physiological functions of the organic human body. In basing his theory of the picturesque on a physiological point (concerning the innate happiness we derive from stimulus to the optic nerve) Price gives a natural or innate reason for us to feel pleasure in rough and abraded surfaces, variety rather than uniformity, contrast rather than predictability, and so on, and therefore in signs of age, experience, and decay. Matter always decays, and decaying objects are generally rougher and their surfaces more broken-looking than new objects. Age as a prime factor in the picturesque is stressed by many writers.¹¹ As John Ruskin argued, the marks of age in buildings are part of a larger spectacle that the picturesque enjoys, that of the reclaiming of the products of human art by nature.¹² In general, of course, decaying places and buildings tend to be subject to one of two fates. Either they molder away to nothing and cease to exist, or they are subject to the sudden upheaval of renewal or redevelopment. Either way the sadness of a vanishing past can accumulate around them. Even gypsies, a favorite subject of picturesque contemplation and a subject chosen by the radical painter George Morland, have by the end of the twentieth century been subjected to the social “improvement” of compulsory settlement in housing, and a whole way of life teeters on the brink of extinction.¹³ (Gypsies are a pertinent subject here, as they are repeatedly described by picturesque travelers in the period 1770–1820, and some modern scholars seem to get quite cross with

those travelers for examining the gypsies.)¹⁴ During the Second World War dilapidated farms could be violently taken over by a state concerned to increase food supply, and one farmer was shot dead by the forces of the state when he refused to give up his farm.¹⁵ Recent scholarly emphasis on Gilpin has therefore worked to restore the picturesque from immersion in what can often seem like a point-less nostalgia for an elusive past.¹⁶

Payne Knight, however, founds his view purely on association. For him there is no innate ability to be pleased with roughness and brokenness for its own sake. Payne Knight's belief points to the necessity of education and the disciplined formation of taste: "a person conversant with the writings of Theocritus and Virgil will relish pastoral scenery more than one unacquainted with such poetry."¹⁷ In contrast, Price's belief would admit that ordinary villagers (often known in present scholarship as "the rural poor") can take pleasure in picturesque sights because such sights are innately pleasing to all of us.

The vexed question of definition, and how that definition is supposed to work on an everyday basis, is no place to linger. As the examples above show, the picturesque is perhaps best classified as a way of seeing. It is about being a tourist. It is concerned with the activity of visiting real countryside and apprehending it with a sensibility that is looking for certain kinds of visual and imaginative pleasure. Two things that can be stated are, first, that the picturesque has its origin in literature, especially that form of poetry known as prospect poetry or loco-descriptive poetry, of which Alexander Pope's *Windsor Forest* (1713) makes an outstanding example.¹⁸ The second is that the term is barely applicable to visual art itself. To call a painting, drawing or print "picturesque" verges on tautology. So does the allegation that a painter has painted a scene according to a picturesque "formula."¹⁹ Application of the term to these domains is the weakest and thus the least important of its uses.

Instead of anything so tidy as a definition, strictly speaking what scholars have to deal with is a large number of individual uses of the word "picturesque," scattered throughout the discourse since the middle of the eighteenth century, any one of which needs to be considered on its own merits before it can be grouped together with others in a varied series of applications. The case of Rievaulx Abbey, in Yorkshire, can be taken to exemplify what is involved in taking such an approach.

In 1820 an antiquarian, T. D. Whitaker, and an artist, William Westall, published a book devoted to Rievaulx Abbey (Fig. 15.1).²⁰ Westall produced an impressive frontispiece, showing the abbey from the vantage point of "Duncomb Terrace," a landscape garden from 1758 that still survives, as Rievaulx Terrace, and can be visited as it now belongs to the National Trust. Westall shows some people using the terrace. They seem to have pulled some branches off the flowering shrubs of the garden, and are now watching the sun set in the west. Westall shows that the abbey ruins are already engulfed in shadow while the terrace still enjoys uninterrupted sunlight. The brighter sky is reflected from the deep valley by the water of the River Rye.



FIG. 15.1 William Westall: *Rievaulx Abbey from Duncombe Park*, aquatint, hand colored, published 1819 by Hurst & Robinson, Cheapside, 10×13 in.

Source: Print from McTague of Harrogate.

Reading the book, we find that Whitaker does an extraordinary thing in light of the excellence of this frontispiece, the largest and grandest image in the book, by his collaborator. He begins by regretting that the abbey

is not better connected with [the town of] Helmsley or [the country house of] Duncombe Park than by a terrace on the brow of a hill ... looking down upon the ruins, as into the funnel of a chimney, and detecting all the windings of the little glens to the first poverty of their sources; the eye is next fatigued by a tiresome expanse of unfeatured and barren slopes, terminated by the desert of Blackmore, which is not entitled, by elevation or outline, to the name of mountain.

Instead of this view from above, Whitaker would have liked a drive from Duncombe Park to have approached “the ruins at the lowest, that is, the really picturesque point of access ... such were the charms which the monks of Rievaulx contemplated at the origin, and enjoyed during the continuance of their house.”

Then Whitaker appears to point at his collaborator: “[These are the] charms which a landscape painter of the present day would have selected.”²¹

The two collaborators have taken their conceptual stands in two opposing points of view. Can we decide between them? There is a certain amount of evidence to

support Whitaker's contention that the view of the ruins at the bottom of the hill, 250 feet below the terrace, should be seen as "the really picturesque point of access." In *Northanger Abbey*, one of the things Catherine Morland gathers from Henry Tilney's conversation is that "It seemed as if a good view were no longer to be taken from the top of a high hill."²² Yet supporters of Westall's position need not despair too soon. In 1768 the agricultural economist Arthur Young had visited Rievaulx Terrace, and found that "at your feet winds an irriguous valley, almost lost in scattered trees: ... upon the edge of the valley, an humble cottage is seen in a situation elegant in itself, and truly picturesque in the whole view."²³ Further along the terrace he sees the abbey: "scattered trees appearing among the ruins in a stile too elegantly picturesque to admit description ... the abbey with some scattered houses are most picturesquely situated."²⁴

In the face of these two starkly contradictory points of view it would be a mistake for us to conclude that Whitaker was right and Young and Westall wrong, or that the picturesque evolved from one position in 1768 to the other by 1820 while Westall remained old-fashioned. Far more interesting and fertile is to investigate what else lies behind these contrasting assertions of different positions. It is noticeable from Young's rapturous description of the views that his mood is a very happy one. Immediately after telling us how the trees appear in the ruins in a style "too elegantly picturesque to admit description" he continues, "it is a casual glance at a little paradise, which seems as it were in another region." Yet how can a visitor look at a view that has a huge pile of ruins as its centerpiece and see it as "a little paradise"? In fact it is noticeable that Young nowhere writes of Rievaulx Abbey in terms of melancholy, which some modern commentators assert (evidently quite erroneously) to have been the standard response to ruins.

In a lengthy and detailed discussion of various qualities of buildings, Uvedale Price asserts at one point in relation to castles and abbeys that "The ruins of these once magnificent edifices, are the pride and boast of this island: we may well be proud of them; not merely in the picturesque point of view: we may glory that the abodes of tyranny and superstition are in ruin."²⁵ In the poem *The Ruined Abbey: or, the Effects of Superstition*, written in 1746 by William Shenstone (1714–1763) the monks of the pre-Reformation abbeys are shown in the grip of various unpleasant activities, vices, sins, and crimes: "gluttony, extortion, fraud, avarice, envy, pride, revenge and shame." They are described as "libidinous" and "murderous." Thomas à Becket, we are told, "with unhallowed crosier bruis'd the Crown." And the ruination of the monastic system at the Reformation under Henry VIII "disclosed the wanton scene/ Of Monkish chastity! Each angry Friar/ Crawl'd from his bedded strumpet, muttering low/ An ineffectual curse."²⁶

Clearly "superstition" was a key-word for the monastic system and for Roman Catholicism in general, within triumphalist Protestant discourse, at a time when Roman Catholicism could still be seen as a threat to the protestant nation because of the persistent Jacobite plots and rebellions that attempted to restore the Roman

Catholic Stuart kings to the throne of Great Britain by force.²⁷ The Stuarts had been usurped and ejected in 1688. The largest of these rebellions took place in 1745–1746, but there were active plots until at least 1759.²⁸ It is this Protestant triumphalism that Young feels at Rievaulx; its roots go back to the 1540s.²⁹

However, Young did feel melancholy when he clambered all over the ruins of Fountains Abbey, attached to another Yorkshire landscape garden, Studley Royal, so the assumption of Protestant triumphalism is not absolute, and is clearly affected by some other factor. Indeed, the “other factor” is completely pertinent to our discussion of the picturesque. Young was affected by the distancing that he was put through, with respect to the abbey ruins, by the elevated position of Rievaulx Terrace, and he was equally affected by the proximity that he was allowed to the ruins of Fountains Abbey, which permitted different feelings about the ruined abbey to arise. Rievaulx Terrace puts the abbey *in perspective*. It *looks down on* the ruins. Both these phrases are often used in a metaphorical sense. An optical control is exercised by the way the objects are laid out in three dimensional space, and this becomes a conceptual or imaginative determinant.

Against it we can place T. D. Whitaker’s endorsement of the lower position, which, he told us, embodied “the charms which the monks of Rievaulx contemplated at the origin, and enjoyed during the continuance of their house.” Clearly the monks are not threatening to Whitaker as they were to Shenstone (and we might note that the last of the Stuart claimants to the throne, Prince Charles Edward, who had presided over the 1745 rebellion, died in 1788 without a male heir, while his brother, Cardinal York, died in 1807. By 1820, therefore, the Stuart cause was dead and the threat of a Catholic takeover reinstituting the monastic system much more unlikely). In fact, for the antiquarian, who is obviously interested in recapturing some idea of the medieval past, adopting the monks’ point of view becomes important, and by looking at the abbey from the lower viewpoint he can perform a perspectival synecdochic assimilation of the ruined fragments to make them the crucial element in a new whole: the whole being a closer imagination of the past.³⁰ The picturesque view of abbeys can therefore clearly contain without problems a range of differing views of ruins, from distanced and elevated to close up, but is much more likely to exult in ruin, either for historical reasons or simply because the visual effects of ruins are rare and interesting. The antiquarian view, on the other hand, more urgently needs to be exclusively a close up view, and is more likely to be affected in a melancholy fashion by the ruin of past grandeur. The schoolmaster and Church of England vicar William Gilpin described Tintern Abbey, on the River Wye, as a “splendid ruin.” He acknowledges that “it is easy to conceive, a man of warm imagination, in monkish times, might have been allured by such a scene to become an inhabitant of it,” but that is the extent of his sympathy with the monastic system. He feels that the abbey church is not ruined enough: “a number of gable ends hurt the eye with their regularity, and disgust it by the vulgarity of their shape. A mallet judiciously used (but who durst use it?) might be of service in fracturing some of them.” As he gets nearer, he finds the abbey “a very enchanting



FIG. 15.2 J. C. Bentley, after Joseph Mallord William Turner: *Rievaulx Abbey*, from *The Gallery of Modern British Artists*, intaglio print on paper, 94×155 mm, 1836.
 Source: © Tate, London 2011.

piece of ruin ... [flowers growing on the walls] gave those full-blown tints which add the richest finishing to a ruin.” Inside, “we see it in most perfection ... this awful piece of ruin,” which becomes a “scene of desolation” when he contemplates the various cripples and beggars who use the ruins as their dwelling.³¹ Clearly Gilpin is enjoying himself a great deal, experiencing a range of feelings all of which in some way contribute to his enjoyment. One cannot imagine Whitaker saying quite the same things.

At Rievaulx, between 1798 and 1806 the ruins had been drawn from the lower viewpoint by the watercolor artists Thomas Girtin, John Sell Cotman, and Paul Sandby Munn. Copley Fielding and J. M. W. Turner adopted the same low position in the 1820s and 1830s (Fig. 15.2). In making this image, Turner distances himself from the abbey and allows the foreground to be occupied by people going about their daily lives. Behind them the abbey looms up as an impressive massive ghost of former power and grandeur. However, Turner also shows the Ionic Temple, one of the garden buildings on Rievaulx Terrace, above the abbey, thereby acknowledging its exciting position and hinting at the potential pleasure it might afford.

The example of Rievaulx shows that behind the two separate and in fact contradictory uses of the word “picturesque” that we started with lie profound historical convictions and revealing views of historical events. Such a contradiction is useful to a scholar. Contradictions cannot be reconciled: instead they must be investigated and made to reveal what is at first sight concealed.

The example of Rievaulx Abbey and the landscape garden overlooking it gives an immediate and reliable answer to the question, where did tourists first become practiced in the aesthetic judgement of real terrain? Where were persons likely to be able to develop and practice the processes of seeing picturesquely, particularly during the period of the first emergence of the picturesque? While Rievaulx produces an answer, in general the relationship between the picturesque and the English landscape garden, though a very important one, is a gray area. Some scholars seem to assume that there is a complete identification between the two areas of activity (that the landscape garden is the same thing as the picturesque garden).³² Yet the landowners Price and Payne Knight objected vigorously to the most general and common form of landscape garden – that made in large numbers by the landscape gardener Lancelot “Capability” Brown and less well-known practitioners such as Richard Woods, Thomas White, and Humphry Repton – on the grounds that the parks and gardens produced were too bare of visual incident and too denuded of variety in vegetation to be pleasing. At best such domains belong to one of the other eighteenth-century categories of aesthetic pleasure, the beautiful.³³ Yet much more remains to be said, and for further elucidation of these questions we should turn again to the minor poet and important garden-maker, William Shenstone. In his essay *Unconnected Thoughts on Gardening* (1764) Shenstone was the first person to coin the term “landscape gardening.” As he put it,

landskip, or picturesque-gardening ... consists in pleasing the imagination by scenes of grandeur, beauty, or variety. Convenience has no share here, any farther than as it pleases the imagination...

Objects should be less calculated to strike the immediate eye, than the judgment or well-formed imagination; as in painting...

Landskip should contain variety enough to form a picture upon canvas; and this is no bad test, and I think the landskip painter is the gardiner's best designer... A wood, or hill, may balance a house or obelisk; for exactness would be displeasing.³⁴

It is interesting to note how Shenstone, who was himself a poet, asserts that the “landskip painter” would make the best designer, rather than a poet. In doing this he shows an emphasis toward the visual and away from the literary, at least in the forming of compositional wholes, although it must be admitted that the poet's abilities are crucial in the provision of suitable inscriptions with which garden features need to be equipped in order to make their deepest appeal to the “well-formed imagination.”³⁵ Shenstone's beliefs about garden design had been developed at his own garden of The Leasowes, in the West Midlands. Here he owned, among other features, a narrow valley filled with trees, in which he strengthened the elegiac feeling that he felt already existed by adding an obelisk commemorating the poet Virgil. On a low site beside a large pond he built a new ruin – a ruined priory, not to evoke a pleasing melancholy but, as his poem *The Ruined Abbey* confirms, in order to celebrate the breaking of Roman Catholic power and with it



FIG. 15.3 Kedleston Hall from the south-west, taken from within the park.

Source: Author's photo, 1985.

the overthrow of superstition.³⁶ Shenstone advocates variety and combination ('balance'): William Gilpin came to distill variety, contrast, and combination as desiderata in scenery in his *Observations on the River Wye*.³⁷ Shenstone and other landowners and designers could change natural scenes – views of random countryside – over which they had control in the very area in which Gilpin detected nature's weakness: he wrote, "Nature is always great in design. She is an admirable colourist also; and harmonizes tints with infinite variety and beauty: but she is seldom so correct in composition, as to produce an harmonious whole."³⁸ It is in this weak area of composition that the landscape garden could achieve great things by improving on nature.

An example of a landscape garden offering pleasing compositions while suggesting associations of ideas to the imagination and providing visitors with opportunities to practice composing their own views is still available at Kedleston Hall, in Derbyshire. The landscape there was designed by the architect Robert Adam in the period 1760–1780. As visitors walk around the further reaches of the park and come to the southwest corner, they can look back towards the house and see a view with a distinct character, based on ideas associated with the visible features (Fig. 15.3). Visible between the big beech trees is a broad valley with a river flowing slowly through it. In the middle of the valley stands a large building of gray stone in the classical architectural idiom with distinct associations of ancient Rome about it (the facade has been designed by Adam using the model of Rome's Arch



FIG. 15.4 Kedleston Hall from the south-west, taken from a position 30 yards to the east of Figure 15.3.

Source: Author's photo, 1985.

of Constantine). If a visitor then moves 30 yards to the right, and looks in the same direction, the view is completely transformed (Fig. 15.4). The classical building has disappeared. Apparently in its place a church tower, a bridge, and a house in the vernacular English idiom are visible: together they imply the existence of a village, and the associations are domestic, rural, and native. So variety of scenes can be produced through visitors judiciously framing their views by using nearer trees to screen and mask more distant features.

Kedleston teeters on the brink of being a landscape that Gilpin and Payne Knight would have found insipid because of the gentleness of the topography in which it lies and the smoothness of the surfaces it features. For a clearly picturesque garden Scotney Castle, in Kent, can be advanced. Scotney Castle's picturesque lineage is impeccable, since it was designed by William Gilpin's nephew, William Sawrey Gilpin (1762–1843), who had made the aquatint illustrations to his uncle's *Observations on the River Wye* over half a century before. He designed Scotney in 1836, siting a new house uphill, preserving the old medieval castle on the River Bewl in the valley bottom, building a terrace and round viewing platform, and starting the intimate planting, perpetuated and augmented by later owners, between the platform and the castle (Fig. 15.5). The result is an complex combination of broken and tinted surfaces, variety and harmonization of hues of foliage and flowers, contrasts in forms (between, for example, the rounded tower of the



FIG. 15.5 Scotney Castle; view over the garden from the viewing bastion.
 Source: Author's photo, 1985.

castle and the horizontally spreading branches of the cedar of Lebanon across the river, and between the relatively level grass in the field below the tree and the confused masses of flowering shrubs in the quarry below the vantage-point). William Sawrey Gilpin derived his ideas from his uncle and from Uvedale Price. At Scotney he gives an impressive display of what can be achieved through the intelligent practical adaptation of what can otherwise occasionally seem, reading the elder Gilpin, Price, and Payne Knight, to be rather abstract principles.

Alongside the question of connections with the landscape garden, the picturesque has another gray area in its connection with contemporary painting. Earlier in this chapter I characterized as a tautology the idea of judging paintings as picturesque. Only discussion of a concrete example can illuminate a category of exception to this state of affairs. The example in question indeed demands to be seen in relation to picturesque principles: it is John Constable's *The Vale of Dedham* (1828), now in the National Gallery of Scotland in Edinburgh (Fig. 15.6).³⁹

In this painting Constable has created a part of southern England. That is to say, this view of the village of Dedham, in Essex, in which actual topography seems a paramount factor, takes its composition precisely from Claude Lorrain's *Landscape: Hagar and the Angel*, a painting (now in the National Gallery) owned at the time by the patron Sir George Beaumont and well known to Constable. This is the first level on which Constable's painting is picturesque. Here is the real parish of Dedham as if Claude Lorrain had designed it. The painting forms the



FIG. 15.6 John Constable: *The Vale of Dedham*, Scottish National Gallery, Purchased with the aid of The Cowan Smith Bequest and the Art Fund 1944.

Source: © National Gallery of Scotland.

topography of part of England in accordance with paradigms derived from the best landscape art. The painting is also picturesque in its subject matter. A gypsy camp occupies the center foreground with a red-clothed woman looking after a baby beside a fire. On the right there is that picturesque animal, a cow, and further off, a cottage. On the left, in the foreground, the stump of a tree still hangs on to life. A healthier-looking, less rugged tree occupies this space in the earlier painting of Constable's on which *The Vale of Dedham* is based.⁴⁰ The earlier painting shows no trace of a cow nor the gypsy camp. If this were the extent of the picturesque, however, *The Vale of Dedham* would be, in my view, only partially picturesque. The really interesting factor is the third way in which Constable has made his image picturesque. He has taken the picturesque into the body of

the painting. The picturesque favors the blending of tints and the spectacle of fractured surfaces and broken forms. These are characteristics of the application of paint in this painting. The cow only just emerges from the marks on the right of the canvas: the closer the view, the more ambiguity its representation seems to have: "it is equally patches of white among others, which, blending with the paint surface, lose representational distinctness."⁴¹ Only just cohering on the other side of the painting is the stump, Constable's depiction of it is so approximative, broad and rough, separated and terse. A blending and unifying application of white and yellow marks over much of the painting often seems to deny connection with elements being represented in the scene. The broken and fractured surface with broken and blended tints and hues all through it has accepted into the body of the paint a central picturesque phenomenon.

Materialist reductions of the picturesque to a "style," a "convention" or a "formula" distort the potential within this way of seeing.⁴² Reductions of it to a series of details, or getting too exercised at the spectacle of picturesque tourists contemplating gypsies, can lead us to diminish the picturesque and throw out the baby with the bathwater.

But what is the baby, exactly? For the eighteenth-century writers the goal is a delight in sensations of viewing and in historical and cultural association, in a mode as purely aesthetic as they can make it, abandoning moral concerns. John Ruskin, theorizing the picturesque nearly two generations after Gilpin, Price, and Payne Knight, attempts to create another baby. Inevitably, with such a lapse of time, the situation of the picturesque way of seeing in Ruskin's lifetime was different from that in the eighteenth century. In the years between Price and Payne Knight's essays and the first appearance of Ruskin's *Modern Painters* in 1843, the picturesque had received criticism and endured an ironic reaction. Discussions of "side-screens" and "distances" as technical terms in picturesque composition could provoke a reaction of "impatience"⁴³ affecting the picturesque as a whole. Sometimes criticism of the picturesque as an element in art and literature was expressed as a demand for greater naturalism. In tourist enjoyment of landscape the picturesque could sometimes be experienced as a cultural imposition that in fact restricted the responses visitors felt to the landscape they moved through.⁴⁴ A character in James Plumptre's *The Lakers* (1798) exclaims over Derwentwater, "How frigidly frozen! What illusions of vision!"⁴⁵ A more important array of nineteenth-century factors impinging on Ruskin's generation, however, was caused by the expansion of evangelicalism in religion (in which Ruskin was brought up), the emergence of utilitarianism in philosophy and political economy, and the rise of liberal and social-reform movements in thought. Perhaps the explosion of industrialization and the expansion of towns and cities between the 1790s and 1850 should also be added as a factor. In the most extreme examples, the picturesque was condemned for its appreciation of dilapidation in rural cottages in ways which implied that a taste for the picturesque had *caused* or at least *perpetuated* social inequality.⁴⁶ The pressure exerted by these forces meant that it became difficult to ignore the human dimension of landscape. Indeed, the pressures seem to

have demanded overt signs of acknowledgement of the injustices of poverty on the part of writers and artists.

In these changed circumstances, Ruskin adds a moralistic level to the human dimension that exists in the eighteenth-century picturesque. In *Modern Painters* he asserts that there are two types of love of the picturesque. One of them simply takes pleasure in surface roughness, finds dilapidation charming, likes variety in color and form, but does not develop any “comprehension of the pathos of character hidden beneath” the delightful surface.⁴⁷ We might judge that the amoral delights exemplified by William Gilpin are in question here. Although Ruskin argues strenuously that this appreciation of the “surface picturesque” involves narrower sympathies than a second, more holistic view (which we will examine shortly), he states that it is not without considerable value. The traveler possessed by this type of love for the surface picturesque is “not only innocent, but even respectable and admirable, compared with the person who has *no* pleasure in sights of this kind.” On a moral level, this type of superficial picturesque appreciation “will never really or seriously interfere with practical benevolence; on the contrary, it will constantly lead, if associated with other benevolent principles, to a truer sympathy with the poor, and better understanding of the right ways of helping them.” And on an aesthetic level,

it is the most important element of character, not directly moral, which can be cultivated in youth; since it is mainly for the want of this feeling that we destroy so many ancient monuments, in order to erect “handsome” streets and shops instead, which might just as well have been erected elsewhere, and whose effect on our minds, so far as they have any, is to increase every disposition to frivolity, expense, and display.⁴⁸

We notice here that the aesthetic level impinges on the character of a civilization, the depravation of taste, and the moral character of a nation: all these problems, which as they manifest themselves in the specific imagery Ruskin gives them are classic preoccupations of the nineteenth century, could be influenced for good by a vigorous love even of the surface picturesque.

Ruskin’s wholehearted admiration, however, is reserved for a second more holistic form of appreciation of picturesqueness, the “higher picturesque.” This he exemplifies in the tower of the church in the French port of Calais:

The large neglect, the noble unsightliness of it; the record of its years written so visibly, yet without sign of weakness of decay; its stern wasteness and gloom, eaten away by the Channel winds, and overgrown with the bitter sea grasses; its slates and tiles all shaken and rent, and yet not falling; its desert of brick work full of bolts, and holes, and ugly fissures, and yet strong, like a bare brown rock; ... useful still, going through its own daily work, – as some old fisherman beaten grey by storm, yet drawing his daily nets: so it stands, with no complaint about its past youth, in blanced and meagre massiveness and serviceableness, gathering human souls under it; the sound of its bells for prayer still rolling through its rents.⁴⁹

In our own time of the twenty-first century we cannot share Ruskin's enthusiasm for the overtly sentimental image of the "old fisherman" that Ruskin introduces here, since we feel that it skews the aesthetic appreciation in the direction of an unnecessary anthropomorphism of a patronizing kind. However, Ruskin goes on to abstract his anthropomorphism and situate the human sympathies he feels on a more acceptable level when he admits that there is something unspeakable in his affection for this old tower:

I cannot tell the half of the strange pleasures and thoughts that come about me at the sight of that old tower; for ... it is the epitome of all that makes the Continent of Europe interesting, as opposed to new countries; and, above all, it completely expresses that agedness in the midst of active life which binds the old and the new into harmony ... in its largeness, in its permitted evidence of slow decline, in its poverty, in its absence of all pretence, of all show and care for outside aspect, that Calais tower has an infinite of symbolism in it, all the more striking because usually seen in contrast with English scenes expressive of feelings the exact reverse of these.⁵⁰

What Ruskin objects to in English culture is the neat and tidy, the small-scale, the housemaid's trimness, as well as the complete triumph of commercial values. "Everything being done that vulgar minds can conceive as wanting to be done; the spirit of well-principled housemaids everywhere, exerting itself for perpetual propriety and renovation, so that nothing is old, but only 'old-fashioned'." Ruskin abominates the tendencies of the culture to banish the picturesque, out of sight and out of mind: a culture that cannot abide to look at gypsies: a person who "has *no* pleasure in sights of this kind, but only in fair facades, trim gardens, and park palings, and who would thrust all poverty and misery out of his way, collecting it into back alleys, or sweeping it finally out of the world."⁵¹ For Ruskin the continental picturesque is part of experience in its largest and most generous sense; picturesque objects and buildings making the past present:

Abroad, a building of the of the eighth or tenth century stands ruinous in the open street; the children play round it, the peasants heap corn in it, the buildings of yesterday nestle about it, and fit their new stones into its rents, and tremble in sympathy as it trembles. No one wonders at it ... we feel the ancient world to be a real thing, and one with the new: antiquity is no dream; it is rather the children who are playing about the old stones that are the dream. Whereas [in England] we have ... a past which peasant and citizen can no more conceive; all equally far away; Queen Elizabeth as old as Queen Boadicea, and both incredible. At Verona we look out of Can Grande's window to his tomb; and if he does not stand beside us, we feel only that he is in the grave instead of the chamber, – not that he is old, but that he might have been beside us last night. But in England the dead are dead to purpose. One cannot believe they ever were alive.⁵²

Ruskin's connective "higher picturesque" evokes human sympathies and maintains what might be termed a spiritual element in daily life.

Encouraged by his view, we might ponder larger ideological and political questions that, but for Ruskin, would lurk very much off-stage from the present discussion. They can at least be indicated here as a starting point for thought. What are the implications of inducing ourselves to admire and value an aesthetic based on uniformity and sleek smoothness, as opposed to one based on variety, roughness, and raggedness?⁵³ Do we really want to inhabit a society in which the uniform, the slick, and the smooth are celebrated, while the varied, the ragged, and the rough are rejected?

Pursuing a holistic view of the picturesque, what can be said about it? That the picturesque is a fundamentally irrational way of perceiving the world, which, partly because it has been made the subject of a series of prose explanations, tries to masquerade as rationality. That it is also a way of seeing that emphasizes sheer enjoyment of landscape, without being trameled by mundane questions about profitability, exploitation, or the utilitarian requirements of human life. It is opportunistic enjoyment that the picturesque proposes. Travelers must be equipped with the necessary resources to make the fullest use of opportunities that might come their way, whether these resources include a classical education in the poetry of Virgil and Theocritus, the possession of a Claude glass in which to view the landscape, a map of the “stations” established as the best vantage points over the Lake District, or not. Indeed, the best resources are far less material than these: they include a free imagination, a broad, fair, and well-stocked mind, and lively feelings, especially for nature and art.

At the same time, the picturesque keeps open considerable access to human sympathies. We may conclude that it can be a conduit for strong feelings about the past; the present; the place of art in life; the contest between nature and art; the place of the past in the present; the transitory character of human life and art; and the irresistible action of nature as a shaping force in life. There is little or no mention of the Christian deity in picturesque discourse. Given that Gilpin was a Church of England vicar, and that, together with Price and Payne Knight, he was born in the age of deism (which seems to be lurking just beyond the margins of Price’s texts), and that Ruskin was brought up religious, this is a surprising fact. The purposely non-religious essays of picturesque theorists mask profound spiritual questions approached only very obliquely.

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It is worth adding a brief coda to this chapter; one that reminds us of the continuing importance of the picturesque way of seeing in late twentieth-century and contemporary art and design. That the picturesque has had an enormous effect on the decorative arts and fashion cannot be denied.⁵⁴ What has hitherto been more debatable, however, is its status as one of the cornerstones of modernism in art. Recently John Dixon Hunt has summarized the situation with respect at least to the modern practices of sculpture, land art, and landscape architecture by considering the evidence provided by four seminal or representative essays.⁵⁵

Hunt sees “the creative encounters between terrain – the lie of the land – and the moving spectator” as central to contemporary experience of land art and landscape architecture.⁵⁶ Indeed Rievaulx Terrace, producing 12 varied, sometimes contrasting views from the terrace as the visitor strolls along, provides an outstanding and memorable example of this. As Yves-Alain Bois put it, “deambulatory space and peripatetic vision” are “the very heart of the experience of the picturesque.”⁵⁷ A careful reading of Arthur Young’s account of Rievaulx shows him to be extremely attentive to these possibilities. By shifting “its focus from the design process itself to the reception by a visitor of a designed site (or even an un-designed and so imaginary one)” the picturesque emancipated viewers “to explore, understand and articulate their environment.”⁵⁸ This principle is generally accepted as fundamental in modern landscape design, and Hunt’s discussion illuminates lines of thought and artistic practices while embracing important sites such as Central Park, New York (1850s); the Parc des Buttes – Chaumont, Paris (1867); Parc de la Villette, Paris (1980s); Barcelona Pavilion (1929) as well as the artists and designers Robert Smithson, Richard Serra, Bernard Tschumi, Mies van der Rohe, Alphonse Alphand, and F. L. Olmsted. Hunt makes a convincing case that in the picturesque are “the deep roots of certain modernist practices:” part of the bedrock on which modernism is constructed.⁵⁹

Notes

- 1 Ruskin, J. ([1849] 1994) *Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849), quoted in Andrews, M. *The Picturesque: Literary Sources and Documents* 3 vols, Robertsbridge: Helm Information Ltd, III, 342.
- 2 Copley, S. and Garside, P. (1993) *The Politics of the Picturesque: Literature, Landscape and Aesthetics since 1770*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1; Ross, S. (1998) “Picturesque” in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. This was a complaint at the time: Price, U. (1810) *Essays on the Picturesque, as Compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful; and, on the Use of Studying Pictures, for the Purpose of Improving Real Landscape*, London, 3 vols, I, 37 “There are few words, whose meaning has been less accurately determined than that of the word picturesque.” (first published 1794).
- 3 Payne Knight, R. (1805) *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste*, Part II, Chapter 2.
- 4 Gilpin, W. ([1782] 2005) *Observations on the River Wye, and Several Parts of South Wales, &c. relative chiefly to Picturesque Beauty: Made in the Summer of the year 1770*, London, 1782: republished London, Pallas Athene, 2005, Section 1, 22.
- 5 For a summary of current moralistic objections to the picturesque, see Thompson, I. (2006) “The picturesque as pejorative,” *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes*, 26, 3, 237–248.
- 6 Gilpin ([1782] 2005), 20.
- 7 I have, for example, found it used in that arbiter of popular taste in the USA, “TV Guide,” and as the title of “The newsletter of the Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.”

- 8 John Constable writing in 1821, quoted by Bermingham, A. (1987) "Reading Constable," *Art History*, 10, 1, 38–58, 50.
- 9 Price (1810), I, 116–122.
- 10 Price (1810), I, 122.
- 11 Among the most cogent is Bell Scott, W. "Terms in art," in Andrews, M. (1994) *The Picturesque: Literary Sources and Documents* 3 vols, Robertsbridge: Helm Information Ltd, III, 336–340.
- 12 Ruskin, J. ([1856] 1994) "Of the Turnerian picturesque," *Modern Painters*, Vol 4 in Andrews, M. (1994) *The Picturesque: Literary Sources and Documents* 3 vols, Robertsbridge: Helm Information Ltd, III, 348–359.
- 13 Evans, S. (2004) *Stopping Places: A Gypsy History of South London and Kent*, Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press.
- 14 Bermingham, A. (1986) *Landscape and Ideology: the English Rustic Tradition, 1740–1860*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, esp. 74–75; Andrews (1994), Introduction, I, 22–26.
- 15 Matless, D. (1998) *Landscape and Englishness*, London: Reaktion Books, 175.
- 16 Calder, A. (1971) *The People's War: Britain 1939–45*, 2nd edn, St. Albans: Granada Publishing, 492–493.
- 17 Andrews (1989) *The Search for the Picturesque: Landscape Aesthetics and Tourism in Britain, 1760–1800*, Aldershot: Scholar Press; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press contains an excellent discussion of Gilpin.
- 18 Payne Knight (1805), Part II, Chapter 2.
- 19 This is emphasized in Andrews (1989), 3–23.
- 20 This type of allegation is repeatedly made by G. H. R. Tillotson, in his attacks on William Hodges and the works that artist made in India. For a discussion see Charlesworth, M. (2007) "The picturesque, William Hodges, photographs, and some problems in recent interpretation of images of India," *Word & Image*, 23, 3, 376–380.
- 21 *A Series of Views of the Abbeys and Castles in Yorkshire, Drawn and Engraved by W. Westall A.R.A. and F. Mackenzie with Historical and Descriptive Accounts by Thomas Dunham Whitaker* (London, 1820). Despite the title, the only building shown is Rievaulx Abbey.
- 22 All these quotations from *A Series of Views*, 15.
- 23 Austen, J. ([1818] 1972) *Northanger Abbey*, London, 1818: Harmondsworth: Penguin English Library, 1972), chapter 14, 125.
- 24 Young, A. (1771) *A Six Months' Tour in the North of England*, 2nd edition, 4 vols, London, II, 83.
- 25 Young (1771), II, 85.
- 26 Price (1810), II, 264.
- 27 Shenstone, W. (1773) *The Works in Verse and Prose*, 4th edition, 2 vols, II, 60–64, 344–349.
- 28 For Jacobitism, see in particular Cruikshanks, E. (ed.) (1982) *Ideology and Conspiracy: Aspects of Jacobitism, 1689–1759*, Edinburgh: John Donald, and Monod, P. (1989) *Jacobitism and the English People 1688–1788*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 29 T. D. Whitaker, Westall's collaborator, wrote an account of the 1745 rebellion in Latin: *De Motu per Britanniam Civico Annis 1745 et 1746* (1809).
- 30 For a critical view of this and a series of pertinent primary sources, see Charlesworth, M. (2002) *The Gothic Revival*, 3 vols, Robertsbridge: Helm Information Ltd, esp. vol. I.

- 30 The phrase “synecdochic assimilation” comes from Bann, S. (1984) *The Clothing of Clio: a Study of the Representation of History in Nineteenth-Century Britain and France*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 100.
- 31 Gilpin ([1782] 2005), 40–43.
- 32 For example, Dixon Hunt, J. (2002) *The Picturesque Garden in Europe*, London: Thames & Hudson.
- 33 As theorized by William Hogarth, Edmund Burke, and in William Mason’s *The English Garden* (1772–1781). See Charlesworth, M. (1993) *The English Garden: Literary Sources and Documents*, 3 vols, Robertsbridge: Helm Information Ltd.
- 34 William Shenstone, in Charlesworth (1993), II, 169–171.
- 35 Shenstone’s own inscriptions are collected and printed in Dodsley, R. (1764) “A description of the Leasowes” in Shenstone, *The Works*, II, reprinted in Charlesworth (1993), II, 204–218. At least two of Shenstone’s inscriptions were re-used by the Marquis de Girardin (1735–1808) in his landscape garden at Ermenonville, in France. The most skilled practitioner of this kind of garden design in the twentieth century was Ian Hamilton Finlay, who had developed considerable abilities as a poet before becoming a designer of landscape gardens. His work is in Abrioux, Y. (1985) *Ian Hamilton Finlay: a Visual Primer*, London: Reaktion.
- 36 For these and all Shenstone’s other features, see Dodsley (1764).
- 37 Gilpin ([1782] 2005), 25–30.
- 38 Gilpin ([1782] 2005), 31.
- 39 See Rosenthal, M. (1983) *Constable: the Painter and his Landscape*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 186–190 for a very useful discussion of this painting.
- 40 Rosenthal (1983), 33.
- 41 Rosenthal (1983), 189.
- 42 All of these words are applied to the picturesque by Tillotson, G. H. R. (2000) *The Artificial Empire: the Indian Landscapes of William Hodges*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 102, 45, 36. Tillotson’s view of the picturesque is extremely limited in usefulness because of its unremitting hostility.
- 43 Andrews (1989), 33–37.
- 44 Andrews (1989), 237–239.
- 45 Plumptre, J. (1798) *The Lakers: a Comic Opera in Three Acts*, London, 19. Another famous satire of taste for the picturesque is William Combe’s (1809) *A Tour of Doctor Syntax in Search of the Picturesque*, London. But there were many.
- 46 Two of the more famous critics of the picturesque along these lines were the novelists Charles Dickens, in *The Chimes* (1844) and *Pictures from Italy* (1846); and George Eliot, in *Middlemarch* (1872). The latter novel is set in the year 1832, and in it chapter 39 sets out the problem of “Dagley’s cottage ... *Freeman’s End*.” See 422–433 of the Penguin edition of the novel (1965).
- 47 Ruskin, *Modern Painters* Vol. 4 (1856), in Andrews (1994), III, 352.
- 48 Ruskin, in Andrews (1994), III, 356,
- 49 Ruskin, in Andrews (1994), III, 350.
- 50 Ruskin, in Andrews (1994), III, 350–351.
- 51 Ruskin, in Andrews (1994), III, 356.
- 52 Ruskin, in Andrews (1994), III, 351.
- 53 For a historical discussion of related questions, see Robinson, S. K. (1991) *Inquiry into the Picturesque*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

- 54 Ann Bermingham's essay, "The picturesque and ready-to-wear femininity," in Copley and Garside, *The Politics of the Picturesque*, 81–119, discusses one aspect of this. The essay begins with the example of the "Picturesque" style of womanhood in a classification used by a Los Angeles department store in the 1920s.
- 55 The essays are: Smithson, R. (1973) "Frederick Law Olmsted and the dialectical landscape," *Artforum*, Feb and in J. Flam (ed.) (1996) *Robert Smithson: the Collected Writings*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 157–171; Bois, Y.-A. (1984) "A picturesque stroll around Clara-Clara," *October*, 29, 32–62; Constant, C. (1990) "The Barcelona Pavilion as landscape garden: modernity and the picturesque," *AAFiles*, 20, 46–52; Meyer, E. K. (1991) 'The public park as avant-garde (landscape) architecture', *Landscape Journal*, 10, 16–26.
- 56 Dixon Hunt, J. (2006) "'The question opened by the picturesque'. Fragments and fractures in picturesque criticism and historiography," in B. Bergdoll and W. Oechslin (eds) *Fragments Architecture and the Unfinished: Essays Presented to Robin Middleton*, New York: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 267–274. Quotation 267.
- 57 Bois quoted by Hunt (2006), 267.
- 58 Hunt (2006), 271, 273.
- 59 Quotation, Hunt (2006), 271.

Landscape into Art

Painting and Place-Making in England, c.1760–1830

Tom Williamson

Introduction

This short essay examines two very large topics: the development of the landscape park and its adoption, in the half century or so after 1760, by the majority of country landowners as a setting for their homes; and the emergence, in the same period, of rural landscape painting as an accepted form of public art. The two phenomena have been related to contemporary patterns of social and landscape change by a number of eminent scholars, including John Barrell, Anne Bermingham, and Elizabeth Helsinger.¹ Their interpretations will not so much be challenged, as qualified, in the pages that follow. According to these and other writers, this was a period of increasing social tension in the countryside. Large-scale enclosure of open fields and commons, brought about through parliamentary enclosure acts, not only changed the face of the countryside but also the lives of those who lived and worked within it. A long line of social and economic historians, from the Hammonds to Jeanette Neason, have described how laborers and small farmers lost their rights to exploit the commons, together with the various benefits (gleaning, fallow grazing) provided by the open fields. Any compensation they received in the form of an allotment of land from the enclosure commissioners was seldom equal in value to what they had lost, and the costs involved – in terms of legal bills and fencing – ensured that many were obliged to sell their properties almost immediately to richer neighbors. Enclosure was, moreover, part and parcel of a wider shift in attitudes to landed property, which in the course of the eighteenth century came to be regarded primarily in financial terms, as a source of income and a profitable investment.²



FIG. 16.1 John Constable: *Wivenhoe Park*, Essex, oil on canvas, 561×1012 mm, 1816. Source: National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection, 1942.9.10. Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington.

That landscape painting should have emerged as an acceptable art form in this same period is no coincidence. The very structure of landscape paintings, as well as their subject matter, implied “the organization of power and property of which they formed a part.”³ Landscape paintings provided idealized views over enclosed ground, sometimes at least the actual property of the patron or customer, and the poor were increasingly relegated to marginal positions, their homes objects of picturesque detail; or, on occasions, presented in idealized form. For artists like Constable, in Barrell’s words, the “ideal of the close rural community has replaced the experience of it.”⁴ In origin, at least, landscape paintings represented commodified property, private space for private production, and their purchasers were men of property.

The development of the new landscape park as the fashionable setting for country houses has been interpreted in similar terms. Beginning in the middle decades of the eighteenth century, but at an increasing rate from the 1770s, country landowners removed the enclosed gardens, avenues, and other formal planting from the vicinity of their homes. Under the influence of Lancelot “Capability” Brown and his numerous “imitators,” the homes of the gentry came to stand, free of walls, “solitary and unconnected” in a casual, naturalistic landscape of turf and scattered trees, created at the expense of fields, roads, and settlements (Fig. 16.1).⁵ Not only did the landscape park serve to separate and isolate the landed rich from the local community. It had deeper, and more complex relationships with the wider changes in the countryside. In Anne Bermingham’s words:

As the real landscape began to look increasingly artificial, like a garden, the garden began to look increasingly natural, like the pre-enclosed landscape. Thus a natural landscape became the prerogative of the estate ... so that nature was a sign of property and property the sign of nature... By conflating nature with the fashionable taste of a new social order, it redefined the natural in terms of this order, and vice versa.⁶

Thus making vast yet arbitrary social inequalities appear natural and inevitable. Such parallels between the spread of enclosure, and the rise of the landscape park, have indeed a long history. As early as 1838 the great garden designer John Claudius Loudon argued that:

As the lands devoted to agriculture in England were, sooner than in any other country in Europe, generally enclosed with hedges and hedgerow trees, so the face of the country in England, sooner than in any other part of Europe, produced an appearance which bore a closer resemblance to country seats laid out in the geometrical style; and, for this reason, an attempt to imitate the irregularity of nature in laying out pleasure grounds was made in England ... sooner than in any other part of the world.⁷

Changes in the countryside – in the physical landscape, and in the character of social relations – are thus seen as key to understanding both landscape painting, and what Capability Brown aptly termed “place-making.” There is much truth in these arguments: but, as I shall argue here, new light can be shed on both phenomena by considering them in the context of the wider, and longer, development of the physical and social environment.

Production and Parkland

Although landscape painting as a recognized genre may only have originated in the second half of the eighteenth century, representations of the English landscape had been produced on some scale since at least the beginning of the previous century. Some were paintings or sketches; others were topographic prints or engravings. Although the latter in particular frequently took notable landmarks – especially ruins – and urban panoramas for their subject matter, large numbers of both types of illustration were concerned with country houses. In many cases these were pictured from an impossible aerial viewpoint (as in the well-known engravings produced by Kip and Knyff at the start of the eighteenth century) for only from the air could the formal geometry of power – the axes of design that linked the architecture of the country house, the layout of its gardens, and the wider estate landscape – be fully appreciated. Less often noticed by modern observers is the way in which, as well as showing the gardens, most such representations depict a range of productive or semi-productive structures and facilities clustered around the mansion. In addition to extensive kitchen

gardens, nut grounds and orchards most great houses in the seventeenth century had barns, farmyards, fish ponds and dovecotes in close proximity.⁸ Moreover, even the ostensibly aesthetic areas around the country house usually had a productive aspect. Documentary sources make it clear that ornamental “basons” and canals were well stocked with fish, while fruit trees were invariably espaliered against the walls of even the grandest garden, and often planted in the ornamental woods or “wildernesses” that were such a feature of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century designs.⁹ The functional and the aesthetic everywhere interpenetrated each other: even the kitchen grounds and the ornamental garden were not necessarily distinct. Roger North noted in his *Cursory Thoughts of Building* that he:

Ever had a dislike for evesdropping or spouting of water from the roof about an house, for it hinders planting of fruit, sweets, or salads neer the walls.¹⁰

True, William Lawson in 1617 had argued that gardens should be compartmentalized, with “gardens for flowers” kept separate and distinct from the kitchen garden, so that the appreciation of the flowers would not be spoilt by the smell of onions, but the fact that he urged this shows that such mixtures were not unusual: and even he did not envisage a “perfect distinction.”¹¹

The tradition of displaying productive features proudly and prominently beside great houses had medieval origins. Not only did this demonstrate the superior resources and superior diet enjoyed by the owner, many of these things were in themselves symbols of lordly status. While the keeping of fish ponds had long been the preserve of the landed elite simply by dint of cost, dovecotes were actually a manorial privilege – it was illegal for anyone else to build them. In the words of one seventeenth-century observer, “To erect a dove house or dovecote is the right onely and badge of a lordship or signorye.”¹²

Beauty and utility were thus inextricably intermingled around the homes of the wealthy, and many of these features had, in addition, a recreational aspect. Ponds might be aesthetically appealing, a source of fish and a symbol of status, but they also provided fun. As Roger North’s *Discourse of Fish and Fish Ponds*, published as late as 1713, put it:

Young people love angling extremely: then there is the boat, which gives pleasure enough in summer, frequent fishing with nets, the very making of nets, seeing the waters, much discussion of them, and the fish, especially upon your great sweeps, and the strange surprises which that will happen in numbers and bigness.¹³

Even rabbit warrens might form important features of these landscapes, and on occasion the special mounds in which the rabbits were kept – “buries” or “berries” to contemporaries, “pillow mounds” to modern archaeologists – were built higher than necessary and carefully placed on the false crest of rising ground overlooking the mansion so that they could be rendered more visible to observers.¹⁴

Designed landscapes like these carried a clear message. The landowner was fully involved in the productive life of the countryside, was at home in his “country.” He did many of the things that his more lowly neighbors did, but on a larger, grander scale. He was a member of their world: but at the same time he and his family ate more food, more varied food, and more exotic food than they. To some extent things were beginning to change by the later seventeenth century. As early as Sir Thomas Hanmer’s *Garden Book* of 1659 recommended that the kitchen garden should be located away from the house, and by the 1690s many of the greatest landowners were beginning to effect a greater separation of the productive and the ornamental in the vicinity of their homes.¹⁵ Nevertheless, even the most sophisticated gardens continued to have fish in their canals and fruit trees espaliered, in vast numbers, against their walls, and some of the greatest mansions in England still maintained a wealth of more obvious agrarian facilities, on full and public display, well into the eighteenth century. Chatsworth House in Derbyshire was rebuilt at great expense by the Dukes of Devonshire in the decades either side of 1700 and its grounds remodeled in lavish style. But as late as 1755 the kitchen gardens lay in full view of the main area of ornamental gardens, the extensive complex of canals and basins was still stocked with fish, a threshing barn and farmyard lay immediately to the north of the house and its eastern facade, a flamboyant exercise in the Baroque, looked out across a vast rabbit warren.¹⁶

At Chatsworth, as at other houses of similar status, a deer park also formed a prominent feature of the landscape. For in spite of what is implied in some discussions of the development of landscape design, parks were not in themselves new in the later eighteenth century. On the contrary: they had a long and complex history, a history that ensured they carried particular connotations of status. In early medieval times parks had been densely wooded venison farms and hunting grounds, usually located away from manor houses. Many contained a lodge, providing accommodation for the owner not merely while hunting but also when wishing to withdraw from the daily ritualized social life of the mansion, to keep “secret house” with a restricted company of companions. Parks were magical places – they were the last slices of wilderness in England, privatized, and for this reason were usually quite divorced from the mansion: the one created out of surviving fragments of woodland towards the fringes of a settlement’s territory, the other lying close to its heart. By the thirteenth century parks were among the only really “wild” landscapes left in England, areas in which the natural environment had been least modified by arable farming, or by the kind of intensive grazing that had created, and maintained, open commons, heaths, and moors. And they had become – with the deer that lived in them – the exclusive province of, and therefore the symbol *par excellence* of, the feudal elite.¹⁷

During the late Middle Ages the numbers of deer parks in England drastically declined. The economic dislocations of the fourteenth century placed considerable strains on demesne incomes, while rising wages and the decline of customary services ensured that maintenance costs spiralled. Parks were increasingly restricted to the richest families. But more importantly, they were now more closely associated

with high-status residences. As parks dwindled in numbers, those that remained were usually among the relatively few examples that had been located beside great houses; and, as the number of parks began to increase again in the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the new creations were, almost without exception, placed beside mansions. There were changes, too, in the appearance of parks, with the emergence for the first time of true “parkland.” Early medieval parks had been densely treed wood pastures, usually with relatively few open areas or “laundes.” But as parks were brought into close association with mansions they tended to become more open in appearance. The number of trees within them was reduced, for otherwise the house would have been hemmed in on one or more sides by woodland and, perhaps of greater importance, it would not have been possible to demonstrate the wealth of an owner who was able to put vast acres out of cultivation in this manner.¹⁸

For while early medieval parks had been created at the expense of – had been formed out of – wood pasture “waste,” most late-medieval and early post-medieval parks in contrast were made out of cultivated land, and made much use of existing hedgerow trees, copses, and so on. Already, designers of parkland were consulting, as their eighteenth-century successors were to do, the “genius of the place.” During the seventeenth century, the layout of vistas within parkland came to be more carefully considered. More importantly – and with greater significance for the future – from the later seventeenth century the park began to be wrapped around the mansion and its gardens, began in some cases to be the principal setting for the great house while, at some sites, the boundary between the park and the wider world was hardened with the planting, along the line of the perimeter fence or pale, of a thick belt of trees. And, in the last decades of the century – for a few brief decades, lasting into the early eighteenth century – the geometric design of the garden was extended out into the park in the form of avenues, although these were an intrusion into the park’s natural informality, rather than a radical disruption or displacement of it.

Long before the arrival of “Capability” Brown on the scene, in other words, the park was a designed landscape, with an immense pedigree, loaded with significance and meaning. We do not need to look to the writings of eighteenth-century theorists, or to the changes in the working landscape of eighteenth-century England wrought by parliamentary enclosure, to explain the park’s essential form, as an area of grass irregularly scattered with trees, and containing some clumps and blocks of woodland. It was a long-established element in the vocabulary of elite landscape design, which derived its significance from a long trajectory of accumulated meaning. Even the lakes which formed a feature of many eighteenth-century parks had their precursors in the large fish ponds that had characterized medieval and early-modern deer parks, and, indeed, were sometimes adapted from them.

The key change in the later eighteenth century was not the invention of the park as a landscape, but the removal from it of any geometric vistas and avenues and, more importantly, the wholesale destruction of walled gardens, courts and other features from the immediate vicinity of the house, so that the park became,

in effect, its sole setting. At the same time, sheep and cattle tended to replace deer as the main denizens of parkland – they were less destructive of young planting, and more easily kept within the park without expensive perimeter paling. Parks proliferated steadily, descending the social scale, so that they began to be laid out by local landowners, even by prosperous merchants and financiers living on the fringes of town. While a proportion of eighteenth-century parks – usually the larger ones – originated as late medieval or early post-medieval deer parks, the majority were entirely new creations, laid out at the expense of agricultural land.

The Social Meaning of the Landscape Park

Many garden historians, and many art historians, continue to interpret landscape design as an essentially autonomous practice, its development divorced from any wider social and economic context. The fashion for setting the house solely within the open irregular and naturalistic landscape of the park is thus often viewed as the logical conclusion of an inexorable progression of garden design from regularity to irregularity, which began in the early eighteenth century and was continued by men like Charles Bridgeman, William Kent, and finally Lancelot Brown; as a manifestation of a growing appreciation of nature and the natural, inspired in part by the enclosure and cultivation of most of the remaining wild landscapes in England; or in terms of particular political or philosophical ideas, with the landscape style representing, for example, the supposed freedom enjoyed by the British people after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, in contrast to the formal geometric styles of garden design associated with absolutist foreign monarchies.¹⁹ Yet it is also possible to read the development of the landscape park in terms of contemporary social change, and a number of writers, as we have seen, have done just that. Many have seen the park primarily as a landscape of exclusion: as a sign of the increasing segregation of rural landowners from local communities.²⁰ It is certainly true that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century parks were laid out in such a way that they afforded their owners enhanced privacy. Settlements were occasionally removed when they were created, roads and footpaths almost invariably closed or diverted, and perimeter belts obscured near views of the working landscape, and of the homes of those who labored within it. Parks thus represented islands of gentility, of polite exclusion, within the wider rural landscape.

Such an interpretation does not, however, help us explain the specific *style* of the landscape park, for this degree of privacy could have been obtained at the same time as formal planting and walled gardens were retained beside the mansion. More importantly, it is based on a model of eighteenth-century society that even a cursory knowledge of contemporary literature would indicate is simplistic. For late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century society was highly complex, and did not consist simply of two opposed groups, the landed rich and the landless poor. The development of designed landscapes, in other words, thus also needs to be understood in terms of the relationship between different

groups within the propertied class, and in particular in the context of a middle class expanding in numbers and affluence.

One useful way of examining the landscape park is in terms of the emergence of “polite society” in the middle decades of the eighteenth century. From the later seventeenth century the differences in status and lifestyle between the greatest landowners, and the broader group of the propertied comprising the local gentry and wealthy professionals, were being consciously played down. Social encounters – at country houses or, increasingly, at assemblies and similar gatherings – became more relaxed and informal in character, as emphasis was placed on easy affability, wit, conversation. The upper ranks of society began to coalesce into a single cultural group. Yet at the same time, with commercial and industrial expansion, there was increased upward social mobility; while with the steady proliferation of material goods associated with the “consumer revolution” many of the old markers of social distinction, in terms for example of dress, began to grow less distinct.²¹

Landscape parks can profitably be read in terms of the emergence of the “polite.” They provided privacy at a time when landowners had less and less in common with their immediate neighbors and wished to socialize only with those of similar, or greater, social status. But in addition, the very style of the landscape park helped to mark off the “polite” clearly both from the local farming community, and from middle-class neighbors. When the garden courts were removed from the vicinity of the house, so too were all the productive features and enclosures – many of which had been semi-ornamental in character – in which the gentry had once delighted, and which had symbolized their active involvement in the productive life of their estates – orchards, nut grounds, fish ponds, dovecotes, farmyards. Removal of productive clutter expressed a lack of involvement with the shared world of the agricultural community. At the same time, with the development of a more complex, commercial, consuming society – with a middle class growing in size and wealth and busy making elaborate gardens of their own – the new style prioritized the ancient symbol of the park, over elaborate gardens, as the main setting for the homes of the wealthy. Not only was the park an ancient symbol of aristocratic privilege. It also demanded the commodity which only the established landed elite possessed – land in abundance.²²

The Park: New Perspectives

The above account briefly summarizes an argument I have presented in detail elsewhere.²³ But in the light of more recent thought and research it perhaps requires some amendment. First, more emphasis could be given to the relationship between the architecture and planning of country houses and the evolution of their grounds in the second half of the eighteenth century. The development of less structured and formal forms of social interaction ensured that the old “formal” house plans of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, arranged round a series of *enfilades* and linear axes, were replaced by house with

more flowing circulation plans, which comprised suites of entertaining rooms forming a circuit in which a diverse range of activities – dancing, card games, conversation – could take place at the same time.²⁴ The serpentine, flowing lines of the landscape garden to some extent mirrored this development. With interior space no longer structured around formal, geometric vistas, people began to enjoy views toward and away from the mansion from a variety of angles, not only along axes that replicated, and continued, those inside it. And at the same time, the elegant, sweeping drives in the park, and walks in the pleasure grounds, provided additional contexts for “polite” social engagement.

But more importantly, we must be careful not to assume too simple a relationship – too direct an equivalence – between the traditional deer park, and the new parks of the eighteenth century. The one may have developed into the other, but not without significant changes. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century deer parks had been characterized by indigenous trees, often fairly densely planted and scattered individually across the more open areas of grassland. Eighteenth-century landscape parks – new, or created by adapting earlier parks – were often more open in character, made more use of distinct clumps of trees, and often featured a higher proportion of new, fast-growing species – especially conifers. In part these stylistic features were directly derived from the Italianate pleasure-grounds laid out – as three-dimensional versions of the paintings of Italian scenery by artists like Claude Lorraine – by William Kent in the 1730s, which were one of the important influences on the style of Brown and his fellow landscapers. But to some extent they reflected the fact that planting trees like larch and pine provided more rapid results for the owner, and designer. True, older trees, especially oaks, were incorporated from the previous landscape wherever possible, to provide a new park with a veneer of established respectability, and most landscape parks in England contain old trees, often outgrown pollards, which were retained from hedges grubbed out to provide the sweeping, uninterrupted prospects demanded by fashionable taste. In addition, many additional indigenous trees were planted when parks were created, both in plantations and as free-standing specimens. But for much of the more structural planting, especially of clumps and belts, new trees with rapid growth were also extensively used. Too great an emphasis on planting of this kind could invite criticism on predictable, class lines: Repton thus lamented the clumps of fir trees at Henham in Suffolk, “only applicable to the recent Villa, and beneath the dignity of an Ancient inheritance.”²⁵ But there is no doubt that eighteenth-century parks were, on the whole, more varied in their planting, and generally placed more emphasis on both clumps, and the open spaces of turf between them, than the parks created in earlier periods. They were more elegant, more overtly designed spaces, partaking as much of the style of early and mid-century gardens and pleasure grounds as that of deer parks in the traditional sense, of hunting grounds and venison farms.

This observation – that landscape parks were more manicured in appearance than the traditional parks associated with large mansions – serves to concentrate our attention on the cultural context of later eighteenth-century landscape design.

This is particularly the case as, under the influence of Humphry Repton (whose career spanned the period 1788–1816), parkland became still more studied, more minutely designed, in part at least because more and more diminutive examples – “lawns” rather than “parks,” in contemporary terms – appeared in the landscape. The landscape park may have been a symbol and sign of the “polite,” and of the emergence of a society that was horizontally stratified rather than vertically integrated, but we should not read it entirely in terms of *rural* social relations. Although the landscape style was self-consciously rural – in its ostentatious rejection of structured gardens in particular – the “polite” were, in an important sense, not really a rural class. While many landowners derived their income primarily from agricultural rents, equally numerous were those whose wealth stemmed principally from active investment in colonial enterprises, industry, and commerce. Moreover, rural landowners were not a closed class, and many of those who lived in a mansion, surrounded by a fashionable landscape park, had made their money in industry or commerce. Above all, in cultural terms the later eighteenth-century elite was unquestionably more urban than rural in character. Not only Bath and London, but most major towns, were the centers of their social universe, with shops, public spaces, assemblies, and other opportunities for fashionable consumption and display. Even in the 1720s, Daniel Defoe could describe a town like Bury St Edmunds – not a very large population center – as “the *Montpelier* of Suffolk ... it being thronged with Gentry, People of Fashion, and the most polite conversation.”²⁶ From the later seventeenth century many large, elegant houses were erected and the bigger towns and cities began to exhibit a measure of social zoning, with areas suitable for the homes of the “polite” contrasting with areas of increasing poverty. Large town houses might resemble – more than we notice today, because of their settings – small country houses. But more important in the present context is the transformation experienced by the hinterlands of England’s larger towns and cities in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Improvements in communications with, in particular, the steady extension of the turnpike system in the second half of the eighteenth century ensured that most major population centers could be reached with relative ease from the surrounding countryside.²⁷ Those hinterlands themselves began to change: people who did not wish to reside within towns were usually keen to live close to them, and while larger landowners, dwelling in vast mansions at the centre of extensive landed estates, often remained on their ancestral acres, the newly rich, or those whose possessions included land close to a town, often chose to live within easy distance of urban attractions. As a consequence, most major towns and cities were, by the early nineteenth century, surrounded by a penumbra of country houses and parks, often of small or medium size.²⁸ Such proximity not only provided easy access to the attractions and facilities that urban centers had to offer. It also allowed those with interests in town – commercial or industrial – to keep a ready eye on business.

This penumbra of parks and mansions was most marked, needless to say, in the case of the capital. Already, by the seventeenth century, it had become fashionable

for wealthy people living in London to acquire a residence within an easy ride or drive of that place. Not only fashion and society, and commercial activity, kept them so anchored: so too did political activities – London was where all the important things happened, and where the main decisions affecting national life were made. Directors of city banks, wealthy merchants, and retired army officers all moved *en masse* into counties like Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire, and Surrey in the course of the eighteenth century. This had a number of important consequences for the development of the rural landscape. In particular, competition for properties forced up land prices and tended to preclude the development of very large estates. Arthur Young commented in 1804 that “Property in Hertfordshire is much divided: the vicinity of the capital; the goodness of the air and roads; and the beauty of the country” had led “great numbers of wealthy persons to purchase land for villas.”²⁹ “Villa” was a term with a range of meanings in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries but was often used (as here) for a reasonably sized country residence without a significant landed estate attached, and many “country seats” in the vicinity of the capital possessed no more than a few acres of agricultural land, although they usually had some kind of “park.” Where the countryside in the vicinity of the metropolis was particularly appealing to contemporary taste, and/or where transport links to London were particularly good, the area under parkland might, by the early decades of the nineteenth century, actually approach that devoted to the real business of agriculture. Humphry Repton thus commented with approval on the near-continuous belt of estates owned by the various members of the Cowper family along the Mimram valley between Hertford and Welwyn (Panshanger, Cole Green, Tewin Water, and Digswell) and considered that their “united woods and lawns will by extending thro’ the whole valley enrich the general face of the country.”³⁰ In a sense, areas like this were already becoming suburbanized, albeit on a grand scale.

Many of the people who lived in fashionable late eighteenth-century mansions, in other words, were far more divorced from the real, practical business of agriculture than the people who had dominated rural society half a century earlier, and the landscape laid out around them reflected and expressed this. It was not merely a desire to signal their difference from the farmers and other agricultural producers in the surrounding countryside that encouraged the gentry to clear away the barns, yards, and orchards from the immediate vicinity of their homes. It was also because such things had no interest to them and seemed offensive, uncouth, dirty. It is true that even in the 1770s there remained substantial landowners in more remote areas of the country who, like James Coldham of Anmer in Norfolk, were happy to record in their diaries the number of young pigs which had been born on their home farm that year: the likes of Squire Weston disappeared slowly. But such individuals were, by the end of the century, becoming unusual. Great landowners might embrace a fashionable interest in estate management, agricultural improvement, and enclosure, but usually in a hands-off way: farming was something that took place at one remove, or more, from the mansion. In this sense, the landscape park – for all its homage to “nature” – expressed a

lifestyle increasingly divorced from real rural life. The fashion among the wealthy for surrounding their mansions with a “natural” landscape thus correlates, pretty closely, with their steady absorption into a mainly urban culture.

Enclosure and its Representation

When we turn from the character of designed landscapes in the later eighteenth century, to representations of the working “vernacular” countryside, similar themes are apparent. Many historians, as we have seen, have emphasized the importance of enclosure in this period, and have viewed representations of the countryside mainly in terms of changes in rural social relations. But enclosure, like the park, was not entirely new: and the market for landscape paintings lay in the same urban or semi-urban world in which the landscape park was developing. The relationship between the real appearance of the countryside, and its depiction by the artist, was complex and uncertain, structured by and refracted through urban as much as rural concerns.

I shall begin with the first of these issues – the chronology of enclosure – because it is something frequently misunderstood, or at least oversimplified, by art historians. Enclosure is the process by which areas of common grazing land and open fields (in which the properties of proprietors were intermixed in small unfenced strips, and farmed subject to some measure of communal regulation) were replaced by small walled or hedged closes in individual occupancy. In this sense enclosure, like the poor, has always been with us. Some districts had never had much in the way of open arable, and had lost most of their common grazing land at a very early date. At a reasonable estimate, around a third of England already lay in walled or hedged fields by the end of the Middle Ages. The precise chronology with which the rest was enclosed remains a matter for some debate, but the famous and well-documented parliamentary enclosures of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries accounted for no more than 20–23% of the land area of the country – historians argue over the precise proportion – and while some land was enclosed in this period by other means it is hard to believe that more than 30% of England still lay in open fields, and commons, in c.1760.³¹ Such land was, moreover, not evenly distributed. The majority of remaining open fields could be found in the Midlands, especially in Northamptonshire, Leicestershire, and north Buckinghamshire. In contrast, open fields were rare in south eastern England, across the southern parts of East Anglia, and in the West Country. Moreover, in all districts the core areas of most landed estates were enclosed at an early date, thus reducing the kind of visual contrast emphasized by Bermingham and Loudon as important in the development of the landscape park.

It is, in fact, curious that students of landscape paintings should have concentrated so much on their relationship with enclosure, given that the scenes normally chosen as subjects by late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century artists were characterized by ancient rather than recently established hedges and fields. Gainsborough,

Constable, the members of the Norwich School, all concentrated their attention on landscapes that had been hedged, and in private occupancy, since the later Middle Ages. Landscapes of recent enclosure could be found in East Anglia, the region in which these artists principally operated: but no serious artist bothered to paint them. The fields and hedges depicted by these men, moreover – with their irregular form, high spreading undergrowth and gnarled timber – *appear* for all the world like well-established features of the landscape, not recent creations by the enclosure commissioners.

This rejection of recently enclosed landscapes is, however, rather less striking than the attitude of later eighteenth- and nineteenth-century artists to areas that remained *unenclosed*, especially open fields. For while, by 1760, such land may have accounted for only a relatively small area of the country, it did exist, and as already noted could be locally dominant. The majority of artists simply shunned such scenes. Lacking hedges, trees, and woods – resembling extensive areas of featureless crops or, in the winter, boundless prospects of mud – they could not be ordered into the familiar “three distances” of classical composition and, at a later date, lacked any of the details and associations that might have appealed to picturesque taste. Open fields were generally held to epitomize the very worst of unimproved, backward agriculture, and representations of them were unlikely to be viewed with favor by customers or patrons. Thomas Batchellor, author of the *General View of the Agriculture of Bedfordshire* of 1808, included a poem that contrasted the pre- and post-enclosure landscape of the county:

Yet have I seen, nor long elapsed the day,
When yon rich vale in rude disorder lay:
Each scanty farm spread over many a mile,
The fences few, ill-cultur'd half the soil;
Seen rushy slips contiguous roods divide
Mid worthless commons boundless stretching wide.³²

Of course, there are some visual representations of open fields, especially from the first half of the eighteenth century, as Ian Waites has recently emphasized.³³ Upper class taste was not some uniform, monolithic thing, and some patrons and purchasers, especially of topographic engravings, were keen to see these features of the local landscape clearly portrayed. The prospects of English towns published by Samuel and Nathaniel Buck, for example, feature many examples. Open arable was also sometimes depicted in views of country houses. A painting of Averham Park in Nottinghamshire, for example, made by an unknown artist around 1720, shows the house set in its park – created at least in part at the expense of open-field arable, to judge from the old plough-ridges clearly fossilized beneath the turf – while in the immediate foreground surviving strips in Averham’s open fields are visible. Other notable examples include the numerous topographical sketches by Peter Tillemans of the Northamptonshire countryside and the prospects of Cambridgeshire villages produced in the 1820s by Richard Relhan, classical

scholar, noted botanist, and fellow of Kings College, Cambridge.³⁴ Depictions of open fields certainly exist: but they are very few in number compared to those of enclosed countryside.

Commons, however – open areas used primarily for communal grazing, but also to provide fuel and other household resources for local communities – were more frequently represented by landscape painters, in spite of the fact that most rural purchasers or patrons would have associated them with idleness, lawlessness, and backward agriculture. Batchellor described one Bedfordshire example as a:

Dull scene! Where Nature, with herself at strife
Teemed but with useless vegetable life³⁵

Constable's famous oil sketch *Spring Ploughing*, reproduced as a mezzotint in 1830 by David Lucas, shows East Bergholt Common in Suffolk, and has as one of its alternative names *Mill on a Common*. But it shows the common under the plough, in the process of being converted to arable land. The sketch was probably made in 1817, the year after the common was enclosed by parliamentary act: the mill in the distance was one of several owned by Constable's father.³⁶ Many commons in both lowland England – heaths, fens and greens – and in the uplands – moors and fells – disappeared as a consequence of a great wave of enclosure acts passed during the Napoleonic Wars, when grain prices were particularly high and farmers and landowners in an optimistic mood.

The appearance of commons was generally at variance with contemporary stereotypes of rural beauty – most for example had long been denuded of significant quantities of timber. Nevertheless, by the early nineteenth century some could appeal to the growing taste for the picturesque. Heaths in particular were often wild, windswept places, and the occasional ancient pollard which had somehow survived centuries of intensive exploitation could provide a suitably picturesque detail. More importantly, while rural landowners and farmers seem to have regarded commons with disdain, the attitudes of polite town-dwellers were perhaps more ambivalent. Commons survived in some numbers in the vicinity of the larger towns, where they could be regarded as a potential nuisance – they provided places for gypsy camps, illegal fights, and horse races, for dumping rubbish and for digging sand, clay and gravel. But whatever the problems of policing and social control that such places might have presented, they also served as locations for promenade and fashionable excursion. Constable painted Hampstead Heath on a number of occasions; members of the Norwich School like John Crome were particularly keen on Sheringham Common, and on Mousehold Heath just outside Norwich, both with their prominent windmills. The popularity of Mousehold has been explained in terms of its associations with the sixteenth-century rebel Robert Kett.³⁷ But it is noteworthy that all three of these commons lay on the edges of urban areas – just north of suburbanizing London, beside the regional capital Norwich, or next to the fashionable watering place of Sheringham – and were places much frequented by respectable, as well as by less respectable, members of society.

Such exceptions aside, it was anciently enclosed landscapes that formed the principal subject for most landscape artists. These had all the agreed benefits of enclosed land – privacy, freedom from communal regulation, high land values – but without the associations of social dislocation that many associated with the newly hedged landscapes created by parliamentary enclosure. Yet even these ancient landscapes were subtly transformed, more than we often realize, to make them acceptable to polite taste. The depiction of trees is a case in point. Hedgerow trees are a major feature of the paintings of the period, but their depiction is curious. Seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and even early nineteenth-century estate surveys leave little doubt that most farmland trees were managed as pollards: that is, they were repeatedly cut at intervals of 10 to 15 years, at a height of around 2 or 3 meters – out of reach of grazing livestock – in order to produce a regular supply of straight “poles” for fuel, fencing, and a host of other uses. Only a minority were left to grow naturally, as timber trees. This dominance of pollards in part reflected the great need for wood (as opposed to timber) on the part of the local population, and in part the importance of freeholders and the strength of tenants in many anciently enclosed areas, where landed estates were often small and splintered: for both medieval custom, and the terms of post-medieval leases, generally stipulated that the tenant had the right to take wood but not the timber from the farm, and the temptation to convert any young tree into a pollard was thus overwhelming. Timber surveys and – more rarely – maps from south east England and East Anglia usually suggest that between 70 and 80% of hedgerow trees were managed in this way.³⁸ On a farm in Beeston near Mileham in Norfolk, for example, surveyed by Henry Keymer in 1761 there were 413 pollards but only 101 timber trees.³⁹ Occasionally the proportion was even higher: 91% of the trees at West End, Wormley, in Hertfordshire in 1784 were pollards.⁴⁰

In the course of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth century there was mounting hostility to pollarding on the part of rural landowners and other members of the “polite.” Their dense heads spread a deep pool of shade over crops, and they were looked on by agricultural improvers as relics of backward peasant agriculture. Landowners and larger farmers were now increasingly using coal, rather than wood, for their fires.⁴¹ Pollards may also have offended because they seemed as “unnatural” as the topiaried trees in formal gardens, which were now out of fashion among the rich and educated. “Let the axe fall with undistinguished severity upon all their mutilated heads,” Thomas Ruggles declared in 1794: around the same time the agriculturalist Anthony Collet described how Suffolk landlords were giving their clayland tenants leave to “take down every pollard tree that stands in the way of the plough.”⁴² Nevertheless, documentary sources make it clear that even in the early nineteenth century most hedgerow trees were still regularly pollarded. It is curious, then, that the overwhelming majority of trees shown by Constable, members of the Norwich School, or any other late eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century painters are “standards” or “maidens” – that is, normal timber trees, allowed to grow without cropping into their natural form. There are rare exceptions to this – John Crome’s *Road with*

Pollards (c.1815) for example. But on the whole pollarded trees evidently offended polite taste to such an extent that they were simply omitted from the view.

The landscape paintings of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century were thus structured by two distinct “codes” of meaning. The first was the real if often unconscious rules – economic, agrarian, social, and environmental – which governed the spatial organization of the “real,” physical rural landscape; the second the kinds of landscape preferences shared by the people who bought landscape paintings, the sort of people who were, to a significant extent, also responsible for remodeling the landscape. I have already given, but did not fully note the significance of, an example of the former – the windmills shown on the paintings of Mousehold Heath, Sheringham Heath, and East Bergholt Common. There are numerous other examples of this association of windmills and commons, some in paintings of imaginary (or at least unidentified) heaths or greens. In part windmills were so featured because, in the absence of any other substantial landmarks in such open landscapes they provided focus and scale; but in part it was because of one of the hidden “rules” of landscape – a high proportion of mills were, like smithies, erected on common land, away from crops and buildings, because of the fire risk which they posed. I have also touched upon examples of the second kind of “rule”. The relative paucity of pollarded trees in representations of anciently enclosed countrysides does not accurately reflect their frequency in the rural landscape: but it does indicate the hostility felt toward them by the wealthy. If we relied *only* on the evidence of the visual arts, we would get an odd idea of the appearance of the eighteenth-century countryside.

So problematic is the relationship between the working countryside, and its depiction by the artist, that we are sometimes left uncertain as to whether the frequency of a particular feature in paintings reflects the particular interests of artist or their patrons and customers; physical reality; or something in between. Sometimes we can be surprised. One of the most striking features of Constable’s paintings of the countryside around the Suffolk/Essex border are the large numbers of Lombardy poplar trees shown growing in hedges, beside rivers, and in particular close to farm houses. The tree (*Populus nigra* Italica) was introduced from northern Italy only in 1758 and is today usually thought of as a rather modern, urban, or suburban species, found in large gardens, lining the roads associated with twentieth-century developments, or screening industrial buildings. It is a surprise to see it looking so much at home in the early nineteenth-century English countryside. It evidently gained rapid popularity, presumably because of its associations with the Italian landscape and its speedy growth: but it was clearly not restricted to the estates of the wealthy. We might wonder whether Constable exaggerated its presence in the East Anglian countryside, perhaps introducing it into views where it was not really present precisely because it was a fashionable feature. But other sources of evidence suggest otherwise. In 1808 William Wood, a painter of landscapes and miniatures by profession but a dabbler in landscape design, prepared proposals for the Shrubland estate near Coddensham, to the north of Ipswich in Suffolk, not a million miles from Constable’s principal stomping

ground. These included – among numerous “picturesque” additions and alterations to the park and gardens – extensive planting of Lombardy poplars. Interestingly, he felt the need to justify his use of the tree. It had, he believed, “suffer’d from its familiarity: because ill-judging people have seen it improperly plac’d,” and because it had been widely planted beside the homes of “the vulgar inhabitants.”⁴³ Constable is clearly depicting a reality of the contemporary East Anglian landscape. What is also important here, however, is the fact that the Lombardy poplar, while it grows quickly, has no real use as timber, and makes but indifferent firewood. Its presence in Constable’s paintings, planted in particular within settlements, and around farms, is a signal of changing sensibilities amongst even lesser landowners. It was planted for its appearance, and its Italian associations, alone. It was an alien intrusion into the real rural world, and evidently a common one, even in this fairly remote area of the country.

The Town and the Country

Most readers will, of course, be completely unsurprised to learn that the scenes presented in landscape paintings had a fairly tangential relationship with the real appearance of the countryside. But the extent to which that relationship was tenuous, and precisely what this signifies, is worthy of further consideration. As already noted, most analyses of the social significance of landscape paintings, like most discussions of landscape parks, have examined them in an essentially rural context: that is, in terms of what they meant to rural landowners, men involved in estate administration, enclosure, and the administration of the Poor Law. Yet just as landscape parks can also be understood as a manifestation, at least in part, of essentially urban mentalities, so too can these representations of the countryside. This, of course, is not a new perspective. Andrew Hemmingway, in his book *Landscape Imagery and Urban Culture in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain*, has argued persuasively that early nineteenth-century landscape paintings were not only exhibited in an urban context but were largely purchased by town dwellers, or by people who maintained a town as well as a country house.⁴⁴ He has also pointed out that many of the scenes that we would see as depictions of a rural idyll carried at the time a range of other connotations, many of them redolent of commerce, industry, modernity. He has noted in particular the importance in early nineteenth-century paintings of river scenes, and the complexity of their associations, which included the crucial significance of rivers as arteries of communication in this increasingly commercial and spatially integrated world. This point can be amplified with innumerable examples. Modern audiences might view Constable’s *Flatford Mill* of 1816 as a depiction of a rural idyll, but the painting’s alternative name – *Scene on a Navigable Waterway* – hints at a different significance (Fig. 16.2). The Stour navigation established by parliamentary acts of 1705 and 1781 allowed boats to reach from coastal Manningtree deep inland to Sudbury.⁴⁵ The mill in the background, another example owned by Constable’s father, was not



FIG. 16.2 John Constable: *Flatford Mill* (*Scene on a Navigable River*), 1816–17.
 Source: © Tate, London 2012.

some ancient picturesque feature but the kind of substantial grain-processing factory, which only developed in the course of the later eighteenth century, to deal with the ever-increasing quantities of grain pouring out of the East Anglian fields. Lombardy poplars grow in the background.

For the most part, it is true, landscape painting dealt with subjects more obviously rural in character. But even so we should not be misled into thinking that the scenes depicted were necessarily remote, untouched by the modern world. It is easy to imagine that when Constable painted his famous pictures of Hampstead Heath he was depicting a still completely rural world. But in the 1820s the area was already being affected, not so much by urbanization perhaps, but certainly by suburbanization. Constable, having stayed at Hampstead every summer between 1819 and 1824, settled there permanently in 1827, keeping a studio in the West End. He told his friend John Fisher that this arrangement allowed him to “unite a town life and a country life.”⁴⁶ Others were keen to do the same. By this time, to judge from the Ordnance Survey 2” map of 1822, the Heath lay less than 3 miles from the rows and terraces around Camden Town and Regent’s Park. By the 1840s it stood on the very edge of the sprawling metropolis.⁴⁷

More importantly, perhaps, we should try to consider how people whose lives were really centered on the countryside – focused on agriculture, estate management, land improvement, and forestry – would have reacted to these supposedly “rural” paintings. It is striking, for example, how – with the partial exception of

Constable – most eighteenth- and nineteenth-century painters seem to have paid little attention to the precise species of tree which they were depicting. To established landowners – men who were immersed in the writings of John Evelyn, Moses Cook, or John Lawrence, and who kept meticulous accounts of their timber and planting – Gainsborough's complete failure to depict a tree as anything other than "a tree" would have been striking. The representation of agricultural tasks – which enjoyed something of a revival in rural paintings in the 1810s, perhaps a reflection of the patriotic connotations of food production during the Napoleonic blockade – would similarly have seemed, in many if not most cases, vague or improbable to anybody actually involved in farming life – to the kind of people who kept volumes of the *General Views* recently produced by the Board of Agriculture on their shelves, or subscribed to *Annals of Agriculture*. Of course, this does not mean that landowners with a keen interest in farming or forestry did not form part of the audience and market for such scenes. But it does suggest that the origins of this kind of art, this way of looking at the rural landscape, lay in a different and essentially urban world. The very act of seeing the countryside in terms of a painting by Claude or Poussin, or of investing it with picturesque meaning, involved some measure of distancing and divorce from the genuinely rural.

Norwich and the Norwich School

The extent to which an essentially urban cultural context shaped both landscape design, and landscape representation, is best illustrated by taking a single example from provincial England. The Norwich School of artists – strictly, the Norwich Society of Artists – was established in 1803 and held regular exhibitions in the city from 1805 until 1833. Its members included John Crome, John Sell Cotman, Henry Bright, Robert Ladbroke, James Stark, James Sillett, and John Thirtle (the Stannard brothers, Joseph and Alfred, were closely associated with the group but were not official members).⁴⁸ The group constituted the only real regional school of artists in the country, although similar societies and institutions concerned with promoting the visual arts subsequently appeared, at Edinburgh and Bath in 1808 and at Leeds in 1809.

Much has been made of the similarities between the paintings produced by the Norwich artists, and the landscapes produced in seventeenth-century Holland. Local landowners and businessmen, such as the Norwich merchant and brewer John Patteson, had long held a particular affection for Dutch art – paintings by Flemish and Netherlandish artists, especially landscapes, had featured prominently on the walls of East Anglian country houses for more than a century.⁴⁹ In part this local preference was a manifestation of the region's strong and ancient links with the Low Countries. But it also reflected the similarity of the landscapes of Holland and East Anglia – the broad waterways, the prosperous yet ancient towns, the wide valleys and muted terrain – which made these paintings particularly appealing to local consumers. Crome, Stark, Bright, and the Stannards produced paintings that

are indeed sometimes closely comparable to those of Dutch seventeenth-century masters like Hobbema, Hondecoeter, or Cuyp.⁵⁰ Yet it is a moot point how far we are dealing here with artistic influences, and how far with parallel development in the landscape itself: how far the artists in question were directly influenced by Dutch models, that is, and catered for the taste in them of local patrons; and how far resemblances in scale and subject matter reflect real similarities in the landscape of the two regions. Windmills are thus a common motif in both Dutch and Norwich paintings, but were prominent in the landscape of both regions; the same was true of wide expanses of heath, and valleys with wide and slow-flowing rivers, while in both areas level terrain ensured the overwhelming importance of the ever-changing sky as a major element in the scene. Either way, John Sell Cotman, Crome, and their fellows painted a wide variety of local views. Pictures of Norwich, especially river scenes, form a prominent part of the corpus, together with depictions of the Broadland marshes to the east of the city, but a large proportion of their work comprises representation of the countryside around Norwich itself – paintings like Crome's *Poringland Oak*, *Grove Scene* and *Yare at Thorpe*; George Vincent's *Trowse Meadow*; or Cotman's *Mousehold Heath*.⁵¹

It is easy to think of such paintings as purely rural, not just in subject matter, but also in social context. But Norwich was still at this time one of the largest cities in England, and most of these paintings were purchased by local industrialists, merchants, and financiers. One of the principal patrons and collectors was Jeremiah Coleman, founder and owner of Coleman's mustard company. More importantly, while we might interpret these as scenes of unspoilt countryside, in reality the hinterland of the city was already, in effect, suburbanized. William Faden's map, published in 1797 – just six years before the Society was established – shows that Norwich was surrounded by a dense cluster of small and medium-sized parks. These included Earlham, where Crome worked as tutor to the children of the Gurneys, the prominent banking family; and Catton, Humphry Repton's first paid commission, which was the home of Jeremiah Ives, a banker and businessman in the city.⁵² This diminutive park (which Repton in fact embellished, rather than created) was closely surrounded by neighboring residences, all set in small parks or pleasure grounds. Armstrong in 1781 described the village of Catton as:

The residence of many manufacturers, who have retired from Norwich, and built elegant houses. The air is reckoned very healthful, and many invalids resort thither for the benefit of it. It is distant from the city a mile and half north... The late Robert Roger, esq. and Robert Harvey, esq., both Aldermen of Norwich, have erected handsome seats in this village; as also Jeremiah Ives Harvey, esq. and Mr Suffield.⁵³

As already noted, such proximity allowed these men to keep an eye on their business interests, as well as to enjoy the society and leisure facilities which the city had to offer. But such facilities themselves migrated outwards, into the city's quasi-urban hinterland. Mulbarton Hall, for example, set in its "beautiful fine Pleasure Garden," was put up for sale when its owner, the textile manufacturer Philip

Stannard, went bankrupt in 1770.⁵⁴ Lying some 6 kilometers outside Norwich, it was purchased by Robert Parkerson, and soon opened “for the reception of Gentlemen and Ladies, for Breakfasting, or Tea in the afternoon,” the latter featuring “fine Strawberries, and other Fruit as they come into season.” A coach operated several times a day, bringing customers from Norwich.⁵⁵

Those who made this short journey would have regarded the landscape through which they passed in ways very different from the agricultural laborer, farmer, or even rural landowner: and not only the paintings of this landscape, but the parks set within it, need to be understood in this essentially suburban context. No less than 44% of the parks shown on William Faden’s map of Norfolk were located within 20 kilometers (12½ miles) of the city; most of the rural landscapes depicted by the Norwich School were concentrated in this very same area.⁵⁶

Conclusion

The argument that both landscape parks, and ways of representing the countryside, reflected the increasingly urban character of English society in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries can be taken too far, and nothing that I have written here necessarily contradicts the broad conclusions reached by writers like Barrel, Elsinger, or Bermingham. Readings of past art forms should always be multiple, overlapping, layered, nuanced. That rural laborers were alternately marginalized, and romanticized, by landscape artists in part reflects widespread concerns about this group, either as victims or as potential social threat. But it also relates to the fact that an increasing number of people knew little and cared less about them, just as they cared little and knew less about the realities of farming and rural life in general. Like the unidentifiable trees in the paintings of Gainsborough, they are ornaments in a sanitized backdrop to an essentially urban existence. This trend was to intensify over the following century or so. Today, when the overwhelming majority of the population is now completely urban in character, Constable’s *Hay Wain* has become the most popular of all English paintings: it is almost gratuitous to add that the vehicle depicted in this iconic work is not a hay wagon at all, but a specialized timber wagon.⁵⁷

Michael Rosenthal has emphasized that “landscape painting, aesthetics and politics in Britain are not only indissolubly linked but also demanding of scrupulous and sophisticated analysis.”⁵⁸ But if we are to understand the contemporary significance of landscape art – using this term to mean both the representation of the rural environment, and its transformation to create acceptable settings for the homes of the wealthy – we also need to be more aware of the physical character of the contemporary landscape, both rural and urban. For it is only by appreciating how representations deviated from physical realities, and how designed landscapes contrasted with, obscured, or mimicked the surrounding environment, that we can understand the full implications of either. Yet at the same time, the “real” landscape also carried social meaning – it had an “iconography” that in part had

developed only in the course of the eighteenth century, and in part had more ancient roots. Meaningful studies of landscape art, in short, should adopt a more sophisticated contextual, “historicist” perspective than is perhaps currently fashionable, and proceed hand-in-hand with detailed investigations into the physical as well as the social contexts in which both landscape paintings, and landscape designs, were produced.

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Landscape Painting, c.1770–1840

Sam Smiles

Landscape painting in Britain in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries represents one of the few occasions in a survey of world art where the omission of the British contribution would be seen as negligent. For these reasons landscape painting has often been regarded as central to any understanding of the national school, considered as a historic phenomenon. This is not merely a matter of academic interest; institutionally, too, landscape is a major presence in the selections shown at the two most important repositories of British art in the world: Tate Britain in London and the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, CT. And while *Remapping British Art* and similar surveys provide ample evidence of an intricate and many-sided art world in Britain, it is still the case that the development of landscape painting has a special status as a cultural episode within more general understandings of British art.

It would be critically complacent, however, to let it go at that and leave these kinds of valorizations unexamined. Why is it that landscape painting has achieved this prominence? What are the cultural agencies that have collaborated to position landscape so centrally in the story of British art? What are the presumed relations between landscape and a sense of national identity, as vested in the so-called national school? In this chapter we will look first at some general considerations bearing on these questions before turning to four images that exemplify the variety of landscape painting practices in operation between the 1770s and the 1840s. These are George Stubbs' *Haymakers* (1785) (Fig. 17.1), J. M. W. Turner's *The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire* (1817) (Fig. 17.2), Samuel Palmer's *The Valley Thick with Corn* (1825) (Fig. 17.3), and John Constable's *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* (1831) (Fig. 17.4). Necessarily, this selection is somewhat arbitrary, for no adequate history of British landscape painting can be reduced to four totemic images, nor could its outlines be neatly summarized in



FIG. 17.1 George Stubbs: *Haymakers*, 1785.
Source: Tate Gallery, London. akg-images / Erich Lessing.



FIG. 17.2 J. M. W. Turner: *The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire*, painting, 170.2×238.8 cm, 1817.
Source: Tate Gallery, London. akg-images / Erich Lessing.



FIG. 17.3 Samuel Palmer: *Valley Thick with Corn*, 1825.
 Source: Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford/Bridgeman Art Library.



FIG. 17.4 John Constable: *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows*, oil on canvas, 1831.
 Source: Private Collection/The Bridgeman Art Library.

even a score of pictures. Equally, any process of selection confers on particular pictures a temporary sense of uniqueness and authority that is wholly alien to the ambition of seeing the production of landscape images in this period as a complex but interrelated whole. Nevertheless, each of these four paintings may be used as types, to stand for one particular aspect of the landscape painting phenomenon this chapter bids to analyze.

The investigation of British landscape painting within academic art history is today a routine preoccupation. Arguably, its modern foundations were laid in the late 1960s and early 1970s as scholars replaced connoisseurial and anecdotal treatments of landscape artists with more searching investigations.¹ For the general public and the academic community alike, the first major disclosure of these new directions was the groundbreaking exhibition, "Landscape in Britain, c.1750–1850," mounted by the Tate Gallery in 1973. The Tate's exhibition was timely, for not only did it benefit from the new scholarly approach to landscape painting, it also coincided with that moment in the late 1960s and 1970s when ecological awareness and the environment movement had mobilized public opinion to make landscape an important and urgent concern. Furthermore, after many years of relative neglect, in the 1960s landscape had again become an important feature of contemporary arts practice, with numerous artists now orientated to site-specific work away from urban centers, as seen in the land art, environmental art or earth art movements in the UK and the USA especially.

"Landscape in Britain" included some 300 exhibits produced by British landscape artists, from Richard Wilson (1714–1782) in the eighteenth century to John Everett Millais (1829–1896) in the nineteenth. Ranging across oil paintings, watercolors, prints, and drawings, the exhibition demonstrated to a large and attentive public the significance of landscape for the history of British art. This very successful venture was followed by major exhibitions a few years later, on the occasion of the bicentenaries of the three artists whose achievement is central to any understanding of British landscape painting: in 1975 J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851) was fêted at the Royal Academy and the British Museum; in 1976 John Constable (1776–1837) was celebrated at the Tate; finally, in 1982, the work of Richard Wilson was the subject of a landmark exhibition, also at the Tate.² These and related exhibitions, together with the publication of scholarly monographs, re-established landscape painting at the center of popular and academic attention.³ Cumulatively, art historical scholarship began to respond to the challenge of the "Landscape in Britain" catalogue: "The rise of landscape painting in Britain during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is, surely, among the most remarkable episodes of cultural history: yet it is a phenomenon for which, so far, no convincing account can be given."⁴

To compare the range of publications devoted to British landscape painting over the past 40 years with what was available before then is to see clearly that a wholesale transformation has occurred. Scholars have produced catalogues *raisonnés* and monographic studies of individual artists; the social, political, and

institutional context for the production of landscape painting has been scrutinized; issues of subjectivity, colonialism, and gender have been explored; and both the contemporary and posthumous cultural reception of selected canonical landscape artists have been investigated. The bibliography of recent scholarship on British landscape painters is huge, especially that which surrounds the most well-known artists and, for many approaching it for the first time, it presents a formidable and daunting challenge. Any attempt to summarize this mass of work is somewhat fruitless, but if one had to characterize the change in approach that differentiates today's consensus view from what was circulating a generation ago, one of the most important transformations to note would be a shift from an essentially formalist description of landscape painting, largely restricted to chronicling stylistic developments between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, to a concern with landscape painting as a cultural product imbricated in its particular ideological circumstances.

This new perspective, although not universally shared, offers a productive field of inquiry for those wishing to study landscape painting. It is orientated primarily to the mediating function of the painted image, understanding landscape painting not so much as a transcript of an unproblematically understood and objective natural world, but as an engagement with a discursive understanding of "landscape," a labile concept formed and reformed as part of wider considerations about the place of the land in national consciousness and, more broadly, about nature in culture. Yet although this kind of emphasis prioritizes its concerns very differently from the older, more connoisseurial tradition, it does not necessarily select different artists for study, nor need it valorize landscape paintings that clearly problematize the depicted landscape over others that seem to have been orientated to "pure" painting. Neither does it neglect the variety of technical achievements in the British landscape tradition. Fundamentally, this contextual approach is predicated on the supposition that the original producers and consumers of this art had a knowing engagement with landscape and with its representation, and that our response to landscape painting today will be enriched the more we can retrieve these original cultural expectations and assumptions. Thus, even technical achievements are not presumed to transcend their historical circumstances but are seen as better understood in the context of the contemporary art market, the workings of art criticism, and the institutional position of the landscape artist.

To recognize landscape painting as a cultural product is necessarily to downplay any claims for its straightforward representation of nature and to emphasize instead both its contemporary signification and its relationship to its own tradition. This is not a retrospective judgment, for serious landscape artists of this period were wary of being seen as mere transcribers of the external world, producing an entirely servile and commonplace art. Landscape needed to fight its corner within academic theory and its ablest practitioners were adept at renegotiating its position in art criticism and expanding its field of operations. In France the historiographer André Félibien had formulated in the 1660s what has become known as the

hierarchy of the genres ranking different modes of painting practice in order of importance. Landscape was placed next to bottom, just above still-life, because it was deemed to be primarily imitative and did not broach the ideal nor employ the highest reaches of the imagination. Although not universally accepted, this academic prejudice was operative in England throughout most of the eighteenth century, from Jonathan Richardson's *Connoisseur* at its beginning to Sir Joshua Reynolds' *Discourses* at its close.⁵ For all his awareness of the varieties of excellence in different genres, Reynolds maintained a belief in the superiority of history painting over the lower, imitative genres for just this reason. But an understanding of landscape as merely a genre, fixed within a system of differentiated practices, ignores its dynamism within an active market for landscape paintings, a situation that not only attracted ambitious painters to it but also, as a result of those very ambitions, allowed landscape to trespass on the territory occupied by history painting, either in terms of subject matter or in terms of imagination or indeed both. From its establishment in 1768, the Royal Academy had included landscape painters among its members and in the period immediately before the dates selected for this essay a number of artists had extended landscape's remit, notably Richard Wilson and Thomas Gainsborough (1727–1788).

Although a founding member of the Royal Academy, Wilson died in poverty in 1782. In the 1760s, as well as painting the estates of the grandees who dominated British society, he had occasionally attempted to unite history painting with landscape and he had been censured by Reynolds for doing so: "Our late ingenious academician, Wilson, has, I fear, been guilty, like many of his predecessors, of introducing gods and goddesses, ideal beings, into scenes which were by no means prepared to receive such personages. His landskips were in reality too near common nature to admit supernatural objects."⁶ Yet within a generation, Wilson's career was being held up as an example to contemporary artists, and his neglect as a rebuke to the hierarchical values of the world he had confronted. It is a mark of how comprehensively a self-consciousness about the English school of landscape was becoming established in the early nineteenth century that in 1814 Wilson was hailed as the father of English landscape and honoured with a display of his works at the British Institution.

For Reynolds, the chief merit of Gainsborough's landscapes was that they were unassuming transcripts of nature, uninfluenced by the old masters, while Gainsborough himself was unwilling to stray beyond his proper place: "It is to the credit of his good sense and judgement that he never did attempt that style of historical painting, for which his previous studies had made no preparation."⁷ But Gainsborough, too, was prepared to stretch the bounds of landscape on occasion far beyond what Reynolds recommended. One of his landscapes, *The Harvest Wagon* (1767, Barber Institute, University of Birmingham) has been shown to contain reminiscences of old master paintings in its figure groupings and at the end of his life Gainsborough left an unfinished *Diana and Actaeon* (c.1785, Royal Collection) in his studio, which fused landscape and history painting in ways that Reynolds would have had difficulty accepting.⁸

Wilson and Gainsborough's example notwithstanding, eighteenth-century landscape painting in Britain had not developed the ambitions that could have overcome academic discrimination. Many landscapes, especially those in watercolor, were predominantly concerned with topography: from portraits of great houses and their estates, to antiquarian studies of the medieval architectural legacy and latterly views of "picturesque" scenery. In his lectures at the Royal Academy, given at the turn of the century, the history painter Henry Fuseli attacked the view painters of his day, whose "tame delineation of a given spot" or "mapwork" approach to landscape was far removed from the aspirations of a creative art. For Fuseli, most contemporary topographical art was worthless and Richard Wilson was the only English artist to be listed alongside the luminaries of the great tradition: Titian, Mola, Salvator Rosa, Nicolas Poussin, Gaspard Dughet, Claude, Rubens, Elzheimer, and Rembrandt.⁹ As the Professor of Painting at the Royal Academy, Fuseli's views were orthodox, maintaining many of the precepts advanced by Sir Joshua Reynolds. On this model, landscape's inferior status was predicated specifically on its tendency to copy appearances rather than deploy the imagination.

Supporters of contemporary landscape painting were acutely aware that if their métier was to be taken seriously the academic prejudice against imitation had to be overcome. Indeed, when Fuseli made his remarks, the theoretical understanding that sustained his position was coming under strain, for it was increasingly obvious that contemporary landscape painting was capable of much more than the caricature Fuseli offered. John Britton, the antiquarian and topographer, counter-attacked Fuseli in his *Fine Arts of the English School* (1812), citing not just Wilson, but Gainsborough, Wright of Derby, Turner, Girtin and others whose works had been unjustly stigmatized by Fuseli's prejudices.¹⁰ A letter from Turner to Britton, as he prepared his book for publication, records his support for what must originally have been an even stronger riposte.¹¹ In his own lectures, as Professor of Perspective at the Royal Academy, Turner insisted that the painter should "mark the greater from the lesser truth; namely the larger and more liberal idea of nature from the comparatively narrow and confined ... that which addresses itself to the imagination from that which is solely addressed to the Eye."¹² At first glance, this remark makes sense as a landscape painter's accession to Reynolds and Fuseli's position, but it is also a subversive gesture. Turner deliberately deployed a passage in Reynolds's final discourse, given in 1790, where Reynolds attempted to overcome seemingly irreconcilable differences in art theory by distinguishing the varieties of excellence appropriate to the different genres of art practice.¹³ For Reynolds in 1790 "that which is solely addressed to the eye" was shorthand for the inferior genres, especially landscape and still-life; "that which is addressed to the imagination" was confined essentially to history painting. Turner in the 1810s takes the same terms and applies them without hierarchical intent; the greater truth and the address to the imagination, in other words, may be found just as well in landscape as in history painting.

As the possibilities for landscape in England moved from producing a topographical record to providing a vehicle for the full play of the artistic imagination, so landscape arrogated to itself some of the intellectual, ethical, and spiritual concerns that had been traditionally associated with history painting alone. And while not all its practitioners aimed so high, commercially landscape painting imposed itself on the art market, providing a living for large numbers of artists and dominating the London exhibition rooms. The establishment of the Society of Painters in Water-Colours in November 1804, followed by its rival organization, The New Society of Painters in Miniature and Water-Colours (also known as the Associated Artists) in 1807, ensured that additional public venues were available for exhibiting landscapes. This expansion of landscape's purpose and function is routinely understood as an evolutionary development, but it is a development that masks a crisis in the visual arts in Britain, and in culture more generally, as the normative values of a dominant social and political settlement were put under increasing strain. If the purpose of history painting was to produce a public art, articulating the ideals of civic society and providing encouragement and exhortation to its spectators, how could landscape, now increasingly dominant, fulfil the same function? Some commentators expressed severe doubts that landscape was capable of doing so. In his *Observations on the Probable Decline or Extinction of British Historical Painting* (1825) William Carey classified landscape as "domestic style," when compared to the "public style" of history painting, and claimed that "the nation has been deceived, by the constant repetition of well-intentioned applause, into a belief that a liberal patronage of the *domestic style* ... is a liberal patronage of the *public style*, which comprehends historical painting only."¹⁴

Institutionally, the more ambitious artists could combat any residual academic prejudice against landscape painting by finding ways to insist on its cultural importance. As previously mentioned, Turner took advantage of the Royal Academy's need to appoint a new Professor of Perspective to secure his own election to that position in 1807, giving his course of lectures 12 times between 1811 and 1828.¹⁵ While most of this series comprised technical explorations of perspective, the "Backgrounds" lecture Turner delivered as part of his course of instruction was especially crafted to allow him to review the history of landscape painting and to concentrate on its achievements.¹⁶ Although his limitations as a public speaker severely reduced the efficacy of his remarks, Turner was clearly aware that the provision of these lectures within the Royal Academy necessarily conferred on the study of landscape a respect that might otherwise have eluded it. It is a mark of his belief in the imprimatur of the Academy that in 1811, the first year in which the Perspective lecture series was delivered, Turner discussed with Joseph Farington, an influential academician, the possibility of establishing a Professorship of Landscape Painting there.¹⁷

The status of landscape as a constituent of the national school became more firmly established in the early years of the nineteenth century. Contemporary landscape painting had become increasingly prominent in the galleries of

collectors, such as Sir John Leicester, the Earl of Essex, and the Duke of Bedford. The recently established (1805) British Institution also encouraged landscape painting. From 1812 it offered a prize of 100 guineas for landscape and in 1814 hosted an exhibition of British artists including Gainsborough and Wilson. As the *Monthly Magazine* declared in 1810: “The progress of the British school may be thus estimated: – To be retrograde in grand historical and poetical composition; to be increasing in correct drawing and chaste coloring; eminent in portrait; and beyond competition in landscape.”¹⁸ It is a mark of landscape’s growing prominence in this period that new biographies of Wilson and Gainsborough were published in the 1820s and that Turner and Constable were to be so honored after their deaths.¹⁹ The representation of British landscape painting in the new National Gallery (founded in 1824) was, however, much less generous. By 1840 its collections included merely two landscapes by Wilson, two by Gainsborough, and one by Constable.²⁰ It was not until the advent of Robert Vernon’s collection in 1847 that the National Gallery’s holdings of British landscape paintings increased substantially, to which was added the Turner Bequest in 1856.²¹ The following year John Sheepshanks’ collection was given to the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum), including a number of landscapes by Turner, Constable, Bonington, Crome, and others. Vernon donated his pictures to the National Gallery, promoting the claims of the British school vis-à-vis the schools of other nations; Sheepshanks intended his gift to form the nucleus of a separate National Gallery of British Art. The prominence of landscape examples in both collections clearly demonstrates how central landscape painting had become to any understanding of the national school by mid-century.

The critical arena for discussing landscape painting is a feature of this period. Art journalism responded to the ubiquity of landscape in the London exhibitions; in addition, several wide-ranging accounts of painting and sculpture included landscape painting as a significant feature of the contemporary British art world.²² As we have seen, Turner lectured on perspective at the Royal Academy from 1811 and Constable, too, talked on landscape in various courses of lectures given in London and elsewhere in the 1830s.²³ Neither of them published their observations, however, and even had they done so it is unlikely that their championing of landscape would have been robust or far-reaching enough to overcome its incidental appearance in the writings of Royal Academicians, such as Reynolds and Fuseli, or in the treatises of connoisseurs of art. Two intellectual contexts for landscape had emerged, however, toward the close of the eighteenth century that offered a wider prospect: the picturesque aesthetic and the doctrine of associationism.

The development of the picturesque is associated primarily with William Gilpin, whose earliest writings on the subject date from 1768 and who published a series of British tours in search of picturesque landscape from the 1780s. Concentrating on those varieties of countryside that would be agreeable in a picture, Gilpin’s approach was to emphasize formal and compositional

attributes, such as ruggedness, broken forms, unity and variety, abstracting these effects from the perceived landscape to produce an aesthetic appraisal of it.²⁴ Gilpin's advocacy of a new aesthetic category, designed to mediate between the sublime and the beautiful, proved remarkably influential, but the vogue for the picturesque did not escape criticism. The agricultural writer William Marshall, for example, took the new approach to task, with special reference to the picturesque theorists, Richard Payne Knight and Sir Uvedale Price, for ignoring the social relations intrinsic to the landscapes they discussed.²⁵ If the cult of the picturesque may have helped landscape become a popular point of discussion, associationism provided a more intellectual response. As articulated by Archibald Allison in his *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* (1790), associationism attempted to ground aesthetic responses in cognition, explaining reactions to landscape, for example, as the projection of habitual responses to remembered stimuli of pleasure and pain. Although philosophically speaking this approach was limited, it helped to position landscape painting as a site for the production of meaning, as opposed to being merely the imitation of something found in nature. By the turn of the century, therefore, it is arguable that landscape was receiving more theoretically complex treatments. Nevertheless, although landscape painting was making institutional headway, and despite its popularity as a commodity, its intellectual and ethical potential was relatively underplayed until the publication of Ruskin's *Modern Painters* (1843–1860).

While it would be wrong to characterize *Modern Painters* as solely a landscape treatise, landscape painting is its major concern. Ruskin recounted its increasing importance in the work of some renaissance artists and its subsequent development as a specialist pursuit in the hands of northern European painters from the seventeenth century onwards. As is well known, he believed that landscape painting had come of age in his lifetime, in the career of J. M. W. Turner. For Ruskin, Turner's understanding of natural processes, coupled with the technical ability that allowed him to register the whole gamut of natural effects, had allowed him to develop landscape as the only art form capable of offering profound insights into the workings of nature. And these insights, by extension, could provide the contemplative mind with a route toward spiritual understanding of man's place in nature and, beyond that, a means of shoring up faith itself. Ruskin was also concerned to consider landscape's ability to anatomize contemporary culture in its recording of human agency.²⁶ These are high claims, whether for Turner or any other artist, and Ruskin's often overdetermined readings of landscape are rarely endorsed today. We are, moreover, resistant to Ruskin's teleological understanding of artistic progress and are likely to be cautious about using without further qualification words like "development," implying as they do an organic evolution of landscape painting irrespective of its position in particular cultural circumstances. But modern approaches to landscape do share with Ruskin a perception that the business of making landscape pictures was always more complex than a simple transcription of nature; landscape bears

witness to social and ideological contexts and in its ability to do so can offer insights into wider cultural circumstances.

Thus far, this essay has used the word “landscape” without any qualification, but one of the more intractable problems of landscape is its definition. The four pictures selected for this chapter embrace variously rustic genre (Stubbs), the deployment of historical narrative (Turner), engagement with a known topography (Constable), and the visionary transformation of place (Palmer). What is most striking, surely, about this quartet is that we are prepared to subsume such disparate images under the same generic descriptive term. The fact that “landscape” as a category can accommodate all of them under its aegis says something about its flexibility as a category, for the only common feature linking the subject matter of these four images is that they are outdoor scenes. The inadequacy of such a banal observation reveals that landscape painting cannot be tidily explained by virtue of a set of defining criteria for its contents. Indeed, any understanding of landscape painting that presumes its “typical” subject matter to be unspoiled nature, the rural scene or idealized prospects will fail to comprehend the landscape phenomenon in all its range and intensity. Instead, we might wish to argue that the significance of landscape in this period lay not so much in its treatment of a familiar nature, or its creation of an idealized substitute for that nature, as in its reworking of the landscape genre to become the site where the preoccupations of the age could be explored. The liminal position of landscape, its potentiality to remake itself, to infiltrate other genres, and even to undermine them, suggest that we would be better off thinking of landscape not so much as a differentiated body of work defined in terms of its subjects or themes but as something much more general: a cultural propensity to explore lived reality as a complex integration of natural forces and human effort.

The ascendancy of landscape saw it become such a diversified activity that some artists devised classificatory schemes to discipline its protean character into something more coherent. But this lack of definitional clarity was prompted by the ambiguity of the word landscape itself, whether it signified an expanse of rural scenery or the product of the artist’s involvement with nature. To take an early classificatory scheme, Alexander Cozens’ *The Various Species of Landscape in Nature* (1770) separated out different natural features, light, and weather effects as differentiated subjects for painting. A generation later Turner’ *Liber Studiorum* went further, now identifying the varieties of landscape not so much with motifs found in nature but in their subjection to different modes of apprehension.²⁷ Published between 1807 and 1819 in 14 parts, the *Liber Studiorum* divided its 70 prints into separate categories of A – Architectural, H – Historical, M (or Ms) – Mountainous, M (or Ma) Marine, P – Pastoral, and EP (the only category not explained, but probably intended as Elevated or Epic Pastoral). Inspired by Turner’s example, the watercolor painter John Varley, in his *Principles of Landscape Design* (1816, revised 1821) drew distinctions between Marine, Epic, Pastoral, and Elegant Pastoral. In 1830–1831 Constable, too, considered the possibility of codifying his output, while preparing the plates

for his 22 mezzotints *English Landscape Scenery*.²⁸ Lecturing on Poussin in 1833 he talked of “every walk of landscape – historic – poetic – classic – and pastoral.”²⁹ As a contemporary writer in the *Library of the Fine Arts* declared, an essay on landscape painting could be divided “according to the modern and certainly not inappropriate nomenclature, the Epic, the Pastoral, the Domestic ... the Topographical [and] the Marine.”³⁰

It is arguable that landscape was always an unstable category by virtue of its dynamic position within the changing culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. When landscape painting was taken up in England, pursued first by Dutch and Flemish artists working in Britain in the seventeenth century, a new word was adopted to describe this cultural import. Writing in the middle of the seventeenth century, Edward Norgate declared that landscape painting was “an Art soe new in England, and so lately come a shore, as all the Language within our fower Seas cannot find it a Name but a borrowed one.”³¹ Indeed, the Dutch term *landschap* was first naturalized as *landskip*, then as *landscape*. The belatedness of landscape painting’s emergence in Britain was, for some, compounded by what they considered to be the meagre potential of the physical landscape to stimulate good painting. In the 1790s the wealthy connoisseur and collector Richard Payne Knight included remarks on national scenery in a footnote added to his reprinted treatise on the picturesque, *The Landscape: A Didactic Poem*:

Scarcely any parts of our island are capable of affording the compositions of Salvator Rosa, Claude, and the Poussins; and only the most picturesque parts those of Rysdael, Berghem, and Pynaker; but those of Hobbima, Waterloe, and Adrian Vandervelde (which also have their beauties) are to be obtained everywhere.³²

Although Knight claimed he wasn’t recommending artists to restrict themselves to “servile imitation,” recommending instead that they make compositions by combining together accurate studies, the assumption lying behind his remarks was that the English landscape was essentially agrarian and would therefore stimulate a national school working on much the same lines as Dutch landscape art. Knight’s is very much a connoisseur’s view, adopting seventeenth-century landscape painting in general and Dutch landscape painting in particular as the normative standard for landscape and expecting British artists to emulate these predecessors. What seems to have entirely escaped him was the possibility that a British school of landscape painters could rethink the possibilities for landscape, renovating these traditions to fit them for contemporary needs.

As landscape began to dominate the English school of painting in the nineteenth century, the question of origins returned. The fact that it was originally introduced from the Netherlands, as opposed to being an autochthonous art in Britain may help explain the desire to naturalize it as closely united to the English scene – as though the location alone inspired the artist attuned to it to make a response privileged by experiential knowledge. Unlike Knight’s limited expectations, fitting

the English landscape to a pre-existent Dutch exemplar, the response to place now suggested the possibility of going beyond the achievements of the Dutch school. Constable is the classic instance of this tendency; the mezzotints engraved after his paintings and published as *English Landscape Scenery* (1830–1832), were designed to:

increase the interest for and promote the study of the rural scenery of England, with all its endearing associations, and even in its most simple localities; of England with her climate of more than vernal freshness, in whose summer skies and rich autumnal clouds, “in thousand liveries dight”, the observer of nature may daily watch her endless varieties of effects.³³

Turner, too, was prepared to identify England as particularly suitable to nurture a school of landscape painters. Lecturing to students at the Royal Academy in the 1810s he declared:

In our variable climate, where [all] the seasons are recognizable in one day, where all the vapoury turbulence involves the face of things, where nature seems to sport in all her dignity ... how happily is the landscape painter situated, how roused by every change of nature in every moment, that allows no languor even in her effects which she places before him, and demands most peremptorily every moment his admiration and investigation, to store his mind with every change of time and place.³⁴

Constable's and Turner's remarks can be contrasted, however, in where they place their emphasis: Constable's response to landscape includes the desire to work with the “endearing affections” of familiar scenes; Turner's encomium refers to a more abstract national landscape where the dynamism of its weather is the key property. If Constable is valorizing place in his comments on English scenery, Turner seems more concerned with effect, the modification of landscape by more ephemeral phenomena of climate, light, and color. While it would be dangerous to draw too firm a conclusion from this contrast there is some truth in it. Constable, typically, found stimulation in the associations he derived from particular locations, as seen in his oft-quoted remarks on the inspiration of the landscape around East Bergholt: “Painting is but another word for feeling. I associate my ‘careless boyhood’ to all that lies on the banks of the Stour. They made me a painter (& I am grateful).”³⁵ He tended to work in places he knew well (East Anglia, London, Brighton, and Salisbury especially), he had relatively little experience of English landscape more generally and he never travelled abroad. Turner, famously, was an avid traveller, exploring much of England, Wales and Scotland and making extensive tours of Europe.

In this connection it is important to remember how the wars against Revolutionary and Napoleonic France had frustrated travel to the continent. From 1793 until 1815, with the brief exception of the Peace of Amiens

(1802–1803) travel abroad, the routine pursuit of artists and connoisseurs alike earlier in the eighteenth century, was interrupted. Forced to travel within the UK, artists and tourists became more curious about the variety of scenery it contained and a burgeoning print market grew up to satisfy their taste for topographical and antiquarian engravings of picturesque locations in England, Scotland, and Wales. By the same token, images portraying identified tracts of countryside might appeal to spectators as imbued with national sentiment. A consumer who accepted that the French Revolution had destroyed social harmony, unleashing despotism and immorality, might well look with approval on a picture portraying well-tended fields, a compliant workforce, and a bounteous British agriculture.

Yet, even if Britain had no political revolution, the provision of landscape imagery needs to be considered within a climacteric that embraces very wide-ranging social and economic change. In agriculture, enclosure acts saw the landed elite introduce more efficient farming practices by combining smaller fields, converting arable land to pasture, and, most controversially, taking into possession land that had been held in common by a rural community. From the middle of the eighteenth to the middle of the nineteenth centuries, approximately 21% of England – c.7 million acres of land – was enclosed by some 5000 Acts of Parliament, one third of them being concerned with waste lands or commons. Customary rites were removed – to gather firewood or pasture animals – and many villagers lost what little independence they had enjoyed. The rural poor, the modern dispossessed, are included in many eighteenth-century landscape paintings; their presence there is not a token of some unvarying social hierarchy but a recognition that they were the product of a very specific economic process.³⁶

The Industrial Revolution, likewise, altered the social fabric of the nation. With the advent of new manufacturing processes the place of the countryside within British society began to alter. Agriculture was losing its pre-eminence as the source of national wealth and the population, two thirds of whom lived on the land in the 1770s, was becoming increasingly urbanized. Farming declined from providing half of the country's economic output to just under a fifth in the 80 years after 1780. This not only affected the landscape that artists depicted, it placed landscape painting as a commodity in a different position. As more and more of the population lived in cities so landscape could become sentimentalized as urbanism's "other" – valorized for its retention of a more natural or innocent way of life. In addition, industrial and commercial wealth brought new patrons and picture buyers into the market, eager to build up collections of contemporary art. The social and political values that had informed the taste of the largely aristocratic collectors of the 1770s lost influence progressively. Landscape paintings offered for sale on the open market were increasingly addressed to urban consumers who used landscape for recreational purposes, as tourists. They were unlikely to have any vested interest in a particular locality as possession or birthright, but the idea of the national landscape, as a cultural mark of identification, remained important.

George Stubbs' *Haymakers* (1785) was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1786, one of a pair along with a picture of *Reapers*. He had already depicted the

same two subjects in 1783, but the new versions, adding extra figures and altering the landscape, produced more disciplined compositions. In 1788–1789 Stubbs advertised his plans to have the new versions engraved, publishing the prints in 1791, and he painted three further oval versions in enamel in 1794 and 1795, two of the haymakers and one of the reapers. Stubbs is normally considered to be an animal painter and only a couple of “pure” landscapes by him exist. Yet Stubbs’ example provokes thoughts about specialization in the professional world of eighteenth-century painting and about our employment of discrete categories. As with his successor, James Ward, the descriptive term “animal painter” (with its associated lowly academic status) is simultaneously accurate and over-restrictive as a description of Stubbs’ artistic range. The majority of his pictures include landscape backgrounds, ranging from the pastoral setting of his thoroughbreds to the rugged wild terrain seen in paintings such as *Horse Frightened by a Lion* (?1763, Tate) and in this picture of agricultural labor he is manifestly preoccupied with a subject that appealed to numerous artists routinely classed as landscape painters. Indeed, in 1783 Thomas Hearne exhibited at the Society of Artists a watercolour entitled *A Landscape and Figures from Thomson’s Seasons* (Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester), containing three very similar figures, which suggests that he and Stubbs had worked from the same models or shared drawings.

Many commentators have been struck by Stubbs’ treatment of the theme, his self-conscious artifice in arranging the *dramatis personae* on display: the play of rakes and pitchforks describing a right-angled triangle, the haymakers arranged in a frieze spanning the composition, the haywain itself acting as a neutral background for four of them. These agricultural laborers have occasioned much discussion in recent art history concerning Stubbs’ intentions.³⁷ In other images of this period these field hands, would tend to appear as incidental staffage figures, quite unlike the individuation Stubbs employs here for the woman standing looking out at the spectator. Likewise, although it is now accepted that the clothing shown here is contemporary, it seems too neat and clean for field work. Different phases of loading the haywain are shown, the women raking the hay together, the men loading it on to the cart with pitchforks, yet the frozen tableau of Stubbs’ composition militates against us seeing this as a documentary picture. On the other hand, his foregrounding of the labor involved in hay-making runs counter to picturesque expectations. As William Gilpin had declared a decade earlier,

In a moral view, the industrious mechanic is a more pleasing object, than the loitering peasant. But in a picturesque light it is otherwise. The arts of industry are rejected, and even idleness adds dignity to a character. Thus the lazy cowherd resting on his pole; or the peasant lolling on the rock, may be allowed in the grandest scenes; while the laborious mechanic, with his implements of labour, would be repulsed.³⁸

Stubbs’ images of hay-making and reaping find some explanation in another approach to the landscape, praised originally by Virgil and Horace and now

reworked in the eighteenth century: the pleasures of rural retirement and the management of one's estate. Stubbs received commissions from aristocratic patrons, such as the Marquess of Rockingham, who were committed to land improvement not only for economic reasons but also as a virtuous pursuit. Produced at a time when the American Revolution had shaken the certainties of the old political order, Stubbs' figures offer a vision of an organic, harmonious, and peaceful society, at ease with itself and benefiting from the conscientious use of economic and political power to improve the common weal.³⁹

Reflections on these wider social and economic contexts are relatively muted in Stubbs and they contrast vividly with Turner's ambition to use landscape as expansively as possible. Although in watercolor much of his output was devoted to topographical subjects, he was increasingly disposed to people such landscapes with human subjects whose activities, rather than merely animating a composition, provided the key to its meaning. His practice as an oil painter gave him greater freedom to use landscape as a vehicle for complex meditations on history, contemporary life, scientific and technological development, politics, and economics. In contrast to the academic prejudice against landscape, discussed above, Turner consistently produced paintings with the moral seriousness of high art. One relatively early instance of his aspirations for landscape is his *Decline of the Carthaginian Empire* (1817), which can be examined as a classic instance of Turner's method, containing historical and symbolic allusion within a brilliantly realized landscape environment.

The narrative of this picture takes an incident from the third Punic War between Rome and Carthage. Like many of his contemporaries, Turner was disposed to compare that struggle with England's recent confrontation with France. He exhibited a number of pictures with Carthaginian subject matter throughout his career but especially in the 1810s as the conflict reached its climax.⁴⁰ Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo and subsequent exile in 1815 had led to national rejoicing and no little triumphalism, but this painting's brooding on the destruction of Carthage was not part of that mood. For Turner, the fate of Carthage was not an anticipation of France's defeat but a warning against complacency in England. As his biographer, Walter Thornbury, later noted,

Turner seems to have considered the fate of Carthage as a moral example to England; ascribable as it was to the decline of agriculture, the increase of luxury, and besotted blindness, too prolonged, to the insatiable ambition of Rome.⁴¹

The painting has an exceptionally long title: *The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire – Rome being determined on the Overthrow of her Hated Rival, Demanded from Her Such Terms as Might Either Force Her into War, or Ruin her by Compliance: the Enervated Carthaginians, in Their Anxiety for Peace, Consented to Give Up Even Their Arms and Their Children*. Its interpretation as a "moral example" relies on the distribution of detailed historical and symbolic references. The picture is studded with these devices, not just the hostages and the discarded

weapons of the title but also items of clothing and musical instruments – taken from Thomas Hope’s *Costume of the Ancients* (1809) – and inscriptions on the buildings alluding to Carthaginian leaders of the first and second Punic Wars.⁴² The symbolism of the setting sun is reinforced by the snake coiled amidst the flower garlands on the thyrsus in the left foreground, a comment on Rome’s deceitful terms.⁴³ These and other clues are visible to the attentive viewer prepared to scrutinize this picture from very close range.

Turner positions a sculpture of the god Mercury on the left, closely based on a classical example now in the Uffizi museum. In Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Mercury instructs Aeneas to abandon Dido and Carthage so that he may fulfil his destiny and found Rome, the same power that is now at Carthage’s throat. Mercury was also the god of commerce and it is the pursuit of commerce that has brought the Carthaginians to their present predicament. As one of Turner’s sources, Oliver Goldsmith, pointed out, good living born of commerce had made Carthage soft, hiring mercenaries rather than defending itself with its own forces: “all the grandeur of Carthage was founded on commerce alone, which is ever fluctuating, and, at best, serves to dress up a nation, to invite the conqueror, and only to adorn the victim for its destruction.”⁴⁴ Thornbury’s talk of Turner seeing Carthage as “a moral example” is thus explained. This picture may be understood as addressing England, now the supreme economic power in the world, to guard against the corruption that the unfettered pursuit of commerce might bring in its wake.

Constable is often held up as Turner’s complement, an artist who worked within a narrower compass, was slow to receive academic honors and never achieved the same recognition in his lifetime. Constable’s dogged insistence in his early career on naturalism and his pictorial exploitation of the unexceptional landscape around the family home is noteworthy. It is arguable that his association with the national landscape was largely assisted by the early addition of his painting *The Cornfield* (1826) to the National Gallery, donated by a body of subscribers shortly after his death in 1837. *The Haywain* (1821) joined it in 1886. These generic titles, although not Constable’s, echo his own propensity to use non-topographical descriptions for most of the 6-foot canvasses with which he asserted the claims of modern landscape, starting with the *The White Horse* of 1819 (Frick Collection, New York). By the 1890s there were coach tours run by Thomas Cook and the Great Eastern Railway to “Constable Country” (the Stour Valley on the Essex–Suffolk border); indeed, in 1832 Constable himself was told by a fellow stage-coach traveller that the area they were passing through was “Constable’s Country.”⁴⁵

Yet, as Michael Rosenthal first pointed out, Constable’s East Anglia was increasingly a willed fiction. Early in his career his adoption of naturalism had allowed him to offer careful explorations of environment and activity, an insider’s understanding of a rural community and its seasonal occupations. Economic depression following the end of the Napoleonic Wars ruptured this organic vision, bread riots and rick-burning now threatened to overturn the stable world Constable had enjoyed as a boy. His paternalistic understanding of an untroubled

rural life, the product of his family's successful enterprise in milling and shipping grain and importing coal, could no longer be sustained. Resident in London, and painting for spectators largely ignorant of rural specifics, Constable's detailed engagement with place was progressively replaced with a more generalized approach to nature.⁴⁶

The shift away from naturalism saw Constable employing a more expressive vocabulary and *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* (1831) is a good example. Although Constable himself professed impatience with symbolism, as his reported comments on the meaning of Ruisdael's *Jewish Cemetery* reveal, following his wife's death in 1828 his pictures took on a more forbidding aspect, with turbulent skies and agitated handling. Scholars debate whether or not Constable's paintings at the close of his career may be read as responsive to wider cultural change and *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* is a contested site for these arguments. It was painted shortly after the so-called Swing riots in agricultural areas of southern England (1830) and exhibited as the agitation for parliamentary reform became more urgent, following the General Election of 1830. The three Reform Bills presented to Parliament in 1831 and 1832 were designed to extend the franchise and to redistribute constituencies to reflect shifts in population. Constable's patron and friend, John Fisher, the archdeacon of Salisbury, referred to this picture as "the church under a cloud." Constable supported the Tories politically and, like Fisher, viewed with dismay and discomfort the erosion of the old political settlement. As a bastion of the established order, the church was indeed under a cloud.

The broad handling of paint, so typical of Constable's work in the later 1820s and 1830s, regularly antagonized the critics. Indeed, although after Constable's death it was initially proposed to donate *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* to the National Gallery, its execution was considered too obtrusive for that purpose. Turner, too, was attacked for his breadth of handling and his adventurous use of color. These stylistic departures are a feature of landscape's increasingly adventurous use of the medium. Of all the genres, landscape was most suited to pictorial experimentation. Gainsborough and even Wilson, at the very end of his career, had adopted techniques whose rendering of form tended toward imprecision and the rise of the picturesque had also occasioned some discussion on the relationship between subject and image. In 1792 William Gilpin offered some reflections on paint handling as it applied to the picturesque. Noting that "a free, bold touch is in itself pleasing," he moved on to consider paint application with respect to landscape:

If indeed, either in literary, or in picturesque composition you endeavour to draw the reader, or the spectator from the *subject* to the *mode of executing* it, your affectation disgusts. At the same time, if some care, and pains be not bestowed on the *execution*, your slovenliness disgusts as much. Tho perhaps the artist has more to say, than the man of letters, for paying attention to his *execution*. A truth is a truth, whether delivered in the language of a philosopher, or a peasant: and the *intellect*

receives it as such. But the artist, who deals in lines, surfaces, and colours, which are an immediate address to the *eye*, conceives the *very truth itself* concerned in his *mode* of representing it.⁴⁷

Gilpin's remarks point up a phenomenon that became increasingly evident in landscape in the first decades of the nineteenth century, the prominence of the mode of execution. In 1801 a critic complained that Turner's "desire of giving a *free touch* to the objects he represents betrays him into *carelessness* and *obscurity* so that we hardly ever see a firm determined outline in anything he does."⁴⁸ Likewise, as early as the 1810s, it was regretted that Constable's pictures "from want of finish, are rather sketches than pictures."⁴⁹ These remarks multiplied as the artists' careers developed, as both of them adopted techniques developed in their sketching practices and transposed them to finished pictures. In Turner's case, this seeming indistinctness was compounded by the luxuriousness of his coloring, *Ulysses deriding Polyphemus* (1829, National Gallery), for example, being described as:

the perfection of unnatural tawdriness. In fact, it may be taken as a specimen of *colouring run mad* – positive vermilion – positive indigo, and all the most glaring tints of green, yellow, and purple contend for mastery of the canvas, with all the vehement contrasts of a kaleidoscope or Persian carpet ... truth, nature, and feeling are sacrificed to melodramatic effect.⁵⁰

Yet despite the critics' discomfort, it would be wrong to see either artist as abandoning nature for formal experiment. Both Turner and Constable studied nature closely as the basis for their art, and accepted that their predecessors in landscape painting had been similarly attentive. It is well known, for example, that Constable owned Thomas Forster's *Researches about Atmospheric Phaenomena* (1815) and made a series of cloud studies in the 1820s. Turner's similar venture, his "Skies" sketchbook, dates from c.1815–1816.⁵¹ Turner insisted that:

Every look at nature is a refinement upon art: each tree and blade of grass or flower is not to him the individual tree grass or flower, but what is in relation to the whole, its tone its contrast and its hue and how far practicable: admiring nature by the power and practicability of his Art, and judging of his Art by the perceptions drawn from Nature.⁵²

Constable claimed: "Painting is a science, and should be pursued as an inquiry into the laws of nature. Why, then, may not landscape painting be considered as a branch of natural philosophy, of which pictures are but experiments?"⁵³

Equally, however, both artists were concerned to produce images that were more than compendia of naturalistic detail. Constable's deployment of a flickering light and broad handling suggested something of nature as dynamic rather than fixed; Turner's fascination with light and color removed the world from any literal or instrumental understanding, reordering it to suggest a more complex register of comprehension. In both approaches the dignity of modern landscape painting,

its possibility of comparison with the great art of the past, was made evident in what we could call the event of painting. We also need to remember that especially in the circumstances of the Royal Academy exhibitions, landscape paintings were in competition with each other as well as with history painting and portraiture. High color and forceful effects helped achieve distinction in the crowded displays of nineteenth-century hangs.⁵⁴

Landscape painting remained popular throughout the nineteenth century, and many able practitioners made successful careers as landscape specialists. Yet it is widely accepted that landscape's position as the paramount art form in British painting was no longer secure after Turner's death in 1851. One explanation for this is that the generation born in the 1770s had entered the profession when artistic theory and institutional arrangements expected ambitious art to build on the cultural legacy of the old masters and to work responsibly for the refinement of civic society. For all his technical radicalism, Turner stayed true to this eighteenth-century inheritance throughout his career, producing pictures that ranged across historical incident and modern life with social, political, and ethical intent. Constable offers a less straightforward case. His development of landscape painting as a serious art form, irrespective of the social and political implications of many of his pictures, did not make use of historical subject matter. But, like Turner, he clearly situated his art within the great tradition of landscape painting, both of them paying repeated homage to the old masters even as they extended landscape's remit into new areas of competence. Constable and Turner, despite their differences in approach, thought of landscape as a serious, intellectually engaged, and public art.

Those who followed them were, perhaps, less sure. Landscape was still exhibited in public venues, of course, but its ambition and reach, its confident articulation of its centrality as a mode of discourse was waning. Samuel Palmer (1805–1881) is a case in point. *The Valley Thick with Corn* was painted in 1825, one of the so-called visionary landscapes of his early career. In his late teens Palmer fell under the influence of the landscape painter John Linnell whose own paintings made significant contributions to the development of naturalism but who also believed strongly in the spiritual potential of art. Through Linnell, Palmer was introduced to William Blake in 1824, the year before he produced this drawing, and he was frequently in Blake's company in the last three years of the older artist's life. He made a number of drawings in 1825 inspired by the landscapes familiar to him around Dulwich, at that time a village south of London, and Shoreham, in Kent, some 15 miles further to the south east.

Palmer's insistence on a spiritual reaction to place, and his forceful antipathy to naturalism, produced an image diametrically opposed to his contemporaries' orientation to modernity. The figure in the foreground wears Jacobean clothes, and has been interpreted as a reference to Christian in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. The landscape in which he reclines is depicted as preternaturally fertile, with abundant crops and healthy livestock. The disposition of the landscape features and the enormous harvest moon on the horizon, coupled with the use of sepia and gum to unify the composition, position the spectator within this created

world. The image is essentially a stimulus to meditation, requiring slow and diligent perusal to reveal all its details. Although Palmer did exhibit works like this at the Royal Academy, their appeal is essentially private rather than public, best reserved for individual contemplation.⁵⁵

The fecundity of this imagined scene is redolent of pastoral sentiment. On numerous occasions Palmer wrote about ideas of pastoral as the antithesis of modernity and urban life, finding refuge in a poetic apprehension of landscape. If in Palmer's estimation landscape was a retreat from what he found objectionable in the modern age, it was also thereby a retreat from his contemporaries' confident and expansive deployment of landscape as a significant mode of engaged pictorial discourse. Ironically, the disjunction between the world Palmer conjured into being and the social and political reality of his times was brought home to him powerfully in 1830, as the landscape around Shoreham erupted into rick-burning and machine wrecking during the Swing riots. Like Constable, Palmer was a Tory in politics and concerned about the development of English society as it moved from the deferential and hierarchical model associated with the landed interest. In December 1832, with the country preparing for a General Election in the aftermath of the passing of the Great Reform Act, Palmer printed a pamphlet, *An Address to the Electors of West Kent*, whose reactionary tone and extravagant language laid bare his anxieties about the advent of liberal democracy.

Palmer left Shoreham in the mid 1830s. In subsequent years he achieved a certain amount of respectability through his art, which became much more orthodox in its presentation. He was rediscovered in the early twentieth century and from the 1920s until the emergence of neo-romanticism in the 1940s his art became a point of reference for the reinvestigation of the national landscape. Yet for all its intrinsic interest, as part of the complex web of developments in modern British culture, the Palmer revival demonstrates all too clearly the difficulty of reprising visionary intensity in the twentieth century. Palmer's recuperation reminds us, however, that landscape painting more generally was a significant aspect of modern art in Britain. What distinguishes it from the art produced between 1770 and 1840 is fundamentally a matter of context. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries landscape painting was significant because it provided the best means for engaging with British culture as it underwent large-scale social development. It is a moot point whether landscape painting in the twentieth century was similarly positioned as the best available means for engaging with modernity.

Notes

- 1 See, for example Beckett R. B. (ed.) (1962–1968) *John Constable's Correspondence*, 6 vols, Ipswich: Suffolk Records Society; Gage, J. (1969a) *A Decade of English Naturalism 1810–1820*, exhib. cat. Norwich Castle Museum and Victoria and Albert Museum; Gage, J. (1969b) *Colour in Turner: Poetry and Truth*, London: Studio Vista;

- Bachrach A. G. H., *et al.* (1970–1971) *Shock of Recognition : the Landscape of English Romanticism and the Dutch Seventeenth-Century School*, exhib. cat. Mauritshuis and Tate Gallery, London: Arts Council; Parris, L. and Shields, C. (1971) *Constable: the Art of Nature*, exhib. cat., London: Tate Gallery; Greenacre, F. (1973) *The Bristol School of Artists: Francis Danby and Painting in Bristol, 1810–1840*, exhib. cat. Bristol: Bristol City Art Gallery, Herrmann, L. (1973) *British Landscape Painting of the Eighteenth Century*, London: Faber and Faber.
- 2 Solkin, D. (1982) *Richard Wilson: the Landscape of Reaction*, London: Tate Gallery.
 - 3 See especially, Hawes, L. (1982) *Presences of Nature British Landscape 1780–1830*, New Haven, CT: Yale Center for British Art; Fleming-Williams, I. and Parris, L. (1984) *The Discovery of Constable*, London: Hamish Hamilton; Lister, R. (1974) *The Letters of Samuel Palmer*, Oxford: Clarendon Press; Lister, R. (1984) *Samuel Palmer and “The Ancients”*, Cambridge: Fitzwilliam Museum; Shanes, E. (1979) *Turner’s Picturesque Views in England and Wales*, London: Chatto and Windus; Barrell, J. (1980) *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Clarke, M. (1981) *The Tempting Prospect: a Social History of English Watercolours*, London: British Museum Publications; Lindsay, J. (1966) *J.M.W. Turner His Life & Work: a Critical Biography*, London: Cory, Adams & Mackay; Reynolds, G. (1970) *Constable, the Natural Painter*, London: Evelyn, Adams & Mackay; Reynolds, G. (1984) *The Later Paintings and Drawings of John Constable*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press; Rosenthal, M. (1982) *British Landscape Painting*, Oxford: Phaidon; Rosenthal, M. (1983) *Constable: the Painter and his Landscape*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press; Butlin, M. and Joll, E. (1984) *The Paintings of J.M.W. Turner*, 2 vols, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, revised edition; Gage, J. (1969) *Colour in Turner: Poetry and Truth*, London: Studio Vista; Gage, J. (1980) *Collected Correspondence of J.M.W. Turner*, Oxford: Clarendon Press; Wilton, A. (1979) *The Life and Work of J.M.W. Turner*, London: Academy Editions; Wilton, A. (1989) *Turner in his Time*, London: Thames & Hudson.
 - 4 Conal Shields Introduction’ in Parris, L. (1973) *Landscape in Britain, c.1750–1850*, London: Tate Gallery, 9.
 - 5 See Gibson-Wood, C. (2000) *Jonathan Richardson: Art Theorist of the English Enlightenment*, New Haven: Yale University Press; Lambert, R. (2004) *John Constable and the Theory of Landscape Painting*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
 - 6 Discourse xiv, delivered December 10, 1788, in Wark, R. (1975) (ed.) *Sir Joshua Reynolds Discourses on Art*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 255.
 - 7 Discourse xiv, delivered December 10, 1788, in Wark, R. (1975) (ed.) *Sir Joshua Reynolds Discourses on Art*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 254.
 - 8 For recent accounts of Gainsborough’s landscape painting see Rosenthal, M. (1999) *The Art of Thomas Gainsborough: “A Little Business for the Eye,”* New Haven and London: Yale University Press and Asfour, A. and Williamson, P. (1999) *Gainsborough’s Vision*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
 - 9 “Lecture IV – on Invention, Part 11,” [written 1804] in Knowles, J. (1831) (ed.) *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli, Esq, M.A., R.A.*, London, 1831, vol. 11, 217.
 - 10 Britton, J. (1812) *The Fine Arts of the English School*, London: Longman, 65–66.
 - 11 Letter dated November 1811, in Gage, J. (1980) *Collected Correspondence of J.M.W. Turner*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 50.
 - 12 Perspective lecture, BL Add. MS 46151 AA, f28v.

- 13 See Wark, R. (1975) (ed.) *Reynolds Discourses on Art*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 268.
- 14 [William Carey] (1825) *Observations on the Probable Decline or Extinction of British Historical Painting from the effects of the church exclusion of paintings*, London: Howlett and Brimmer, 3.
- 15 In 1811, 1812, 1814, 1815, 1816, 1818, 1819, 1821, 1824, 1825, 1827, and 1828.
- 16 See Ziff, J. (1963) “‘Backgrounds: Introduction of Architecture and Landscape.’ A Lecture by J.M.W. Turner,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 26, 124–147.
- 17 Joseph Farington’s diary entry for January 8, 1811 records: “[John Landseer] told me that Turner is desirous of having a Professorship of Landscape Painting established in the Royal Academy.” Turner was presumably responding to the fact that a Professorship of Sculpture had been inaugurated at the Royal Academy in 1810. See Cave, K., Garlick, K., and Macintyre, A. (eds) (1978–1998) *The Diary of Joseph Farington*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, xi, 3847. Turner’s initiative was unsuccessful and although he left money in his will for the same purpose, the Royal Academy did not pursue this.
- 18 “Monthly Retrospect of the Fine Arts,” *Monthly Magazine*, July 1810, 577; cited in Kriz, K. D. (1997) *The Idea of the English Landscape Painter: Genius as Alibi in the Early Nineteenth Century*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 9.
- 19 Cunningham, A. (1829) *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, includes short biographies of Gainsborough and Wilson. See also Wright, T. (1824) *Some Account of the Life of Richard Wilson*; Leslie, C. R. (1843) *Memoirs of the Life of John Constable*; Fulcher, G. W. (1856) *Life of Thomas Gainsborough*; and Thornbury, W. (1862) *The Life of J.M.W. Turner*.
- 20 The National Gallery’s stock was initially built up by bequests. A policy of purchases was not instituted until the 1860s.
- 21 For Vernon see Hamlyn, R. (1993) *Robert Vernon’s Gift: British Art for the Nation*, London: Tate Gallery. For the Turner Bequest see Smiles, S. (2007) *J.M.W. Turner: the Making of a Modern Artist*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- 22 See especially Hemingway, A. (1992) *Landscape Imagery and Urban Culture in Early Nineteenth-century Britain*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 23 For Constable see Beckett, R. B. (1970) *John Constable’s Discourses*, Ipswich: Suffolk Records Society; and Parris, L., Shields, C., and Fleming-Williams, I. (1975) *John Constable: Further Documents and Correspondence*, Ipswich: Tate Gallery and Suffolk Records Society; Leslie, C. R. (1951) *Memoirs of the Life of John Constable [1845]*, London: Phaidon, 289–331.
- 24 See Andrews, A. (1989) *The Search for the Picturesque: Landscape, Aesthetics and Tourism in Britain, 1760–1800*, Aldershot: Scholar Press.
- 25 Marshall, W. (1795) *A Review of The Landscape, A Didactic Poem: also of An Essay on the Picturesque; Together with Practical Remarks on Rural Ornament*, London: G. Nicol. See also Robinson, S. (1991) *Inquiry into the Picturesque*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- 26 See Helsinger, E. K. (1982) *Ruskin and the Art of the Beholder*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- 27 See Smiles, S. (2000) *Eye Witness: Artists and Visual Documentation in Britain, 1770–1830*, Aldershot and Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 147–177.
- 28 See Beckett, R. B. (1962–1968), iv, 334, 337, 445–446.

- 29 Leslie, C. R. (1951) *Memoirs of the Life of John Constable* [1843], London: Phaidon Press, 297.
- 30 "Hints to amateurs in the study of landscape," *Library of the Fine Arts*, vol. II, August–December 1831, 277.
- 31 Hardie, M. (ed.) (1919) Edward Norgate *Miniatura or the Art of Limning* [1648–1650], Oxford, 42.
- 32 Payne Knight, R. (1795) *The Landscape: a Didactic Poem* (2nd edn).
- 33 Prospectus published 1829. *English Landscape Scenery* was published in five parts, each containing four mezzotints by David Lucas after Constable's designs.
- 34 Perspective Lecture, BL Add. MS 46151 cc – (?1810).
- 35 Letter to Fisher 1821, in Beckett vol. vi, 76–78, October 1821.
- 36 See Barrell, J. (1980) *The Dark Side of the Landscape: the Rural Poor in English Painting 1730–1840*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Bermingham, A. (1987) *Landscape and Ideology: the English Rustic Tradition, 1740–1860*, London: Thames and Hudson; Rosenthal, M. (1999) *The Art of Thomas Gainsborough: "A Little Business for the Eye"*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press.
- 37 For a review of these competing accounts see Wendorf, R. (2005) *After Sir Joshua: Essays on British Art and Cultural History*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press. See also Payne, C. (1994) *Toil and Plenty: Images of the Agricultural Landscape in England, 1780–1890*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press.
- 38 Gilpin, W. (1786) *Observations, Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty, Made in the Year 1772, On Several Parts of England; Particularly the Mountains, and Lakes of Cumberland and Westmoreland*, London: R. Blamire, vol. ii, 44.
- 39 See Arthur Young's (1770) *Six Month's Tour through the North of England*, commenting on Stubbs' patron the Marquess of Rockingham as an improving and patriotic agriculturalist.
- 40 *Hannibal* (exhibited 1812), *Dido and Aeneas* (1814), *Dido building Carthage: or, the Rise of the Carthaginian Empire* (1815). See also *Dido directing the Equipment of the Fleet, or The Morning of the Carthaginian Empire* (1828), *Regulus* (1828; reworked 1837) and *Aeneas relating his Story to Dido, The Visit to the Tomb, Mercury sent to admonish Aeneas, The Departure of the Fleet* (all 1850).
- 41 Thornbury (1877) *The Life of J.M.W. Turner*, 2nd edn, 434.
- 42 The temple portico on the left includes the letters AMILCAR B, alluding to Hamilcar Barca, who was prominent in the first Punic war; on the triumphal monument to the right the letters HANN appear at the top, alluding either to Hannibal or to Hanno, one of his generals in the second Punic war; below them can be seen AI, referring to Hannibal or Hasdrubal, his brother and second in command, followed by CANNAE, the battle in 216 BCE in which Hannibal crushed the Romans.
- 43 As some verses in one of his sketchbooks of the time declared: "Perfidious Rome, the Myrtle proffers still/But round its branch insidious entwined the asp." "Hastings to Margate" sketchbook, TB CXL, 1815–1816, 4. See also 8.
- 44 Goldsmith, O. (1786) *The Roman History*, London, I, 309. This book was in Turner's library.
- 45 See Daniels, S. (1991) "The making of Constable Country, 1880–1940," *Landscape Research* 16 (2), 9–17. For the incident in 1832 when a passenger in a coach from East Bergholt to London told Constable "Yes Sir – this is Constable's Country!", see *Correspondence* vol. iv, 1966, 387.

- 46 Rosenthal, M. (1983) *Constable: the Painter and his Landscape*, New Haven, CT and London, Yale University Press.
- 47 Gilpin, W. (1792) *Three Essays: on Picturesque Beauty; on Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape: to which is added a poem on Landscape Painting*, London: R. Blamire, 18–19.
- 48 *The Porcupine* May 7, 1801 on Turner's *Dutch Boats in a Gale: Fishermen endeavouring to put their Fish on Board* (the Bridgewater Seapiece).
- 49 *The New Monthly Magazine and Universal Register*, iii, 18, July 1815, 550.
- 50 *Morning Herald*, May 5, 1829.
- 51 TB CLVIII, Tate Britain.
- 52 Emendation to John Opie's *Lectures on Painting* (58), cited in Barry Venning Turner's Annotated Books: Opie's "Lectures on Painting" and Shee's "Elements of Art" (I)' *Turner Studies*, 2, 1, 38–39.
- 53 In his fourth lecture at the Royal Institution, June 16, 1836.
- 54 See Solkin, D. *et al.* (2001) *Art on the Line: the Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House, 1780–1836*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press.
- 55 See Vaughan, W., Barker, E. B., and Harrison, C. (2005) *Samuel Palmer, 1805–1881: Vision and Landscape*, London: British Museum.

Landscape and National Identity

The Phoenix Park Dublin

Dana Arnold

This chapter considers the creation of a British identity in relation to the ways in which the aesthetics of landscape worked to promote the idea of nation that encompassed the doctrine of popular freedom and liberty from external constraint. Particular attention is paid to the adoption and creation of new identities through the British colonial presence in Ireland in the nineteenth century. My case study is the Phoenix Park in Dublin and I use this to show that nationhood and nationalism are self-consciously defined tools to focus loyalty and are part of the larger process of making cultural identities. The focus of this study is the national, imperial, and colonial aesthetic – how the aesthetics of landscape, and to a lesser extent here architecture, were used in the furtherance of particular social and political aims. In this way not only did aesthetic culture reinforce that of the dominant political and social ideology but also it re-presented and re-constructed the notion of a national identity.

The Phoenix Park allows us to think more broadly about the interaction between indigenous cultural identity and “Empire,” and how this impacted on the making of “Britishness” in all its complexities. Over the past 20 years the subject of colonialism has received much attention from scholars across a range of interconnected fields.¹ It is not the intention here to rehearse these arguments, nor to apply them to the specifics of Britishness. Instead, I intend to examine the idea of empire from the point of view of the “old colony” Anglo Saxon subject-object.² The period covered by the essays finishes well before the eve of the Second World War after which the whole structure of the British Empire and British national identity changes. At this point it is useful to step back and think about the concerns of postcolonial discourses that tend to focus on the effects and consequences of colonization on the colonized. For instance, in the book of essays *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha³ explores the ways in which the experience of empire and

the end of empire have shaped and been shaped by culture. Moreover, in the essay “The postcolonial and the postmodern,” Bhabha writes that

a range of contemporary critical theories suggest that it is from those who have suffered the sentence of history – subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement – that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking.

In the light of Bhabha’s ideas the wide range of voices from former new colonies, the Indian sub-continent or South America could shed a comparative, if not a more contentious light, on the aesthetics of Britishness. Although this is outside the concerns of this essay, one of my aims is to highlight how the visual culture of Britishness operated and its aesthetic consequences. Moreover, my western viewpoint does not attempt to negate these “other” voices or arguments, nor does it ignore the postcolonial frames through which empire and colonialism have been viewed in the past two decades. Rather I want to point the way to a kind of “unlearning” of the discourses of postcolonialism as a means of revisiting the cultural formulations behind the making of Britishness.⁴

Whose Empire?

The importance of text and verbalized imagery to the creation of an imperial frame of mind – the cultural representation of Britain – is the subject of much postcolonial discourse. This aspect of the “Cultures of Empire” is ably discussed by Catherine Hall in the introduction to her volume of the same name and does not warrant repetition here.⁵ Suffice to say in this context that the visual rather than the verbal aesthetic has remained on the margins of the literature on the cultures of colonialism. But the idea that “nation” can be “imagined” or aesthetized opens up the possibilities for discourse around the different constructions of cultural identities. Edward Said first explored the idea of a cultural identity and its relationship to colonialism in his now canonical work *Orientalism*⁶ but the focus remains on textual discourses and the narratives of the formation of imperial and anti-imperial attitudes. Some of these issues are taken up in Said’s later work *Culture and Imperialism*⁷ in which his discussion of how “the Orient” was constructed by westerners as an explanation of the nature of the west shows how it became a reflective tool to articulate the existence and justify the behavior of the “Occidental” colonial powers. The extraordinary reach of western imperialism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is a predominant aspect of geopolitical history. Neither Rome, nor Byzantium, nor Spain at the height of its glory came close to the imperial scope of France, the USA, and particularly Great Britain in these years. Said argues that the justification for empire-building was inescapably embedded in the western cultural imagination during the Age of Empire, and the imperial legacy remains influential on relations between the west and the formerly colonized world at every level of political, ideological, and social

practice. Said concentrates on literature, and not the visual arts, using a broad range of canonical works – including Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814), Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902), and Albert Camus’s *L’Etranger* (1942) as his evidence. Through these examples he shows how culture and politics cooperated, knowingly and unknowingly, to produce a system of domination that involved more than military might – to produce a western sovereignty that extended over forms, images, and the very imaginations of both the dominators and the dominated. The result was a “consolidated vision” that affirmed not only the Europeans’ right to rule but also their obligation to do so. In contrast to Said’s concerns, this chapter is interested in the mechanisms involved in the creation of this “consolidated vision.” The process of unpacking this vision, as worked through in each of the chapters, reveals complex and diverse results and possibilities. The broad time span of this volume and the cross-disciplinary subject matter are indicative of the possibility that the aesthetics of Britishness may have varied in the purpose, expression, and display between colonial situations, climates, and periods. Whereas postcolonial studies establish the western hegemony that is a necessary part of its discourse, it is important to attempt to fracture that colonial monolith to examine the strategies used in the telling of the various narratives of nationalism and cultural identity.

Constructions of Nation

The broader world stage is also the concern of Benedict Anderson’s enduring and hugely influential *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*.⁸ Anderson argues that national identity and national institutions are highly specific historical products. To this end he emphasizes the importance of print technologies in the process of nation-making and delineates the process by which the nation came to be at once imagined, modeled, adopted, and transformed. He shows how the European processes of inventing nationalism were transported to the developing world through colonialism and adapted by subject races in Latin America and Asia and suggests that nationalism was created in the eighteenth century as an “imagined community” or a “cultural artifact.”⁹ For Anderson, the development of nationalism stems from the convergence of capitalism and print technology on human language, which is primarily responsible for the emotional attachment to nationalism. The global historical and present-day concerns of Anderson’s study, which appeared almost a generation ago, are here focused in on Britain. Nationalism as a self-consciously constructed cultural artifact or imagined community as expressed through different modes of visual rather than literary formulae, albeit that these formulae may have a literary or linguistic basis, becomes the route through which these kinds of national identities can be interrogated. Anderson’s argument that print culture was central to the creation of an “imagined nation” is concerned principally with the act of reading, situating culture

within a verbalized tradition. Homi Bhabha echoes this analysis of the construction of cultural identity in his *Nation and Narration*, which explores the emergence of the novel and a growing sense of national identity.¹⁰

The Problem of Culture

The expression of Britishness through a visual cultural identity is a central concern of this volume. With this in mind, Raymond Williams's famous observation in *Keywords*¹¹ that "culture" is one of the two or three most complex words in the English language demonstrates the complexity of locating specific cultural identities in relationship to Britishness. Williams observes that the notion of "culture" is derived from "husbandry, the tending of natural growth." Since the sixteenth century this was extended to a process of human development; in Bacon's words, "the culture and manurance of minds." Williams identifies Herder's *Ideas of the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (1784–1791) as a key moment in the evolution of the term.¹² Herder argued for the need to speak of "cultures" in the plural, attacking the assumption of the universal histories that "civilization" or "culture" – the historical self-development of humanity – was what we would now call a unilinear process, leading to the high and dominant point of eighteenth-century European culture. But this idea of culture places emphasis on national and traditional cultures and brings to the fore the problematic relationship between the notions of "culture" and "civilization." And it is the "civilizing" aesthetic of Britishness that emerges as a potent theme in this volume. In recent years there has been a certain fashionable populism in the discourses of culture. In his 2000 book *The Idea of Culture*, Terry Eagleton inquires into the reasons why "culture" has achieved its predominant position in our own period, and provocatively proposes that it is time, while acknowledging its significance, to put it back in its place.¹³ Eagleton suggests that the word "culture" is perhaps "both too broad and too narrow to be greatly useful." But the word, precisely by virtue of its protean meanings, opens up a space where the narratives around the construction of cultural identities in a colonial world can become part of a broader discourse that untells these stories.

The Aesthetic

The aesthetics of the "imagined political community" is discussed by Terry Eagleton in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* who sees the bourgeois subject as an essential agent in the establishing of a "republic of taste," which corresponds to values of good and evil, virtue and vice. But for Eagleton the whole of social life is aestheticized, which signifies an inherently cohesive social order. By contrast this volume sees aesthetic identities as more complex, while accepting Eagleton's proposition of the connection between aestheticization and nation – which admits political and economic circumstances into the discourse, attention remains focused

on the aesthetic consequences of these identities. As a consequence these discourses are externalized to allow an examination of the practices and technologies of power expressed through the aesthetic to formulate a cultural identity in the landscape of the Phoenix Park that represents Britishness in a colonial context.

The Phoenix Park

The Phoenix Park lies to the northwest of the center of Dublin standing, in the nineteenth century, between the city and the countryside beyond. It represented the city through the Phoenix Pillar – the symbol of Dublin and of the British colonial presence, as it was the site of official governmental residences and army barracks. The scale and significance of the improvement works in the Phoenix Park carried out between 1832 and 1849 is comparable to those carried out in the Royal Parks in London earlier in the century.¹⁴ By the mid-century the Phoenix Park had been transformed into an attractive landscaped space with public areas and private, but now visible, official residences. This included a clear definition of the perimeter of the park, which was punctuated with new entrance gates and lodges. The landscape was drained, remodeled, and replanted and public pleasure grounds created. New directional axes through the park were established in the form of the Straight Avenue and other new roads, rides, and walkways, and the Wellington Testimonial provided a monumental reminder of British military and imperial might. There is no doubt that the public open spaces of the urban parks in London and Dublin took on a new significance in the nineteenth century as these cities grew in size and political importance. The work in the Royal Parks in London has been shown to be one way in which the state tried to shape this urban experience and social interaction through the design of specific environments.¹⁵ And this can also be identified as one of the motives behind the improvements to the Phoenix Park as many of the key figures involved in the project had also worked in the Royal Parks in London.

This section of the chapter constructs a contextualizing framework for the improvement of the park, examining its social, historical, and cultural significance against the backdrop of important political change – not least the 1829 Act of Catholic Emancipation and 1832 Reform Act. Indeed, the establishment of an urban bourgeois culture¹⁶ in the first half of the nineteenth century affected the relationship between state and monarch and encouraged the promotion of a nationalistic cultural identity. This impact on the bourgeois experience of the metropolis was seen in the new city plans and the development of the urban landscape. The public “body politic” was an essential part of this identity, so in this way the redesigning of the Phoenix Park becomes a barometer of Anglo-Irish relations in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. The relationship between London – as the first city of empire – and Dublin can be read through the work of the French philosophers and historians Michel Foucault and Pierre Nora. Nora helps us to think about these urban landscapes in a colonial context through his concept of a *lieu de mémoire*.

This establishes a material, symbolic, and functional site that is the product of the interrelationship between memory and history.¹⁷ These sites embody a will to remember and record – the respective functions of memory and history. But these *lieux de mémoire* also demonstrate the ability to change their meaning and relationship to other sites. The political weighting this concept lends to sites that endure through the colonial and post-colonial era helps bring to the fore the dialectical relationship between colonial and post-colonial spaces. And this is the case, for instance, in Zeynep Celik's discussion of *lieux de mémoire* in Algiers, which relies heavily on Nora's ideas and ably demonstrates their efficacy as a mode of analysis.¹⁸ But Celik and, through her reading of him, Nora rely on the passage of time to fully explore the slippage between colonizer's intentions and the colonized's reception and adaption of these actions. In her identification of those moments, when the reversal takes place between the dominant and the dominated *lieux de mémoire*, Celik uses Nora's idea of "distorting mirrors" to summarize how the urban spaces of Algiers retained the memory trace of both colonial and pre-colonial times – narrating this history from a postcolonial perspective. I want to stay with the concept of distorting mirrors but want also to collapse the space–time dimension that is so necessary for Celik's evocative discussion. My focus is the colonial situation in Ireland in the early nineteenth century and the attempts to create a national memory (in Nora's words) through landscape design that responded to a specific set of political and colonial circumstances. My aim is to show that in the politically charged urban landscape of Dublin, the will to create a *lieu de mémoire* brought with it a certain amount of cultural baggage that post-colonial theory allows me to unpack. But as the relationship between Ireland and Britain remains complex and has for centuries been a history of domination, appropriation, and revolt, the spaces cannot provide the "before," "during" and "after" that the 130-year occupation of Algiers by the French neatly supplies.

It is here that Michel Foucault's discussion of the idea of the heterotopia is useful.¹⁹ Foucault's analysis of the spaces that act as heterotopias relies on their sustained ambiguity in relationship to other sites. A site, according to Foucault, is defined by a cluster of relations it has – in other words it is characterized by the things to which it relates rather than by its own intrinsic qualities. But certain sites have the property of being related to other sites "in such a way as to suspect, neutralize or invert the set of relationships they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect." In this way places exist in society that are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which real sites that can be found within a culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. It is at this point that the analogy of the mirror used by Foucault helps to demonstrate the ambiguous relationship between utopia and heterotopia:

I believe that between utopias and heterotopias there might be a sort of mixed, joint experience, which would be the mirror... I see myself in the mirror where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, where I am not ... but in so far as the mirror does exist in reality ... it exerts a sort of counteraction

on the position that I occupy... It makes the place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real ... and absolutely unreal.²⁰

The mirror analogy suggests an absence of temporal linearity – a moment frozen in time rather like a snap shot, while also acknowledging the potential for flux and change. As a result, Foucault's concept of a heterotopia can allow for the passage of time as society can make a heterotopia function in a different fashion as its history unfolds.²¹ But it is the static, momentary quality that is of particular use in relation to my reading of the Phoenix Park in Dublin, which presents the idea of the Phoenix Park as a space that reflects an inverted image of the Royal Parks in London.²² As a heterotopia the Phoenix Park becomes an oppositional space, both in terms of its own internal dynamics between the public and private and the cultural and the useful, as well as its ability to refract the Royal Parks in London. Thinking about the Phoenix Park in this way enables us to see the significance of urban landscapes in their space–time location through a kaleidoscopic image of spatial oppositions, political readings, social rituals, and cultural practices.

Transformations

The picture that emerges of the Phoenix Park prior to its improvement is of an area with hilly aspects, boggy land, ramshackle buildings, uncontrolled grazing, and subject to frequent trespass as a result of the inadequate provision of a perimeter wall and insecure gateways. Despite these somewhat inhospitable surroundings, the Vice Regal Lodge – the official residence of the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland – the Chief Secretary's and the Under Secretary's Lodge were all situated in the park each within its own private demesne concealed by overgrown planting from public view. Alongside these the Mountjoy Barracks, Hibernian Military School, and the Magazine and Star Forts were all to be found within the Phoenix Park and, not least, the Phoenix Pillar, the symbol of the park itself. The transformation of the Phoenix Park into a smoothed and levelled landscape with a politically charged meaning is not at all unlike the large-scale landscaped gardening projects, which had become so popular as socially desirable objects and visitor attractions, in the eighteenth century. Indeed, the physical work involved in the re-imaging of the Phoenix Park rivaled the grand schemes of the landed elite, who embellished the land they owned with an aesthetic dressing that represented their political power and aspirations, while deflecting from the more rugged appearance of the working land, which underpinned their financial fortunes.

National Landscapes

Despite the increasing importance of the metropolitan landscape in the social and cultural map of Britain in the opening years of the nineteenth century, the importance of the rural landscape was not forgotten. The latter provided both

examples of how the landscape could be remodeled as well as guidelines for the viewing and consumption of these symbolic spaces. Home tourism had helped to develop nationalistic sentiment in the enjoyment of the British landscape. This was encouraged by writers like the Reverend William Gilpin who, in the 1780s, presented templates or guides to tourists on how to interpret views along picturesque lines so making them evocative of freedom and nationhood. Gilpin's way of seeing remained influential and prepared the way for the reading of the urban parks as a complex narrative where the correlation of freedom and nature inherent in the iconography of English garden design, as well as the landscape, was brought into the city for political and nationalistic ends. The urban landscape became an important element in the creation of nationalist feeling and a sense of belonging within an established social framework, especially for the urban middle class.

The eighteenth-century country house and its garden were symbols of the new society – aristocratic, leisured, landed, and rich. But in the nineteenth century the city became ever more important and home to an increasingly significant middle class where landscape remained a powerful element. Toward the end of the eighteenth century home tourism had developed to include the appreciation of the landscape in general, rather than just landscaped gardens, and here advice was on hand as to how to view it.²³ The political significance of the landscape and its ability to engender a sense of nationalism, pleasure, and/or well-being in the visitor did not go unnoticed by theorists and enlightenment thinkers. These principles were used in the urban plan of London to influence the subjective response of the individual to the new urban landscape. The theorists had established the symbolic function of landscape and architecture here it was used in the service of monarch, state, and nation, instead of an individual landowner. The educated population was already accustomed to reading the landscape and it could have distinctly political associations. In his *Essays on the Picturesque* (1794) Uvedale Price represents these views as he aligns good government with naturalism in landscape:²⁴

A good landscape is that in which all the parts are free and unconstrained, but in which, though some are prominent and highly illuminated, and others in shade and retirement; some rough, and others more smooth and polished, yet they are all necessary to the beauty, energy, effect and harmony of the whole. I do not see how good government can be more exactly defined.

His sentiments were echoed by Humphry Repton who was involved with the landscaping of London especially St James's Park and Russell Square:

The neatness, simplicity, and elegance of English gardening, have acquired the approbation of the present century, as the happy medium betwixt the wildness of nature and the stiffness of art; in the same manner as the English constitution is the happy medium betwixt the liberty of savages, and the restraint of despotic government.²⁵

The implications of these attitudes for the reading of urban landscapes come to the fore in the re-development of the Royal Parks and the Phoenix Park in Dublin. The direct association between landscape, politics, and a sense of national identity was intensified by the metropolitan context of these parks. Here, the laying out of the landscape with an emphasis on axiality and vista, linking key monuments to national greatness the nation's heroes and the impressive government offices and residences, created a new and important urban experience for both the upper and middle classes. The positive remarks by contemporary commentators and guide-books on the developments in the London parks may well have acted as an encouragement for the works in Dublin. The *London Lions* published in 1826 gives a sense of this appreciation of urban landscapes: of the Regent's Park it was said "The plan and size of the Park is in every respect worthy of the nation."²⁶ Alongside an improved metropolitan aesthetic the public's access to royal land was also seen as a great bonus for city dwellers. Percy's *History* remarked "It is fortunate for the inhabitants of London that the parks are royal demesnes" as they were, not least, the lungs of the metropolis.²⁷ Indeed, these feelings found official voice in The Committee on Public Walks 1833:

St James's Park, Green Park and Hyde Park ... afford to the inhabitants of this Western portion of the Metropolis inestimable advantages as Public Walks. The two latter Parks are open to all classes. St James's Park has lately been planted and improved with great taste, and the interior is now opened, as well Kensington gardens, to all persons well-behaved and properly dressed. Your Committee remarks with pleasure the advantage they afford to the Public.

The public gaze was to be directed to symbols of the nation that stood both inside and outside the parks. The combined experience of "common ownership" of these public open spaces and a coherent national identity gave both Londoners and visitors to the metropolis a sense of belonging.

These new urban landscapes were also intended to provide markers of this new national identity. According to a contemporary commentary from 1816 these included:

new palaces for the sovereign and the Duke of Wellington – a national monument as memorial of our naval victories, another to the memory of general, officers and soldiers, a new custom house, Post Office and several bridges.²⁸

All of the above underscored the role of the metropolis as a nexus of nationalistic sensibilities.²⁹ The importance of the urban landscape was not forgotten here, as the Royal Parks were the site for many of the plans for these new palaces and monuments. The Phoenix Park had some similar associations, as it was already the site of like buildings and the remnants of the old pre-1798 system of government – most notably, the Vice Regal Lodge and the Chief Secretary's demesne. These symbols in the performance of the rituals of a patrician authority were now

counterbalanced by the increasing political importance of the urban middle class whose need for some kind of aesthetic expression of their identity had to be met. But the urban landscape of Dublin requires a more complex reading than its London counter-site, as it is in a colonial context. Here, the heterotopic functions of the spaces of the Phoenix Park come to the fore as the re-ordered park both re-presents the Royal Parks and offers a tighter, more orderly version of the same.

The National Hero

The British military successes at Trafalgar and Waterloo prompted plans for monuments both to the victories and the heroic leaders – Nelson and Wellington. Commemoration of these events was a nationwide phenomenon, but few of the projects to celebrate them planned for London were successfully completed.³⁰ In Dublin, however, monuments were erected to both Nelson and Wellington. William Wilkins's Nelson Column had been constructed in the centre of Dublin in 1808³¹ and in 1814 the Wellington Fund had been opened with the idea that there should also be a monument to the Duke in the city. Wellington had long-standing connections with Ireland – not only was he born there but, perhaps more significantly, he was made the country's Chief Secretary, a post he relinquished in 1808 when he was appointed Commander of the Peninsula.

The debates around the kind of monument that should be erected to the Duke in Dublin shed light on how national identities can be expressed. The views of J. W. Croker, an MP and member of the committee that administered the Wellington Fund, on the subject of monuments are clearly set out in his letter to the Secretary of the Dublin Wellington Fund dated October 7, 1814.

I quite agree with the committee in its predilection for a pillar. I was one of the pillarists in the Nelson case and my only wish for our column to be one of more magnificent dimensions. Great height is the cheapest way and one of the most certain of obtaining sublimity. Ten thousand pounds will bring you the highest column in the world, and will produce an astonishing effect; fifty thousand pounds would serve to erect an arch, and when it was erected you would have it dated... Therefore, I exhort you to keep the column form. Whatever you do be at least sure to make it stupendously high; let it be of all the columns in the world the most lofty.

Nelson's is 202, Trajan's about 150, Antonius 132 or as some have it 180, Buonaparte's in the Place Vendôme is, I think, near 200. I wish therefore that you should not fall short of 250, and I should prefer to have it exactly from the first layer to the base of crown of the statue 300.³²

The plans for the Wellington monument in Dublin were given fresh impetus by the victory at Waterloo as seen, for instance, in the two designs for triumphal arches offered by James Gandon in 1815–1816. The Phoenix Park was chosen as the appropriate site for the monument (whatever its final form was to be) as the



FIG. 18.1 Wellington Testimonial in the Phoenix Park Dublin, engraving c.1830.

Source: From Wright, G. N. (1833) *Ireland Illustrated: From Original Drawings* London: H. Fisher & Son. Downloaded from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Wellington_Testimonial,_1830_v3.jpg#filelinks, public domain image

Secretary of State and his chief officers lived there and like Hyde Park in London it was the scene of military exercises. However, the Dublin Committee decided on a pillar to be designed by Robert Smirke, which was erected in the Phoenix Park. There are formal and ideological similarities in placing such a monument in the Royal Parks in London and Dublin. But the meaning of the Wellington column in the Phoenix Park is subtly different. It is a statement of national pride but it is made within a colonial context and, ironically, it is one of the more successful attempts to celebrate the Duke as the monuments to his victory over the French in London were dogged by controversy, apathy, and ridicule.³³

The Political Backdrop to the Phoenix Park as a Symbol of Colonial Rule

The works in the Phoenix Park can be set in the context of the turbulent Anglo-Irish relations during the opening years of the nineteenth century.³⁴ The 1798 rebellion precipitated the abolition of the Irish Parliament, or College Green Assembly, and the transfer of the government to London, although the Irish Exchequer was not amalgamated with the rest of Britain until 1816.³⁵ This meant that Ireland was now subsumed into British political and cultural identity. The nature of Ireland's colonial dependency changed as a metropolitan system of government was established. Although this was nominally run from Dublin it was clearly rooted in London. Moreover, a distinctly Protestant culture emerged in the decades after the Union that became a driving force in urban politics.

The governmental structure in Ireland retained some facets of pre-Union times. The Viceroy, also known as the Lord Lieutenant, and his "court" remained in place in Dublin, despite the transfer of power to London. The Chief Secretary maintained a powerful role – often augmented by good connections with the British cabinet.³⁶ The two posts did not always work well together. The Chief Secretary and his Under Secretary were more politically pro-active and often used patronage of various kinds for their own political ends. Part of the development of a tighter governmental structure in Ireland in the post-Union period was state involvement with improvements in education, public health, and public works.³⁷ Here there was more decisive and extensive intervention than in mainland Britain, which helped ensure the implementation of a metropolitan system of rule. The Phoenix Park was, then, a site of both geographical and political importance in Dublin and can be seen as a focal point of the interaction between colonial rule and urban planning.

By 1828 the political and religious tensions in Ireland had escalated considerably. The Catholic question was becoming more of an issue as Daniel O'Connell, their leader, had been elected to Parliament in 1828 in a by-election in County Clare. Roman Catholics were not allowed to sit in the House of Commons but any attempt to bar O'Connell from doing so would be likely to strike up rebellion in Ireland. The alternative solution of calling a General Election would only intensify the problem, as it was likely all of Ireland except Ulster would return Roman Catholic members of parliament. The Duke of Wellington, by now Prime Minister, decided to admit Catholics to parliament on a temporary basis on condition of them taking an oath of loyalty. Further, the Catholic priesthood was to be licenced and paid for by the government in an attempt to control their behaviour. Opinion had been moving some way toward Catholic emancipation as the House of Commons had voted in favor of it in 1821 and 1825, but the House of Lords had rejected it each time. The problem, in 1828, focused on Robert Peel, the leader of the House of Commons and Home Secretary, who was responsible for Ireland. He was known as "Orange Peel" and, therefore, hardly likely to be in favor of any tolerance of the Catholics.

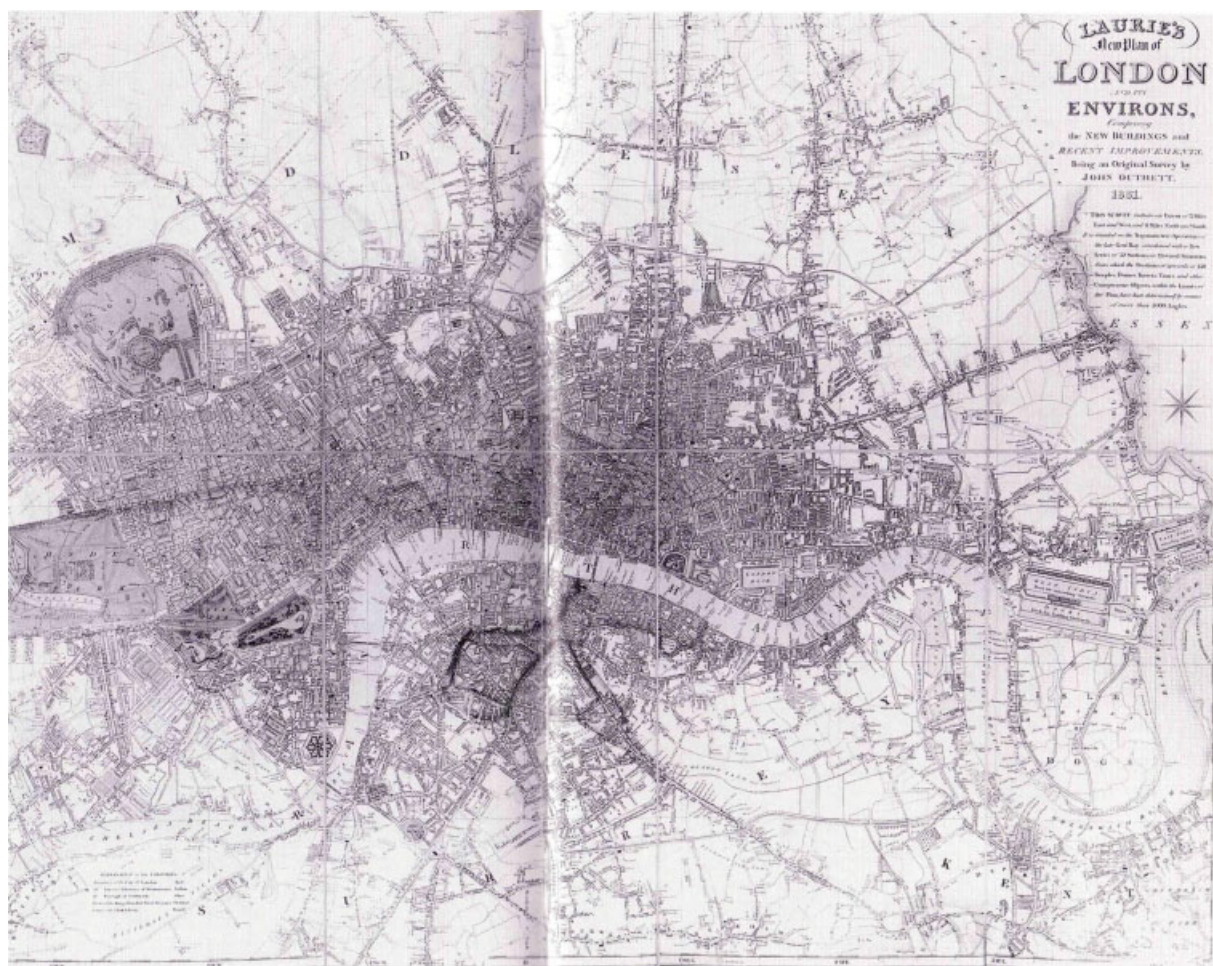


FIG. 18.2 Laurie's New Plan of London 1831 showing the Royal Parks in the west of the city.
Source: Private collection.

But Wellington decided in the summer of 1828 that emancipation must be granted by the autumn and he worked out proposals for this.

The terms offered by Wellington were that Catholic priests should operate under royal licence. Forty-shilling freeholders (that is, most of the Catholic peasantry) should be disenfranchised and only more substantial freeholders should be allowed to vote. Certain high offices – the Lord Chancellor, First Lord of the Treasury, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland – all controlled a high degree of patronage in the Anglican Church. These offices should remain in Protestant and, therefore, in crown hands. Finally, the Catholic Association – O’Connell’s political machine in Ireland should be forbidden.

In 1829 the Act of Catholic Emancipation was passed, to which, despite much opposition, the Duke of Wellington had given his support. Charles Arbuthnot had played an important role in ensuring the necessary support of the Whig opposition especially Lord Duncannon and Earl de Grey. This was quickly followed by the enfranchisement of the middle classes in the 1832 Reform Act. The residency qualification of voters in this act made the Protestant bourgeoisie a significant force in Irish urban politics.³⁸ These social, religious, and political changes highlighted the need for a tight metropolitan government in Ireland. It needed to be both effective and have an appropriate symbolic presence in the cityscape to adequately represent British cultural identity. The Protestant middle class needed to find an appropriate aesthetic expression of its cultural identity, which was both located in and dislocated from mainland Britain. The redesign of the Phoenix Park had, then, to meet this need as well as being a visual signifier of state authority and ideology. It was, at once, a mirror of London and its oppositional space.

The Reform of the Irish Board of Works – a Signifier of Metropolitan Systems of Government

The escalating troubles in Ireland in the 1820s coincided with attempts to tighten control in the province – in particular the Irish Board of Works. Attention to the activities of the Board coincided with the 1828 moratorium that had halted most of the major work being carried out in London by the Offices of Woods and Works. In the same year Lord Lowther was made First Commissioner of the Office of Woods and Forests. Up until this point little attention had been paid to crown lands in Ireland. But Lowther made inquiries into the Phoenix Park wishing to be informed on “the extent, the income; the pasturage; number and names of lodges; whether any other ground is attached to the office of Lord Lieutenant; what extent of ground is attached to [the residences of] the Lord Lieutenant and his secretary.”³⁹ The inquiry was carried out by Lord Palmerston’s agents in Leinster Street and sent back to Lowther via Mr Robinson, Secretary to the Board of Works in Ireland, which was then responsible for the Phoenix Park. This inquiry may not have been totally innocent as there were strong suspicions of mismanagement and financial irregularities on the part of the Irish Board of Works. And in 1829 the

Duke of Wellington launched an inquiry into the Irish Board of Works' activities that led to significant changes in the management of the Phoenix Park. Given the political situation, the symbolic function of the park, and the nature of its residents, the attention paid to the Phoenix Park can at least be termed timely.

The death of George IV in 1830 prompted the reorganization and financial restructuring of the management of all aspects of public works in Britain as well as Ireland. The English Offices of Woods and Works were merged in 1832.⁴⁰ In Ireland the Board of Public Works was established even earlier in 1831 to replace the Board of Works and the Phoenix Park was placed in its care. But the government changed its mind quite quickly about who should have responsibility for the park, as in 1835 the supervision of the park was divided. The enclosed grounds and buildings associated with the Lord Lieutenant and other officers of state was put in the care of the Board of Public Works; all remaining areas of the park, where the greatest number of improvements were planned and to which the general public were admitted, were under the care of the Office of Woods.⁴¹ One of the main reasons for this shift in policy appears to be funding. The improvements of the parks were to be paid for out of the Land Revenues Account for Ireland, which was increasing at a fair rate at this time, and not out of a parliamentary grant. This pattern of funding and management followed that of the Royal Parks in London and obviated the problem of using public funds for such work. Moreover, the reform of the Irish Board of Works was part of the policy of economic development in Ireland. The Board's remit was wide-ranging including government-funded improvements to roads and railways, which would strengthen economic activity and growth.⁴² The division of the care of the Phoenix Park was symbolic of the divided governmental structure of Ireland. On the one hand there was a system administered, albeit nominally, from Dublin Castle by offices and bodies established in pre-Union days – in this case the Chief and Under Secretaries and the newly reformed Board of Public Works. On the other hand there were London-based authorities – specifically here the Office of Woods – whose concern was to improve the quality of the urban fabric.

The 1832 and 1834 Reports

It is against this background of social and political upheaval and reorganization of the administration of crown lands in Ireland that a report on the state of the Phoenix Park and recommendations for improvements was commissioned from the architect Decimus Burton in August 1832. The commissioners found Burton to be the obvious choice and

official instructions to that effect [that is, the improvements] were issued to Mr Decimus Burton, who had previously been employed on a similar service in the Parks of the Metropolis, and who had designed and superintended the execution of the new lodges and other recent improvements there.⁴³

Burton quickly followed up his initial report with a further survey of the state of the Phoenix Park in September 1834.⁴⁴ His remarks written after a visit to Dublin in August 1834 give a clear idea of his overall vision for the park and have distinct resonance with his work in London. At this point it is important to remember the interconnectedness of the seemingly diverse government offices and officials, as this underscores the intentionality and complex relationships in and around the works in the Phoenix Park. For instance, the Duke of Wellington was at once a celebrated war hero and the Prime Minister who prompted the reform of the Offices of Woods and Works in Britain and Ireland. His pragmatic view on the 1829 Act of Catholic Emancipation was contradicted by his strong objections to the 1832 Reform Act, yet he was concerned about rights of access to the Phoenix Park by the urban middle class. Another key player, Charles Arbuthnot, was a close personal friend of Wellington who facilitated the 1829 Act.⁴⁵ Arbuthnot was also a prominent official in the Office of Woods who had done much to promote Decimus Burton as the architect in charge of the redevelopment of Hyde, St James's, and Green Parks. And finally, in this sequence, the architect Decimus Burton as the instrument or agent of the broader socio/political forces behind the re-design of the Phoenix Park.

The Landscaping of the Park

The work falls into three main categories: the drainage and general tidying and replanting of the park; the creation of pleasure grounds for the enjoyment of the public – especially women and children; and the re-landscaping of the area around the Vice Regal, Chief, and Under Secretaries' demesnes. Burton's scheme shows sympathy for the natural landscape of the area by creating views through to the countryside and hills beyond, and a feeling of openness and space within the park. This was to be achieved by vistas stretching across the enclosed grounds of the official residences created through the use of sunk fences rather than high walls, the felling of tall trees, and careful planting. In other more remote areas of the park Burton followed the lay of the land. For instance, the recommendations for the planting around Knockmaroon Glen in 1846 included thorns, furze, and broom "to accord with the wild and natural scenery of that district of the park."⁴⁶

Although the plans to alter levels and improve drainage in the park received close attention, the main emphasis was on the public's enjoyment of the area and how they might use it. A letter to the Office of Woods toward the end of the work in March 1847 is indicative of this view:

the public would approve the enclosure of the plantation between the promenade ground and the zoo through which a direct footpath leads to the gardens from the city. If these groves were thus defended from incursions by horsemen it would become a favourite resort particularly in summer for promenades especially by women and children.⁴⁷



FIG. 18.3 Thomas Shotter Boys, Hyde Park near Grosvenor Gate, 1843, lithograph. *Source:* Private collection.

This feeling of good for the general public and the importance of visibility influenced the landscaping around the Vice Regal, Chief, and Under Secretary's official demesnes within the park. Previously these grand buildings had been hidden from view behind high fences that stopped views across the park. But the new designs recommended the felling of trees and high fences were replaced with sunk fences (a kind of urban Ha Ha⁴⁸) to open up vistas across the demesnes.⁴⁹ This allowed the official residences to be seen by the general public and recalls the techniques used in the design of country house landscapes where impressive buildings became prominent signifiers of the power and wealth of the owner/occupant. This symbolic presence was further enhanced by the stage-set style landscape that completed the panorama. Moreover, in common with country house landscapes, and those of the Royal Parks in London, the Phoenix Park engendered a sense of belonging or illusion of inclusion and common ownership through the public's access to certain parts of the landscape and the visual accessibility of the whole scene.

Indeed, this aspect of the design had been of paramount concern right from the inception of the project in the early 1830s. Attention focused principally on the fact that the opening of the park for public enjoyment and the re-landscaping of the areas around the official residences would impinge on the accommodation of the Lord Lieutenant. The lodge and barrack demesne in the north of the park used by the Lord Lieutenant as a farm denied the public access to parts of the park, and potential revenue from the pasturage available there was desirable to fund the upkeep of the park. James Neale wrote to William Gosset stating:

I am directed by the Board to signify to you with the view of obviating the complaints made in the House of Commons on the part of the public resorting to the parks for recreation as well as carrying into effect the improvements suggested by Mr Decimus

Burton in his report dated 31 January last [1833]. The commons feel themselves required to resume possession of all the land comprised within the above mentioned enclosures [lodge and barracks] and to lay the same open again to the other parts of the park – but considering that the immediate execution of this measure may materially interfere with the comfort of his Excellency, the present Lord Lieutenant of Ireland whose domestic arrangements may have been formed upon an understanding that the farm was an authorized and permanent appendage to the Office the Commissioner trust that they shall be justified in consulting His Excellencies convenience by appointment of the measure during his administration of the Government of Ireland.⁵⁰

But once the term of office is over the arrangement would no longer continue.

and therefore referring to Mr Burton's suggestions relating to this section of the park for your guidance, I am to communicate to you the Board's desire that whenever the Office of the Lord Lieutenant shall next become vacant you will remove walls and fences enclosing the farm preliminary to the execution of further improvements there recommended by Mr Decimus Burton.⁵¹

By the autumn things had moved on as Duncannon, the First Commissioner of Woods urged instructions be issued that the Mountjoy Barrack demesne be opened to the public as quickly as possible as a new Lord Lieutenant might postpone it.⁵² The re-appropriation of land for the public's benefit is undoubtedly indicative of the use of landscape as tool to engender a feeling of inclusivity. But here it is also representative of the way in which political control in Ireland was both tightened and overseen more closely by government in London.

Once again the aesthetic considerations of the landscape and issues of accessibility come to the fore in the repair of the boundary wall of the park, which was to act

as a means of preventing trespass and at the same time of increasing the beauty of the park, an irregular belt of plantation should by degrees, be formed, having a deep ditch next [to] the wall, and another next [to] the park. These ditches would, at the same time, be extremely serviceable in draining the land, which is in the most parts of a damp and spongy nature.⁵³

The architecture of the park also received aesthetic attention, not unlike the remodeling of farm buildings and workers' housing on country house estates.

The lodges and gates throughout the park are of a mean character, and for the most part, the former are far larger than is necessary, either for the purpose they are intended for, or for appearance. They should be gradually rebuilt in an appropriate style of architecture, and no walled gardens, cowhouses or outbuildings allowed to be attached to them.⁵⁴

One of the hallmarks of Burton's redesign of the Royal Parks in London had been the new entrances. These compact, classically inspired lodges helped shape the character of the parks. This was also the case in Dublin, and the Chapelized Gate and lodge amply demonstrates what Burton had in mind.⁵⁵ The new lodge had a compact plan with no outbuildings, instead a sunk court provided storage and small garden laid to turf replaced the plot that had been used for cultivation. Here, as in the Castleknock and Knockmaroon Gates and lodges, the creation of a ordered, public, cultural space with which to replace a more disordered, private, useful space was of paramount importance. Chapelized Lodge was the first to be re-sited to be aligned with the Hibernian Military School.⁵⁶ Although the new lodge was smaller than its predecessor, it created a more impressive and secure entrance as a turnstile gate, locked each night by the Chapelized gatekeeper, replaced the old entrance. The alignment of Chapelized gate and the military school is important here as axiality is a recurrent feature of the plan for the park. Moreover, the amount of remodeling of the landscape required to enable the new plan is once again reminiscent of the huge undertakings in the laying out of country house landscape.

The idea of aligning the new entrance to the Hibernian Military School was ambitious and typifies the amount of work undertaken in each stage of the work in the Phoenix Park. It involved moving the farm situated at the front of the school to the side and concealing it by planting. A sloping lawn was also created to take account of the steep terrain at the front of the school and so affording an axial view of the building from the new entrance gate. This line continued through an ornamental garden laid out at the rear of the school and a small church. The design of the lodge itself was typically compact, symmetrical with a temple portico front – not at all dissimilar to Cumberland Lodge (1825) designed by Burton for the Hyde Park in London.

The Straight Avenue

There was general concern about the roads and providing convenient access through the park for the public. Several new roads were proposed along with the widening of existing ones taking, where required, small tranches of land from the grounds of the official residences. The most impressive proposal for the road system was the new Straight Avenue, which, despite its importance to the overall plan, was formed only gradually, as work in the park progressed. It was necessary to alter the line of the existing road through the park and sow over it with grass, where necessary, and to carry out substantial tree felling and replanting to create the desired effect. The avenue was the essential backbone of the park giving a directional logic to the flow of traffic through it. Indeed, other avenues and roads in the park, which were also improved, met with the Straight Avenue at its virtual center point. Here, Burton re-sited the Phoenix Pillar, the very symbol of both the park itself and of Dublin the capital city of Ireland and

second city of Empire.⁵⁷ The Pillar was surrounded by four iron standard lamps with burners, to align with the new line of the road – a kind of metaphorical re-enactment of the process of annexation and reordering experienced by the colonized at the hands of the colonizer. By 1846 the Straight Avenue was completed between the Phoenix Pillar and Dublin Gate⁵⁸ where the unfinished Wellington monument was situated so creating an ambiguous axis between a monument to Dublin, albeit re-sited, and a potent, but incomplete, symbol of colonial presence.

Although he lamented that the monument was unfinished, Burton suggested that the whole area be replanted and the Dublin Gates redesigned so that “the *tout ensemble* would have a spacious and noble effect.”⁵⁹ Even so, the remaining portion of the road leading to the Castleknock gate still awaited completion a year later.⁶⁰

Burton’s vision was in accord with the Office of Woods’s aim, which was to “render the park more attractive and better suited to those objects [lodges, gates, drives &c] than it was represented to be.” This it was stated followed the wishes of Charles II who had purchased the Phoenix Park “expressly with the view of consulting the taste, and promoting the health and enjoyment of the people.”⁶¹ But this went beyond a simple desire to beautify the only park in Dublin. Perhaps as might be expected there was a strong political motivation behind the instigation of such works. The recent works in the Royal Parks in London were intended to underline governmental authority and be of benefit to the public. Likewise, the government felt this should be extended to “the inhabitants of Dublin [who] are justified in their expectation they entertain that the favour and liberality of the Government will not be withheld of the only park attached to their capital.”⁶² This “liberality” is evident in the careful use of improved landscape and increased public access. Moreover, the relationship between the London parks and the Phoenix Park went beyond the uniformity of their landscaping and architectural improvements and their architect. The outfits worn by the gatekeepers, which it was decided early on in the works should be the same as those worn in St James’s Park and the Regent’s Park, demonstrate the importance of the image of the parks and the strong connection between the works in the two cities. In this way the re-use of the design principles of the London parks can be seen as one way in which authority was exported to a colonial capital. The Phoenix Park helped forge an aesthetic identity for the urban, protestant bourgeoisie whose political empowerment had been augmented both by the Act of Catholic Emancipation and the 1832 Reform Act.

The works discussed so far were all funded by the state, the only revenue yielded from the park being from the pasturage and tollgates.⁶³ Yet, like the Royal Parks in London, there was room for private speculative development. In 1837, in an uncanny imitation of the Regent’s Park in London, Burton recommended that an area between the Castleknock and Colonel White’s Gates (some 12 acres) should be appropriated for villa building;⁶⁴ importantly these should be constructed

APPENDIX N° 10 (C)

Plan showing the state of the Phoenix Park in 1835,
before the improvements were commenced.

Plan of the Phoenix Park

1830.



FIG. 18.4 Plan of the Phoenix Park, Dublin 1830.

Source: Printed as an appendix to the 22nd report of the Office of Woods, 1845. Private collection.

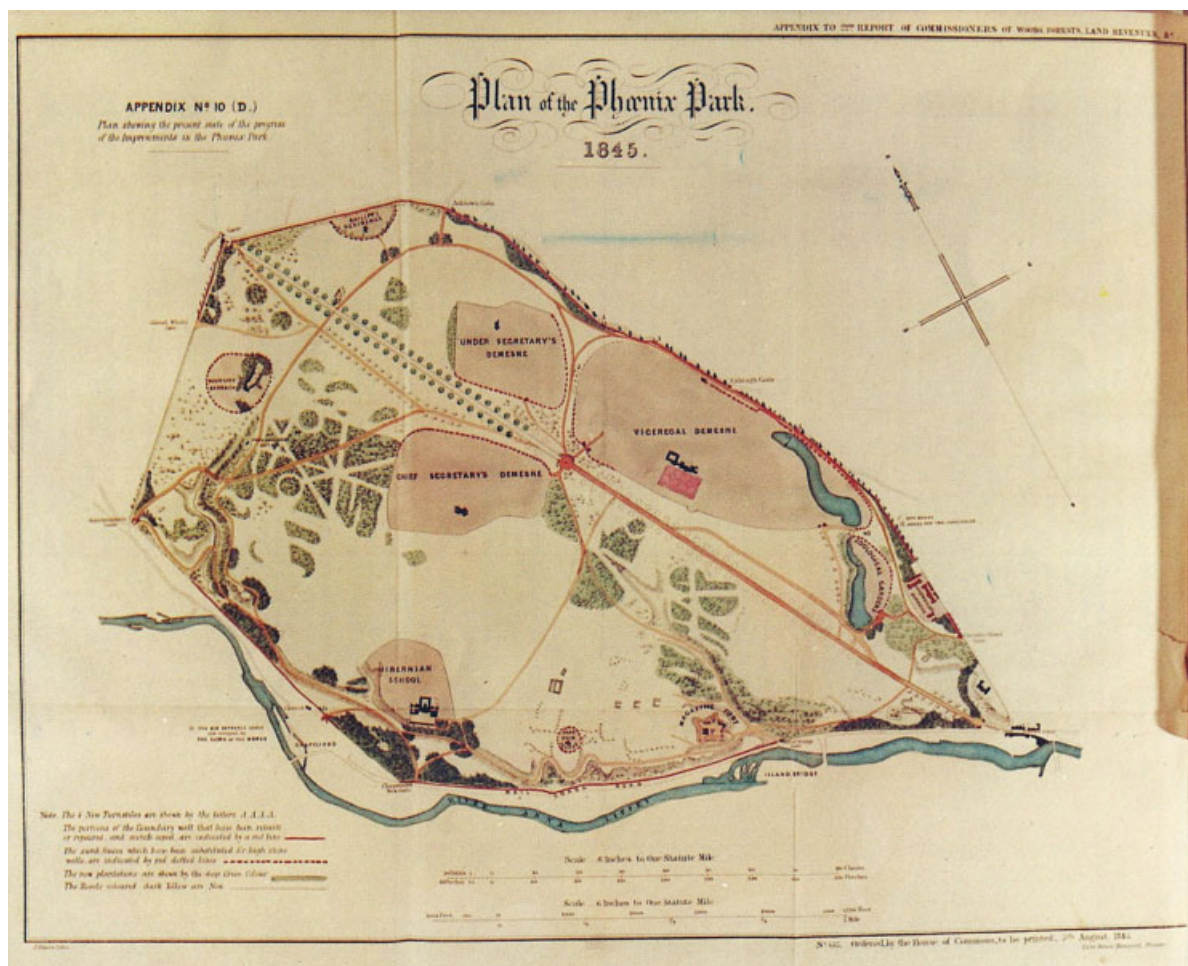


FIG. 18.5 Plan of the Phoenix Park, Dublin 1845.

Source: Printed as an appendix to the 22nd report of the Office of Woods, 1845. Private collection.

“without interference with the views across the park.”⁶⁵ Moreover, like the Regent’s Park, the Commissioners would be responsible for the construction of a road leading to the plots. No villas were built in the park, although a Dublin-based builder, Jacob Owen, did tender for some of the plots. Perhaps the dislocation from central Dublin, a geographical disadvantage no amount of landscape redesign could change, blighted these plans, as it did the impact of the park on the urban fabric of the city itself.

Conclusion

The remodeling of the Phoenix Park drew to a close in 1849. The points of contact between the Phoenix Park and the Royal Parks in London are many. The emphasis in this study has been on the expression of colonial authority now exercised through a metropolitan system of government and how this in turn found expression in the urban landscape. The decisions made in the remodeling of the Phoenix Park offer a mirror image of those effected in London providing us with a reading of the Phoenix Park as a counter-site where the socio-political coordinates of the re-imaging of London in the opening years of the nineteenth century are re-enacted as an inverted vision. Here the democratizing principles of urban landscape development transform into the colonizing authority of a new social elite. The newly remodeled park made the official demesnes of the protestant officers of the British government more visible. And these residences were placed in an improved landscape setting designed for the convenience and pleasure of the public – especially the protestant bourgeoisie. The park and its intended public are important statements when seen against the backdrop of the religious and political situation in Ireland. The landscape design principles used to achieve the desired effects correspond to those Burton employed in the Royal Parks. Moreover, the plans for the inclusion of private speculative development as seen in the villas and the inclusion of premises for learned societies as seen in the zoological gardens, which were also laid out by Burton in both London and Dublin, tie the Phoenix Park more closely to London – in particular the distinctive social environment created in the Regent’s Park.⁶⁶ The Commissioners were successful in their wish to encourage use of the park causing Burton to remark:

since the improvements in the appearance and police in the park have been effected the public generally are accustomed to frequent it in far greater numbers than formerly – and that the difference in this respect is more particularly observable in regard to the upper classes.⁶⁷

In this way the park was a colonizing heterotopia, a meticulous space where all that was planned, but not always realized, for the London parks were mirrored in a discrete location away from the main center of Dublin.⁶⁸ The order imposed on the space through the re-landscaping and conditions of entry and social conduct

within the park, made possible through improved perimeters and boundaries, are both parts of the colonizing process and of the realization of a heterotopia. But the Phoenix Park remains a distinct urban landscape with its own identity. Perhaps here more than any where else Burton's work is the physical expression of the political metaphors of landscape design used by the critics of Capability Brown and Humphry Repton. The attempts by the British government to impose its political will on Ireland could not be better represented than by Burton's "smoothing and levelling" of the rugged Irish terrain.

Acknowledgements

This chapter draws on material published in D. Arnold (ed.) *Cultural Identities and the Aesthetics of Britishness*, Manchester: Manchester University Press (2004). See especially my editor's introduction and essay.

Notes

- 1 These include Stuart Hall, Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, Benedict Anderson, Catherine Hall, and Terry Eagleton and Homi Bhabha as well as a range of French theorists from Jacques Lacan and Fritz Fanon to Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida.
- 2 The period covered by the essays finishes well before the eve of the Second World War after which the whole structure of the British Empire and British national identity changes.
- 3 Bhabha, H. K. (1994) *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge.
- 4 Here I am following the idea of unlearning where one has to be of a skill or process in order not to be of it. See Derrida, J. (1998) "To unsense the subjectile," in J. Derrida and P. Théverin, *The Secret of Antonin Artaud*, trans. Mary Ann Caws, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- 5 Hall, C. (2000) *Cultures of Empire: Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- 6 Said, E. W. (1978) *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon Books; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; Toronto: Random House.
- 7 Said, E. W. (1994) *Culture and Imperialism*, New York: Knopf.
- 8 Anderson, B. (1983) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso.
- 9 For Anderson, the strength of this idea is evident in the way in which it has spread even to socialist states whose Marxist doctrine rejects it and intersocialist wars such as those between revolutionary Marxist regimes – Vietnam, Cambodia, and China.
- 10 Bhabha, H. (1990) *Nation and Narration*, London: Routledge.
- 11 Williams, R. (1976) *Keywords: a Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, London: Fontana, 87.
- 12 von Herder, J. G. (1969) *Ideas for the Philosophy of History of Mankind, 1784–91*, in F. M. Bernard (trans. and ed.) *JG Herder on Social and Political Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- 13 Eagleton, T. (2000) *The Idea of Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- 14 The Royal Parks in London included The Regent's Park as well as Hyde, St James's and Green Parks. All these parks were re-landscaped and generally improved in the opening decades of the nineteenth century.
- 15 For a discussion of the social, cultural, and political significance of the Royal Parks in London in the early nineteenth century see my book *Re-presenting the Metropolis: Architecture, Urban Experience and Social Life in London 1800–1840*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000.
- 16 Throughout this chapter I use bourgeois and middle class interchangeably, see Williams (1976).
- 17 Nora, P. (ed.) (1998) *Realms of Memory: the Construction of the French Past: Conflicts and Divisions*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 3 vols, Foreword by Lawrence D. Kritzman, Arthur Goldhammer, trans.
- 18 Celik, Z. (1999–2000) "Colonial/postcolonial intersections: lieux de mémoire in Algiers," *Third Text*, 49, 632–672.
- 19 See Foucault, M. (1986) "Des espaces autres," trans. Jay Miskowicz as "Of other spaces," *Diacritics*, Spring, 22–27.
- 20 Foucault (1986), 24.
- 21 Foucault (1986), 25
- 22 See Foucault (1986).
- 23 For a fuller discussion of the ways in which the middle and upper classes were taught to view the landscape see Andrews, M. (1995) "A picturesque template: the tourists and their guidebooks," in D. Arnold (ed.) *The Picturesque in late Georgian England*, London: Georgian Group.
- 24 Price published follow on volumes to his *Essay on the Picturesque*, 1792 as *Essays on the Picturesque*, London, 1794. This quotation appears in vol. I, 39.
- 25 From a letter from Repton to Uvedale Price Esq London 1794 in Loudon, J. C. (1840) *The Landscape Gardening and Landscape Architecture of the late Humphry Repton Esq. Being His Entire Works on These Subjects*, London, 106.
- 26 *London Lions for Country Cousins and Friends about Town, New Buildings, Improvements and Amusements in the British Metropolis Illustrated with Wood Engravings by Horace Wellbeloved*, London, 1826, 20 and 22.
- 27 Percy, S. and Percy, R. (1823) *The Percy History and Interesting Memorial on the Rise, Progress and Present State of All the Capitals of Europe*, 3 vols, London, vol. III, 355.
- 28 Crutwell, R. (1816) *Remarks on the Buildings and Improvements in London and Elsewhere*, London, iii.
- 29 Many of these plans – some of them quite improbable – are outlined in Barker, F. and Hyde, R. (1982) *London as it Might Have Been*, London: John Murray.
- 30 For a discussion of the national celebration of the Nelson and Wellington see Yarrington, A. (1988) *The Commemoration of the Hero 1800–1864: Monuments to the British Victors of the Napoleonic Wars*, New York: Garland.
- 31 Liscombe, R. W. (1980) *William Wilkins*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 57–58.
- 32 Pool, B. (ed.) (1967) *The Croker Papers 1808–1857*, London: Batsford, 21–22.
- 33 For a discussion of the different ways in which the Duke of Wellington was commemorated in London see my essay "The Duke of Wellington and London," 13th Annual Wellington Lecture, 2001, University of Southampton.

- 34 For a detailed discussion of Anglo-Irish politics at this time see Vaughan, W. E. (ed.) (1989) *A New History of Ireland*, vol. V, "Ireland Under the Union I 1801–1870," Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 35 For a fuller discussion see Foster, R. F. (1988) *Modern Ireland 1600–1972*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 282 ff.
- 36 Foster (1988), 289.
- 37 Foster (1988), 290.
- 38 Recent debates have queried the relationship between the 1832 Reform Act and the rise of middle class power (see *inter alia* Wahrman, D. (1995) *Imagining the Middle Class: the Political Representation of Class in Britain, c1780–1840*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) claiming that this act facilitated the "invention" of the ever-rising middle class rather than being precipitated by this social group. It is not my intention here to debate the merits of these revisions of historical constructions of class identities and their broader ramifications. But in this instance the case for the combined influence of the Act of Catholic Emancipation and the Reform Act on the socio-political context of the Phoenix Park is compelling, particularly within a colonial framework.
- 39 In 1994 a substantial amount of documentary material has become available in the National Archives of Ireland in the Office of Public Works Collection. The collection of letters, plans, and designs for the works carried out in the park between 1832 and 1849 shed new light on the nature of the improvements and the role played by Decimus Burton and his relationship to other parties also employed in the improvements to the Park. The material comprises six boxes of letters and six folders of drawings. The letters are as yet uncatalogued. A temporary reference of OPW5/Decimus Burton/Phoenix Park has been given to these. (Hereafter OPW). A statement of my preliminary findings appeared as Arnold, D. (1995) "Decimus Burton's work in the Phoenix Park, 1832–49," *The Bulletin of the Irish Georgian Society*, XXXVII, Dublin, 57–75. OPW letter from Mr Philipps, Office of Woods to Mr James Neale, September 19, 1828.
- 40 On this point see Port, M. H. (1973) "Retrenchment and reform: the Office of Woods and Works," in H. Colvin (ed) *History of the King's Works* vol. VI, London: HMSO.
- 41 *Report of the Commissioners of Woods, &c., to the Lords of the Treasury*, 1835. This report also suggested improvements to the Phoenix Park and requested authority to spend £15 000 to execute them. Henceforth, 1835 *Report*.
- 42 For instance in 1835 a Commission on Railways was set up for Ireland.
- 43 1835 *Report*.
- 44 This report dated September 27, 1834 was printed as an appendix to the *Twenty Second Report of the Commissioners of Her Majesty's Woods, Forest and Land Revenues*, 1845. Henceforth Burton's 1834 *Report*.
- 45 The friendship between the Duke of Wellington, Charles Arbuthnot, and his wife Harriet is well documented. The couple were known to have been confidants of the Duke from whom he sought advice. See *inter alia* Smith, E. (1994) *Wellington and the Arbuthnots*, Stroud: Sutton; Arbuthnot, H. (1950) edited by Francis Bamford and the 7th Duke of Wellington, *The Journal of Mrs. Arbuthnot, 1820–1832*, London: Macmillan; and Aspinall, A. (1952) "Review of The Journal of Mrs. Arbuthnot, 1820–1832," *The English Historical Review*, 67, 262, 92–94.
- 46 OPW January 6, 1846 Burton to the Commissioners of Woods.

- 47 OPW March 11, 1847 Burton to the Commissioners of Woods.
- 48 A Ha Ha is a term to describe a sunken ditch used to separate the landscaped area of a country house estate from the working farm land without creating a visual barrier.
- 49 For instance, OPW June 5, 1838 Burton to the Commissioners of Woods outlining his plans for the felling of trees and new planting around the Chief Secretary's demesne. This was agreed to as the First Commissioner felt the vistas were for "the general good of the public."
- 50 OPW April 29, 1833 James Neale, Office of Woods to William Gosset.
- 51 OPW April 29, 1833 James Neale, Office of Woods to William Gosset.
- 52 OPW September 7, 1833 Lord Duncannon, Office of Woods to Mr Adams.
- 53 Burton's 1834 *Report*.
- 54 Burton's 1834 *Report*.
- 55 Burton also produced designs for the Cabragh Gate and Colonel White's Gate with his report of February 27, 1839. Drawings for these submitted with Burton's report are held in the National Library of Ireland (NLI 2123, 2124, 2126, and 2127).
- 56 A drawing by Burton dated January 1836 showing this is held in the National Archives of Ireland, OPW 5 temporary folder HC/2/65.
- 57 He received permission to re-site the Pillar on March 11, 1843 in a letter from Alexander Milne (OPW). Mr Hayden provided the standard lamps and burners. OPW October 31, 1843 Burton to the Commissioners of Woods. Mr John Butler was responsible for taking down the pillar and re-erecting. OPW December 20, 1843 Burton to the Commissioners of Woods.
- 58 OPW March 15, 1847 Burton to the Commissioners of Woods.
- 59 Burton's 1834 *Report*.
- 60 OPW March 15 1847 Burton to the Commissioners of Woods.
- 61 1835 *Report*.
- 62 1835 *Report*.
- 63 Little mention is made of the tollgates but there were problems with avoidance of payment Burton intended to speak to Jacob Owen on the matter. OPW February 12, 1838 Burton to the Commissioners of Woods.
- 64 OPW June 9, 1840 Burton to the Commissioners of Woods. Burton refers to his original suggestion for villas in his report of 1837. A drawing by Burton dated September 10, 1840 showing the proposed villa plots is held in the National Archives of Ireland, OPW 5 temporary folder HC/2/84.
- 65 OPW June 30, 1840 Burton to the Commissioners of Woods.
- 66 The Dublin Zoological Society had first approached Burton in August 1830 about a suitable layout for their gardens. Burton submitted his plan and report on October 27, 1832. A transcript of his report exists in Trinity College Library (Zoological Society Minute Book May 1830 – July 1840 10608/2/1 TCD). I am most grateful to Dr F. O'Dwyer for this reference and to Dr S. O'Reilly for transcribing the document for me. Burton designed the Zoological Society Gardens in the Regent's Park, 1826–1841. The original plan is held in the Public Record Office, MPE 906. Although these provide further examples of the dialectical relationship between London and Dublin they stand outside the concerns of this essay, which is confined to the state's intervention in the landscapes of the urban parks in both cities.
- 67 OPW June 15, 1842 Burton to the Commissioners of Woods.
- 68 Foucault (1986) 27.

Part 6



Men and Women

The Elizabethan Miniature

Dympna Callaghan

Shortly after he married Alice Brandon, the daughter of the goldsmith who had trained him in Exeter, Nicholas Hilliard, a native of Devonshire, and thus one of that rare breed of home-grown early modern English artists, left England for France where he lived between 1576 and 1578.¹ One of the great masters of that iconic genre of English portraiture, namely the Elizabethan miniature, he first encountered the work of the court painter and inventor of the French portrait miniature, Jean Clouet (c.1485–1540), while in France and it was there that he made further discoveries in what was to become a quintessentially English form of early modern portraiture.

Clouet was, of course, long dead by the time of Hilliard's French sojourn, but his work survived, including an important text of 1519–1520, *Les Commentaires de la Guerre Gallique*, containing seven small, beautifully executed, roundel miniature portraits of the heroes of the Battle of Marignan, fought in 1515. Unlike the images adorning other manuscripts, like for example, the repeated images of the broken-hearted Italian poet, Petrarch, and his cruel golden-haired mistress, Laura, dispersed through illuminated copies of Petrarch's famous and widely circulated fourteenth-century sonnet sequence, the *Canzoniere*, Clouet's images are genuine rather than fictional likenesses. Further, these three-quarter profile portraits on a vivid ultramarine-blue background that came to be associated with the autonomous miniature are decidedly set off from the manuscript text by a circle of gold illumination. In addition, Clouet painted independent miniatures; among them, a rectangular miniature of Mary Queen of Scots (1542–1587), executed around 1558 and resembling the manuscript illumination depicting her in Catherine de' Medici's Book of Hours.²

Clouet's reputation, however, was based on the rather comprehensive range of activities of an artist to the court of Valois and not alone on his skills as a painter, let

alone a painter of miniatures. His artistic services included the funeral effigy of Francis I who had died in 1547. According to a surviving account of the piece by Hieronymus Cardanus (1501–1576) Clouet's wax image of the deceased French sovereign was remarkable:

Nothing is more amazing that when we pour cold plaster of paris over the dead – and even the living ... with the result that the image differs from a man in no way... I saw an image of this kind of the recently deceased François Ier [*premiere*; 1st] at the home of the illustrious Cardinal de Tournon. For art could not have made anything more like a man than that image, nor more like the living. Then it was carried out to the funeral.³

This connection between the funeral effigy and the miniature may seem slight and based on a mere accident of the artist's biography. After all, Clouet exercised his artistic talent in whatever form his royal patrons required of him, as was the case with all artists and writers of this period whose Muse first and foremost served their masters, and not themselves. However, what links the miniature with the public, full-size rendition of personal likeness attempted in the funeral effigy is significantly more complex than the aesthetic ambition to render a living image of the dead sovereign. To juxtapose the life-size, life-like effigy and the miniature is not to suggest that the latter replaced the former because in fact, the use of wax and plaster figures at English royal funerals persisted even after the Reformation.⁴ Rather, to compare and contrast the two raises aesthetic concerns about *ad vivum* portraiture (that is, portraits taken in front of the sitter, from the life) and especially the constellation of issues that will be the focus of this essay, namely those of size, dimension, and scale. Size matters because it is over-determined by conditions of production and consumption – patronage structures, the training and skill set of the artist, ideological and aesthetic factors – that are all but forgotten now when viewers peer into a case of miniatures at a museum. In particular, the juxtaposition between a life-size bust, a monumental representation of personhood, as it were, and a miniature highlights the compacted attention to detail required to render personal likeness within the latter's diminished and two-dimensional space. Further, such juxtaposition suggests that the size of a miniature – its *littleness* – might have a cultural and aesthetic significance that is never attended to when its dimensions are taken as an empirical fact too obvious for critical inquiry.

The argument of this essay is that we can determine what the portrait miniature *means* and how it functions in early modern culture only by looking specifically at its dimensions and further that this can only be achieved by doing so in reference to other forms of cultural production that similarly present size and scale as a principal aspect of their composition. Such a contention, however, is diametrically opposed to the conventional disclaimer that the term “miniature” when used in connection with portraiture *does not* refer to size: “The term ‘miniature’ ... has no necessary connection with the idea of smallness, and no connection with art

forms ... in which the products resemble the miniature only in scale.”⁵ Etymologically this is quite correct. “Miniature” indeed refers instead to the arts of manuscript illumination from whence the techniques of this particular art form derive in which *minium* was a vital and long-standing component of the art. As John Murdoch points out: “[T]he term miniature refers to the technical base of the art (from the Latin *minium*, red lead).”⁶ Early moderns did not use the word “miniature” in this sense at all, but rather referred to the objects themselves as “pictures in little” and to the practice of painting them as “limning,” a derivative of the Latin, *lumen*, to light, just as an “illumination,” decorates, clarifies, and illustrates the written matter of a manuscript. This is because limners and manuscript illuminators used the same technique, namely, the application of watercolor to vellum that derived directly from the illuminators of the Ghent-Bruges school who worked at the court of Henry VIII.

However correct, this technical definition of the art of miniature painting does not help explain why it was, in this diminutive form of the skillfully executed miniature portrait, that English artistic powers achieved their best expression in the period from the accession of Henry VIII in 1509 to the death of James I in 1625.

The miniature, by virtue of its size required private viewing, and necessarily departed from the conspicuous, the “public,” and the monumental works of funereal or religious art to be found in churches. Yet just as much as the miniature represented a different scale from public religious monuments, in important ways, it also reprised the now proscribed Catholic culture of relics and items of religious ritual. It is imperative, therefore, to set the miniature, “the English icon”⁷ in the context of the rabidly iconophobic culture of early modern English Protestantism, within which it nonetheless managed to thrive.⁸

Rather than focusing on the technical aspects of miniature production, or even on the achievements of particular artists or the peculiarities of their style, this chapter seeks to understand the cultural and ideological function of the miniature’s diminutive aesthetic. This revisionist account will therefore address the miniature *primarily* as a matter of scale, proposing that far from taking the size of a miniature for granted, we instead probe its significance in reference to both its outsize antithesis, the monument and its fellow diminutive art, the sonnet. Thus, this essay will approach the miniature via a certain deliberate circumlocution – looking first at its antithesis, the monument, in order to argue that it is only via such an oblique approach that we can begin to make a more momentous pronouncement on the miniature than to reiterate the well-worn axiom that at its finest, the early modern English miniature is jewel-like and exquisite.

Monument versus Miniature

When he was dragged on a hurdle toward execution for heresy at Tyburn in December 1581, England’s foremost Jesuit, Edmund Campion, made a gesture of veneration toward the statue of the Blessed Virgin as he passed Newgate arch.⁹

This statue was part of the detritus of Catholic iconography still to be found in the public precincts of a decidedly Protestant Elizabethan London. Although essentially, Henry VIII's motives were personal rather than doctrinal, the break with Rome was sufficient to have allowed him to dissolve monastic institutions in the 1630s, loot their treasure, appropriate their considerable lands and properties, desecrate their buildings, and destroy a wealth of medieval artwork. With the accession of the child monarch, Edward VI, however, the destruction of religious art extended from the world of cloisters to the everyday world of English society. London's Paternoster Row, for example, which had been the site of the manufacture of rosary beads, on which pious Catholics murmured their "Ave Marias," was emptied of its trade. In February 1548 the Privy Council under Edward VI, ordered that "all the images remaining in any church or chapel within your diocese be removed and taken away."¹⁰

Simply because the culture of images was so deeply embedded, the process of destruction – intended precisely to prevent such allegedly idolatrous gestures as that made by Campion – was necessarily protracted. As late as 1644, William Dowsing records destroying pictures and statues, including many images of the Virgin Mary, in St. Peter's church in Sudbury, Suffolk: "We brake down ... about an hundred in all ... and diverse Angels."¹¹ The strain of radical iconoclasm set in motion by the English Reformation under Henry VIII, then, saw the destruction of untold treasures of medieval Catholicism: wall paintings, panel paintings, ornate altars and other church decorations, statues of the saints and of the Blessed Virgin among others.¹²

From the mid-sixteenth century onward, then, aspirations toward monumental scale in English art tended toward secular rather than religious projects. Even when English art took the form of grand tombs in English Churches commissioned by the gentry, they commemorated secular achievement and reflected the new, "bourgeois" desire to defy death with a show of material wealth. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the fact that "a large proportion" of monuments were erected prior to the demise of the persons they commemorated.¹³ As Michael Neill points out:

Unlike earlier tombs ... the great memorials of this period were almost entirely retrospective in their appeals, wholly bent upon the world, they were conspicuously secular substitutes for the liturgical *memento* of the Mass. The more splendid their marble sculpture, the richer their gilding and painting, the more superb their heraldic ornamentation, the more eloquently these shrines of memory spoke of the longing for a species of immortality which, in spite of everything, it might remain in the power of the living to confer.¹⁴

Indeed, the Crown found itself having to redefine church monuments hitherto understood to be intrinsically religious *as* secular, in order to exempt them from destruction as idolatrous ornaments. Thus, in 1560, Elizabeth I issued a proclamation prohibiting their demolition:

The Queen's majesty, understanding that by the means of sundry people, partly ignorant, partly malicious or covetous, there hath been of late years spoiled and broken certain ancient monuments, some of metal, some of stone, which were erected up as well in churches as in other public places within this realm.

Not only did Elizabeth order the cessation of such destruction, but she also ordered all such damage committed since her accession to be repaired:

[A]lthough it be very hard to recover things broken and spoiled, yet both to provide that no such barbarous disorder be hereafter used, and to repair as much of the said monuments as conveniently may be.¹⁵

However, Protestant iconoclasm directed its ire not only toward large-scale images and objects but also those of smaller proportions. Particularly abhorred as symptoms of "Papist" idolatry were objects used for the Mass and in other religious rites, as well as relics and reliquaries, the often bejeweled and ornately wrought receptacles of the remains of saints and martyrs: hands, pieces of skin, bones, teeth, hair, and so on. The fragmented and the diminutive thus became increasingly associated with the proscribed Roman rite. The culture of sacred objects – from the Eucharistic wafer to the rosary – that was the hallmark of medieval Catholicism which Protestant iconoclasm sought to erase was characterized by objects that were to be held in the hand, intimate articles of devotion, small objects of personal piety such as the rosary or the wearable relic of say, a splinter of the wood of the ostensibly "true cross." These were also, of course, precisely the characteristics of the miniature: as Hilliard's treatise points out: "[I]t is to be viewed of necessity in hand near unto the eye."¹⁶

Though such "gegaws," "toys and babberies"¹⁷ as ornamental rather than purposive objects were often pejoratively named by the hotter Protestants who dismissed art as so much "trumpery,"¹⁸ wearing miniatures was all the rage at the court of Elizabeth. In a letter of 1602, William Bowne wrote to the Earl of Shrewsbury about the following incident at court:

The occasion was, as I hear, that the young Lady of Darby wearing about her neck, in her bosom, a picture which was in a dainty tablet, the Queen, espying it, asked what fine jewel that was. The Lady Darby was curious to excuse the showing of it, but the Queen would have it, and opening it, finding it to be Mr. Secretary's [Sir Robert Cecil], snatched it away, and tied it upon her shoe, and walked long with it there. Then she took it thence, and pinned it on her elbow, and wore it some time there also. . . I do boldly send these things to your Lordship which I would not do to any else, for I hear they are very secret.¹⁹

The court, of course, enjoyed a license that might not be tolerated elsewhere, but miniatures were to be found among the citizen-merchant class as well as among the aristocracy and gentry. Hilliard's portraits of Elizabeth I and Wriothesley (see Figs 19.1 and 19.2) were set as gold pendant portraits (that of Elizabeth's boasting



FIG. 19.1 Nicholas Hilliard: *Queen Elizabeth I*, miniature painting, watercolor on vellum, 1595–1600.
Source: © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

a carefully wrought and ornate frame) with the chain rings still attached.²⁰ Similarly, Hilliard's portrait of the consort of Elizabeth's successor, Queen Anne of Denmark (1574–1619) – to take but one of many examples – is of a small oval portrait locket of 54 by 43 millimeters (2⅛th by 1⅓rd inches) in an enameled gold frame set with table diamonds and monogrammed with gold and diamonds. Several extant images – some of them miniatures – depict the sitter wearing a miniature. For example, Lady Frances Walsingham (married to Sir Philip Sidney and subsequently to Robert Devereux, second earl of Essex) is depicted wearing a miniature locket in a painting by Robert Peake in 1594. Similarly, Hilliard's *Man against a Background of Flames* (c.1595) depicts the subject consumed, in tried-and-true Petrarchan manner, in the flames of love holding out from the bare breast revealed from his open shirt, a love-locket miniature of his beloved, who is thus presented as being always literally close to his heart.

Thus, these portable, intimate, treasured little objects, which might be, as in the case of Lady Darby, heavily freighted with “very secret” erotic intrigue, supplanted the now vilified culture of objects within Catholicism.

For all its popularity, the miniature was literally too small to attract the kind of vitriolic condemnation vented upon other arts, including monuments, plays, and “profane schedules, sacrilegious ... and Hethnical pamphlets” widely disseminated in print that Philip Stubbes claimed “corrupt men's minds, pervert good wits, allure to bawdry, induce to whoredom, suppress virtue and erect vice.”²¹ Miniature likenesses were not subject to the same degree of censure or defacement by zealots who held that images were idolatrous and that to “counterfeit” the human face or frame was to set oneself up as a rival to the creative capacities to which only God himself could lay claim. Although unlike Stubbes, John Jewel (1522–1571) Bishop of Salisbury was in fact something of a religious moderate, he nonetheless admonished in *The Seconde Tome of Homilies* the dangers of “any graven image or any likeness of any thing.” For Bishop Jewel, ornate images not only encouraged the human predisposition toward idolatry, but also presented the danger of pure materialism. Jewel argued that the precious stones and metals out of which images were constructed and with which they were decorated incited avarice as a form of worship:



FIG. 19.2 Nicholas Hilliard: *Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton*, miniature painting, watercolor on vellum, 1594.

Source: © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

And the covetous persons by the same occasion, seeming to worship, and peradventure worshipping indeed, not only the images: but also the matter of them, golden and silver: as that vice is of all others in the Scriptures peculiarly called idolatry or worshipping images.

Amidst this hostility to art, the miniature became part of an emerging and definitively secular culture of privacy.²² A signal example of this new phenomenon in relation to the fashion for miniatures is to be found in a letter written by Mary Queen of Scots' ambassador to the English court, James Melville. Melville writes that Elizabeth I:

took me to her bed-chamber, and opened a little cabinet, wherein were divers little pictures wrapt within paper, and their names written with her own hand upon the papers. Upon the first that she took up was written "My Lord's picture." I held the candle, and pressed to see that picture so named. She appeared loath to let me see it; yet my importunity prevailed for a sight thereof, and found it to be the Earl of Leicester's picture... Then she took out the Queen's [Mary, Queen of Scots] picture and kissed it.²³

Although Hilliard's family had been sufficiently firm in its Protestantism to flee England with Sir Thomas Bodley for the safe haven of John Calvin's Geneva during the reign of the Catholic Mary Tudor, from 1553 to 1558, his training as a goldsmith nonetheless served him well in the Elizabethan vogue for miniatures as secular relics. Portraits, held in the hand, carried or worn about the neck, and often encased in locket, took on the status of the trinket, the memento, and the fetish rather than the more distant and objectified work of art. This secular culture of privacy of which the miniature was a part, furthermore, arguably supplanted the invariably public practices of medieval personal piety and the numerous objects and accoutrements that accompanied them.

As the tenor of English iconoclasm in this period amply demonstrates, it is an oversimplification to consider English Protestantism as simply a *less* religious culture than that which preceded it. Rather, in the post-Reformation era, religion was differently configured and dispersed depending on geographic region

and social class. Crucially, the new state religion was unquestionably one that forced aesthetic practices out of churches and into the world, into a new domain where the practices of everyday life were becoming more sharply distinct from a hitherto all-pervasive religious culture.

Beauty in Little

Complaints about the quality of painting and the absence of aesthetic achievement were rife in Elizabethan England, and this combined with the religious condemnation of images to produce nothing short of a crisis in visual representation. Plausible representation of the human face, let alone superior representation of such faces and the artistic rendering of physical beauty, was, then, a particularly English problem and what is at stake in it is not just a matter of technical dexterity, but also the very idea of beauty that informs miniature painting and the social and aesthetic ambitions these portraits represent. It can be no accident, after all, that in an environment where the aesthetic agenda of all art was suspect, beauty especially flourished in scaled down and compacted formats.

Both Sir Philip Sidney and William Shakespeare who were experts in the literary art of miniaturization, the sonnet form, also addressed the problem of the aesthetic inadequacy of painting. In his *Apology for Poetry* (published 1595), a work which is in essence an attempt to make the case that art is morally useful, that it has a twofold function “to teach and to delight,” Sidney nonetheless complained against: “the meaner sort of painters, who counterfeit only such faces as are set before them, and the more excellent, who having no law but wit, bestow that in colours upon you which is fittest for the eye to see.”²⁴ Whereas Sidney’s concern about the parlous state of the visual arts in England focused on the problem of, on the one hand, slavish imitation and crude face recording, and on the other, idealization, Shakespeare’s disparagement was reserved for painters who gild the lily, for inept artists whose “gross painting” (sonnet 82.13) mars the natural beauty of the unknown young man they are ostensibly trying to represent: “And their gross painting might be better used/ Where cheeks need blood; in thee it is abused” (Sonnet 82: 14–15).

Even before the aesthetic vacuum left by the erasure of sacred art, however, the technical aspects of art in England were intrinsically underdeveloped, at least in part, as a result of the country’s geographical isolation. There had long been a reliance on imported talent. Hilliard is believed to have learnt miniature painting from the Flemish-born Lavinia Teerlinc, whose relatively small output is nonetheless interesting because she painted not only portraits but also cultural events, such as the Mary Tudor’s distribution of Maundy money. Teerlinc, paid on retainer by the crown at a higher rate than Holbein, was the daughter of Simon Bening, a celebrated illuminator from the Ghent-Bruges school. Although he never mentions her, Hilliard nevertheless acknowledges that:

By reason of that truth all the rare sciences, especially the arts of carving, painting, goldsmiths, embroiderers, together with the most of all the liberal sciences, come first unto us from the strangers, and generally they are the best and most in number.²⁵

When the German-born Hans Holbein (died November 1543) arrived in England from Basel in 1526 to be hired as court painter from Henry VIII, Sir Thomas More wrote to his friend the Dutch humanist, Erasmus: “Your painter is a wonderful artist, but I fear he will not find England such fruitful and fertile ground as he had hoped.”²⁶ Indeed, while a foreign artist might well ply his trade in England, there were few skills to be acquired there, except of course, miniature painting. For as Christopher Lloyd and Vanessa Remington explain, “The miniature is essentially a creation of the Renaissance and more specifically of the English Renaissance.”²⁷ Holbein learnt the art of miniature painting from Lucas Hornebolte (c.1491–1547) the first painter of miniatures in England, but he also brought with him knowledge of Renaissance art that had hitherto been unknown in England, and so he in turn influenced Hornebolte’s approach. Specifically, what Holbein brought to the miniature, was a “monumental” style – that is the capacity to create the illusion of scale even when painting within the tightly circumscribed parameters of the miniature. He painted not from life but from portrait drawings taken from the life, and thus used a technique quite distinct from that of the English miniaturists.²⁸

The Elizabethan era saw the rise of a second generation of limners. Most prominent among these were Nicholas Hilliard, his son, Lawrence, Isaac Oliver (born in France), and his son, Peter Oliver. Although Hilliard trained Isaac Oliver, the latter became his rival, especially at the close of the Elizabethan regime, when a new, more Italian-inspired style of portrait painting came into vogue. These artists, along with other minor figures in the genre serviced not only the Crown and the court, but also a much wider social bracket of gentry and citizenry than had ever had their likenesses taken prior to Elizabeth’s reign. Far from being the simply spontaneous result of a particular species of artistic talent, these images “in little” were produced in the context of nascent capitalism in response to the increasing demand for luxury commodities, of which the miniature was most certainly one. In addition, Elizabeth’s pecuniary bent meant that she did not follow her father’s practice of having a court atelier, and she did not, therefore, place Hilliard on retainer, despite the many portraits he painted of her; while Hilliard’s own impecunious nature meant that he always needed money and thus was ever available for hire to anyone who could pay his fee. As a result, over 200 miniatures by Hilliard survive in comparison with the handful from Henry VIII’s entire atelier.

However, the difference between the Henrican and the Elizabethan miniature is not only a matter of output. In Henry’s court, the miniature served a more narrowly political function, part of the negotiations and exchanges with other heads of state. For example, in 1526, the French king’s sister, Madame d’Alençon sent Henry miniatures painted by Clouet of Francois I and the Dauphin, images that may well

have influenced Holbein.²⁹ Henry had a Holbein miniature of Anne of Cleves, which must have been idealized since when she arrived in the flesh for their marriage he alleged he had been sold a Flanders mare.³⁰ Henry himself was limned by Lucas Hornebolte but, except for an undoubtedly allegorical miniature known as “Soloman,” which depicts him being paid homage to by other kings, not a single miniature portrait of the king painted by Holbein survives.³¹ This is in sharp contrast to the sizable number of miniature images of Elizabeth that remain extant (the exact number is unknown, but museum curators profess that they come upon them in the hands of private collectors all the time). While miniatures continued to have an important role in diplomatic and aristocratic culture³² (for example, Elizabeth had a Hilliard miniature of her suitor the Duc d’Alençon, limned between 1581 and 1583, at the front of her prayer book),³³ the social dispersion of the art of the miniature was much wider in Elizabeth’s reign than it had ever been in her father’s, and indeed the miniature became a means of promulgating the “myth of Astrea,” that wealth of mythical iconography used to shore up the inherently fragile sovereignty of a woman ruler in a patriarchal regime.³⁴ In sum, Hilliard almost single-handedly invented the Elizabethan regal miniature portraiture.

During Elizabeth’s reign, the miniature, though it was not at all confined to court circles, nonetheless became associated with representations of an aristocratic splendor, especially that of the sovereign, in a way that certainly did not pertain, for example, in the earlier generation of Holbein’s deeply pensive *Unknown Youth* (c.1535–1540), eyes looking down to the left of his small circular frame. Hilliard was known to be particularly gifted in depicting and supplementing female beauty, and a female regal subject lent itself particularly well to his skill in ornamentation, especially the dress, draperies, and jewels that were, *de rigueur*, the accessories of female sovereignty. He was the answer to the crisis in representation consequent upon the dearth of artistic talent that left sovereign power bereft of adequate means of depicting itself in a visual medium. A draft Elizabethan proclamation of 1563 – long prior to the beginning of Hilliard’s work as a painter – attests to the practical and technical difficulties attendant upon finding an appropriate image of Elizabeth:

Forasmuch as through the natural desires that all sorts of subjects and people, both noble and mean, hope to procure the portrait and picture of the Queen’s majesty’s most noble and loving person and royal majesty, all manner of painters have already and do daily attempt to make in short manner portraiture of her majesty in painting, graving, and printing, wherein is evidently seen that hitherto none hath sufficiently expressed the natural representation of her majesty’s person, favor, or grace, but that most have so far erred therein as thereof daily are heard complaints amongst her loving subjects insomuch that for redress thereof her majesty hath lately been so instantly and importunately sued unto by the body of her council and others of her nobility not only to be content that some special commission painter might be permitted by access to her majesty, to take the natural representation of her majesty, whereof she hath always been of her own disposition very unwilling, but also to

prohibit all manner of other persons to draw, paint, grave or portray her majesty's personage or visage for a time until, by some perfect pattern and example, the same may be by others followed.³⁵

Whatever the ideological and political motivations of Elizabeth's control over the representation of her image, it is important that these concerns were expressed in terms of the necessity of an accurate depiction, of rendering the royal countenance to the life. Hilliard ascribed to this orthodoxy: "of all things the perfection is to imitate the face of man kind ... so near and so well after the life, as that ... the party, in all likeness for favour and complexion is or may be very well resembled."³⁶ Hilliard completed his first miniature of Elizabeth in 1572. She sat for him many times, but his depictions of her were more in the service of the ideological promulgation of her status as Virgin Queen than the specificities of personality or the quirks of feature. Indeed, Hilliard also designed Elizabeth's image for the Great Seal used to ratify documents and all manner of official discourse and correspondence. The seal's relationship with miniature painting is purely one of dimension of course, rather than technique. Hilliard's particular skill set coincided beautifully, then, with the reign of the Virgin Queen for whom he produced an iconized and readily recognizable identity. In his treatise on miniature painting, *The Art of Limning*, he had claimed the work of his illustrious precursor, Hans Holbein, as the strongest influence on his painting: "Holbein's manner of limning I have ever imitated, and hold it for the best."³⁷ He did not, however, follow his predecessor in matters of technique, and it is likely that what he meant here is simply that he aspired to Holbein's facility in representing plausible and highly recognizable images of his sitters, which is, although Hilliard does not seem to be aware of it, very different from a comprehensive imitation of reality. What such imitation might mean was a matter of some debate, especially as knowledge of Italian art more fully penetrated the English consciousness at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Shakespeare's sometime collaborator, the poet and playwright George Chapman wrote:

It serves not a skillful Painters turn, to draw the figure of a face only to make known who it represents; but he must limn, give luster, shadow and heightening; which though ignorants will esteem spiced, and too curious, yet such as have the judicial perspective, will see it hath, motion, spirit, and life.³⁸

In Chapman's assessment, it is not only that English painters are unfamiliar with Italianate techniques of chiaroscuro and perspective, but also that uninformed viewers, "ignorants," will be unable to appreciate them. Perhaps more for reasons of vanity than artistic taste, Elizabeth I certainly did not want anything too "spiced" or "curious" in Hilliard's depictions of her when she asked to be painted outside in the garden and away from unflattering shadows: "in an open alley of a goodly garden where no tree was near."³⁹ Hilliard claimed his art did not require the "hard shadows" necessary for "great [large] pictures" that were hung at a distance from the viewer. Contemporaries agreed that whatever the technique,

the point was to produce that visual fiction, a life-like image; and this was the challenge and achievement of the English portrait miniature:

Old Mr. Hilliard's way was to draw the forehead stroke first and according to proportion the face. But I always draw the eyes first leaving the distance of an eye between the two eyes, or according as the life is, and proportion of the face thereunto. But let everyone please himself in his beginning, so his ending be truly done according to the life.⁴⁰

Of course, "truly done according to the life," not all miniatures would portray beautiful people, but the aesthetics of proper proportion was a requirement of every miniature that achieved this goal. It was, after all, the art of proportion that allowed a full-sized human frame to be shrunk to the tiny dimensions of the miniature. In this sense the beauty of perfect proportion belonged as much to the skill of the artist as to the physical attributes of the sitter. Even so, some sitters – and indeed some of them of high social status – still presented a problem. The illustrious Sir Christopher Hatton, who was painted by Hilliard sometime in the period 1588–1591 when he was Lord Chancellor, was "one of the goodliest personages of England, and yet had he a very low forehead, not answerable to that good proportion of a third part of his face."⁴¹ The issue that Hilliard raises here is not the charm of women sitters with which he is so taken elsewhere in his treatise, but the more abstract dimension of his aesthetic practice, the beauty inherent in geometric proportion, which was a vital and intrinsic component of his technique:

[L]et that your first line be the forehead stroke, as for example so then you shall proceed by that scale or scantling [unit of measure] to doe all proportionable to that bigness, as if the forehead be but so long, then the rest of that line to the chin is but twice so long, as thus, and so proceed still.⁴²

It was precisely this phenomenon – the actual technique of miniaturization – that had interested Sidney. Hilliard reports Sidney's question about how people of different dimensions can be rendered on the surfaces of identical measurement:

Yet one word more in remembrance of an excellent man, namely Sir Philip Sidney, that noble and most valiant knight, that great scholar, and excellent Poet, great lover of all virtue and cunning [knowledge; cleverness]. He once demanded of me the question, whether it were possible in one scantling [unit of measure], as in the length of six inches, of a little or short man, and also of a mighty big and tall man, and that one might well and apparently see which was the tall man, and which the little, the picture being just of one length.⁴³

English miniaturists were concerned, then not only to represent whatever physical beauty appeared before them in the countenance of any given sitter, but also about its manifestations in terms of the formal qualities of their aesthetic practice.

Importantly, male beauty is well represented in the miniature format. The *Unknown Man*, possibly a portrait of Sir Everard Digby, a conspirator in the Gunpowder Plot, was painted by Isaac Oliver, probably around 1598. The sitter with his golden ringlets and plain gold earring is at most in his 20s. The femininity of his countenance is only mitigated by what Graham Reynolds pejoratively dubs “relentless realism;”⁴⁴ that is, the more marked contrast between light and shadow in the modeling of the sitter’s features than was used by Hilliard and which serves, for example, to give prominence to his Adam’s apple. Digby was certainly regarded, at least by those who admired him, as a fine specimen of manhood: “[H]andsome, six feet tall, a complete sportsman and gentleman, skilled at riding and at arms, an accomplished musician and generous patron.”⁴⁵ The famous representation of the young Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, is another important representation of masculine beauty (Fig. 19.2). Southampton had spurned a marriage proposal made by the most powerful man in England, Elizabeth’s chief advisor, William Cecil, Lord Burghley on behalf of his granddaughter, Lady Elizabeth Vere in 1591. As Cecil’s ward, Southampton was in flagrant violation of the codes of wardship in his refusal and was fined the then enormous sum of £5000. As Hilliard paints him, Southampton’s beauty is arresting: his long golden tresses are draped over one shoulder, he has a confident air and beautifully proportioned features. The pleasure in viewing miniatures such as this one was well described by Hilliard: “in the comliness and beauty of the face ... which giveth us such pleasing, and feedest so wonderfully our affection more than all the world’s treasure it consisteth in three points ... complexion, proportion, countenance.”⁴⁶ Thus in Southampton, there is a happy coincidence between the geometric principles of proportion that must be deployed by the artist and the natural perfection of proportion that happily belongs to the sitter.

Because the ravishing Southampton was also Shakespeare’s patron, the painting is all the more famous for having been taken as the image of the unknown young man in the *Sonnets*. Further, since Shakespeare himself pondered the specifically painted countenance of a male beloved in his own miniaturized art, the sonnet form, scholars have long looked for clues as to whether one of the beautiful young men imaged in the Elizabethan miniatures could be the youth so adored by the poet. Shakespeare’s sonnet 16 famously contains a potential allusion to Hilliard, the master limner of the age, in “*this time’s pencil*.”

But wherefore do not you a mightier way
 Make war upon this bloody tyrant time
 And fortify yourself in your decay
 With means more blessed than my barren rhyme?
 Now stand you on the top of happy hours,
 And many maiden gardens, yet unset,
 With virtuous wish would bear your living flowers,
 Much liker than your painted counterfeit:
 So should the lines of life that life repair
 Which this time’s pencil or my pupil pen,

Neither in inward worth nor outward fair
 Can make you live yourself in eyes of men
 To give away yourself keeps yourself still,
 And you must live drawn by your own sweet skill
 (Shakespeare Sonnet 16)

The allusion here to “living flowers” that would be more like the young man than his portrait, refers to the bearing of a biological image (a child). The sense is also of a parallel between bearing a child and wearing an image, an allusion to the practice of wearing miniatures as locketts on a chain or pinned onto clothing as brooches. Thus, young women wear miniatures of the elusive young man when they would rather bear his children.

While it is impossible to tell what painting Shakespeare had in mind here, Hilliard’s miniature *Young Man Among Roses* (c.1588), a full-length image of a melancholy lover leaning against a tree, with his cloak draped over one shoulder, is also often taken to be Shakespeare’s young man. This painting certainly demonstrates the similar motivations of the two art forms – the sonnet and the miniature.⁴⁷ This painting has a cryptic motto, “*Dat poenas laudata fides*,” (Praised faith brings suffering) appropriate to the image of the forlorn lover and suggests the intensely private and thereby mysterious meaning contained within the painting’s small frame.⁴⁸ Like Shakespeare’s sonnets, the image works simultaneously to reveal and occlude its object.

In Sonnet 16, Shakespeare’s argument is that neither Hilliard in painting nor Shakespeare himself in poetry, “my pupil pen,” can do justice to the beauty of this dazzling young man. Only a genetic copy, according to the poet, can do that. The “lines of life” referred to in line nine of the poem mean both painting from the life, the line of a poem, as well as “line” in the sense of lineage, that is, it is an allusion to the young man’s prospective progeny. However, it is interesting that Hilliard was himself known for his facility with *line*. In the notes to his translation of Ludovico Ariosto’s epic poem *Orlando Furioso*, the Queen’s cousin Sir John Harington reports:

[F]or taking the true lines of the face, I think our countryman (I mean Mr. Hilliard) is inferior to none that lives this day, as among other things of his doing, myself have seen him in white and black in four lines only set down the feature of the Queen’s Majesty’s countenance, that it was even thereby to be known.⁴⁹

Further, since “pencil” was the term used for a fine brush, used precisely to draw lines – the lead pencil as we know it had yet to be invented – “this time’s pencil” may indeed be a direct allusion to Hilliard himself. If this is the case, the sense is that only a biologically living image could outstrip a Hilliard “counterfeit.” If the youth were to produce such an image, he would himself become an artist, a skillful draftsman, “drawn by your own sweet skill.”

In Sonnet 16 then, Shakespeare arguably situates Hilliard along with himself as the greatest artist of the era. Hilliard’s superiority to other painters of his time was confirmed by another sonneteer, John Donne, who had had his own portrait painted by Hilliard:

a hand, or eye
 By Hilliard drawn, is worth an history
 By a worse painter made.⁵⁰

Sir John Harington also concurred with this assessment of Hilliard's achievements, claiming further that miniature painting, limning, is the highest form of art:

And though indeed this Realm hath not bred any *Michel Angelos* nor men of such rare perfection as may deserve this title:

Michel (more than a man) *Angel divine*.

Yet I may say thus much without partiality for the honour of my country ... that we have with us at this day one that for limning (which I take to be the very perfection of art) is comparable with any other country.⁵¹

Artistic facility of this order, however, was potentially dangerous. Painting, drawing, poetry, and biological reproduction are together situated in Shakespeare's sonnets in the realms of reproduction – not simply replication – of a living entity, thus intimating the very aesthetic ambitions feared by more radical Protestants. It was precisely because images were endowed with life by the skill of the artist, that they were proscribed. The Protestant condemnation of images spread its net very wide indeed – all images were problematic. "Idolatry," opined John Jewel in *The Second Tome of Homilies* (1563), "Cannot possibly be separated from images." Despite such fears, the technical dexterity required so that art might be able, as Shakespeare's Sonnet 16 had fantasized, to rival natural reproduction was not, of course, easily achieved. The technical problem of line and counterfeit were much discussed in the period. In his translation of Baldassare Castiglione's *Il Cortegano* (*The Courtier*), Sir Thomas Hoby writes of painting: "Think you again it is a trifling matter to counterfeit natural colours, flesh, clothes and all other coloured things? This cannot now the [en]graver in marble do."⁵²

For the painter in particular, representing the face, beautiful or otherwise, presented even more of a technical problem than it did a philosophical one – a method described in detail by Hilliard's treatise on the art of limning as the careful process of applying first the flesh-colored paint or "carnation" to the finest vellum, which because it is taken from calf fetuses is called "abortive." This was glued to a playing card to give it support (one image of Elizabeth is faced by the Queen of Hearts), and then the ground or carnation was painted, using different intensities of color and transparent paint to capture the modeling of the features. The *Unknown Lady* with a cherry pinned to her left breast (inaccurately dubbed Ann, Countess of Dorset when the image was reframed) wonderfully demonstrates Hilliard's strengths in this department,⁵³ in particular his capacity to render a lively image of his subject's features as well as a powerful sense of an engaging personality: "Now know that all painting imitateth nature of the life in everything, it resembleth so far forth as the painter's memory of skill can serve him to express ... of all things the perfection is to imitate the face of mankind."⁵⁴

The shadowless, pale loveliness of the sitter in Hilliard's *An Unknown Lady* is accentuated by extraordinarily detailed rendition of her costume, one which, incidentally was of the type that incurred the stern reproof of the hotter Protestants such as Stubbes, who opined against the evils of English women's fashions and dubbed these large collars "the master devil ruff" and the starch which stiffened them, "devil's liquor."⁵⁵ He reserved particular condemnation for gowns "laiden with lace ... all over the whole gown, or else the most part."⁵⁶ In this painting, then, extraordinary attention is paid to the very objects that were the source of puritan condemnation, namely, the white lace ruff and the elaborate bodice – black overlaid with ornate lace and jewels – achieved in part by the impasto application of the paint. While the sitter's onomastic identity does not survive, a strong sense of the particular, individual style of her beauty persists with some force as she gazes back at the viewer from beneath a high forehead and unusually well-defined eyebrows.

Howe then the curious drawer watch, and as it were catch these lovely graces, witty smilings, and these stolen glances which suddenly like lightning pass and another countenance taketh place, except he behold, and very well note and conceit to like?⁵⁷

Not surprisingly, Hilliard's treatise also mentions the vulnerability of "his young and simple heart" to the beautiful women who sat for him.

Among the gallery of miniature female beauties that have survived is Sir Philip Sidney's inamorata, Penelope Rich, the Stella of his sonnet sequence, *Astrophil and Stella*, or at least the full-length figure in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen is believed to represent her. Lady Rich had her miniature portrait painted around 1590, but identity fragments over time as name and image gain further and further distance from one another. *Astrophil and Stella* describes Lady Rich in the language of orthodox Petrarchanism. Just as for Petrarch, Laura was the beloved enemy who threatens to destroy the lover because she refuses to return his love, although the tormented Astrophil pursues the divine Stella, this relationship never achieves consummation:

Queen Virtue's Court, which some call Stella's face,
Prepared by Nature's chiefest furniture,
hath his front built of alabaster pure;
Gold is the covering of that stately place;
The door, by which sometimes comes forth her grace,
Red porphyry is, which lock of pearl makes sure,
Whose porches rich (which name of cheeks endure)
Marble mixed with red and white do interlace;
The windows now through which this heav'nly guest
Looks o'er the world, and can find nothing such
Which dare claim from those lights the name of best,
Of touch⁵⁸ they are, that without touch doth touch,
Which Cupid's self from beauty's mine did draw:
Of touch they are, and poor I am their straw.

Stella's beauty reflects the Platonic notion that beauty is a mirror of virtue, and she is possessed of all the standard Petrarchan features: skin white as alabaster, lips like coral (porphyry was a stone that resembled red coral), pearly teeth, and eyes ("windows" through which her celestial being views the world) made of black glossy touchstones. When rubbed, these stones were thought to attract light objects such as straws, and the poem even suggests that the straw becomes combustible. In both the lyrical and visual tradition of Petrarchanism, the lady is a composite of precious objects: eyes of diamonds, teeth of pearl, skin of alabaster and ivory, lips of coral, hair of gold. The lady's beauty is thus invoked in terms of palpable substance, *materia*.

Around 1590, Henry Constable composed a humorous and witty sonnet *To Mr. Hilliard Upon Occasion of a Picture He Made of My Ladie Rich*. Constable argues that if Michelangelo were alive to judge the world's best painter, he would probably choose Raphael over Nicholas Hilliard, on the grounds that he would need to show favor to a fellow archangel (the pun here is, like the one made by Harington, on Michelangelo's name, and the connection is that Raphael is also the name of an archangel). But if Constable could only get the great artist by himself, Michelangelo would have to confess that Hilliard is the best painter of jewels who ever lived.

If Michael the archpainter now did live,
Because that Michael he, an angel hight [named],
As partial for his fellow angels, might
To Raphaele skill much more praise and honour give.
But if in secret I his judgment shrive,
It would confess that no man knew aright
To give to stones and pearls true die [shape and design] and light,
Till first your art with orient nature strive.
But think not yet you did that arte devise;
Nay, thank my Lady that such skill you have:
For often sprinkling her black sparkling eyes
Her lips and breast taught you; the [art you gave]
To diamonds, rubies, pearls, the worth of which
Doth make the jewel which you paint seem Rich [seem like Lady Rich].⁵⁹

Painting jewels was indeed a hallmark of Hilliard's skill, and he used real metals and even real diamonds amid *trompe d'oeil* representations of them in some of his miniatures of the Queen. That the living Lady Rich taught Hilliard his art, of course, comports with the fact that the poem needs to flatter aristocratic Lady Rich more than it does Hilliard, but it also comports with the sense that she is already iconized, herself a jewel, whom Hilliard needs but to copy. Art is always contrived, in other words, unless the subject is already a work of art. Constable's description of Lady Rich's portrait suggests numerous iconic treatments of women in Petrarchan discourse, variously stretching or breaking the limits of hyperbole, in which precious objects both augment and emblemize unsurpassable beauty.

However, the achievement of the miniature was not simply the capacity to represent the beauty of precious, but still inert matter. On the contrary, even in full-length figures in the miniature (such as that of the notorious clotheshorse, Richard Sackville, third Earl of Dorset), which necessarily placed immense importance on jewelry and costume, the most important feature was always the face. No matter how idealized, the face had to be recognizable, and the liveliness of the image depended above all else on the eyes and their expression of emotion. Hoby writes that it is imperative that the painter: “express the grace of the sight that is in the black eyes or in azure with the shining of those amorous beams.”⁶⁰ Crucially in Sidney’s sonnet, Stella’s eyes have power over the poet, they touch him. Stella’s eyes, the black lights of her burning gaze have the power to incinerate Astrophil (to “touch” or set light to him), even, as the last lines tell us, without actually touching him. This is surely nothing less than the power of the image – the power of looking back. In Edmund Spenser’s wonderful neologism in his sonnet sequence, the *Amoretti*, such powers are rendered as “Those lamping eyes” in the opening sonnet addressed to his future spouse, Elizabeth Boyle. Conventionally, the poet-lover projects onto the eyes of the beloved the powers of condemnation or annihilation, but in addition Elizabeth Boyle’s eyes are also shining, alive with her subjective presence. This was the literary equivalent of Nicholas Hilliard’s instruction: “Above all things give light to the eyes.”⁶¹

Hilliard had, as we have already noted, believed in the complete illumination of the features, without the use of shadow at all. However, his successor, Isaac Oliver’s technique with light, garnered in part by his travels to Italy, was very different. In 1616, Oliver painted a large-scale, circular miniature (five inches in diameter) of a court lady as a goddess, the allusion to divine beauty, possibly in masquing costume, hand positioned in Venus’s gesture of modesty over her right breast. The sitter, most probably Lucy Harington, the Countess of Bedford (1581–1627), was described in rhetorically equivalent terms by her close friend, John Donne as “God’s masterpiece.”⁶² In lines that conjure up an image not unlike Oliver’s roundel in which the Countess is enveloped in a shimmering veil, Donne imagines Lucy’s body not as composed of flesh at all; instead, “walls of tender christall her enfold.” In vigorously Protestant circles such glamorous, ornamented attire, along with the masques and court entertainments of which they formed a part was vehemently condemned, especially clothes “clogged with gold, silver, or lace of stately price, wrought all over with needlework, speckled and sparkled here and there.”⁶³ Roy Strong has pointed out the oxidization of the silver considerably diminishes the present impact of the miniature, which must have been a tissue of shimmering highlights: “The portrait is all subtlety of colour, the embroidered dress muted, the billowing veil an excuse for virtuoso monochromatic chiaroscuro to enhance the Countess who emerges from the half light.”⁶⁴ Indeed, light is the principle theme of this stunning miniature, achieved not only by the use of silver but also in the deployment of the new more Italianate technique of chiaroscuro, which we have noted came into vogue in the Jacobean era.

There are strong reasons to accept that the sitter is indeed Lucy, Countess of Bedford, including the insistent association of her with light. The name "Lucy," means lightbearer, and for the poets who praised her, she is light itself. In a sonnet published in 1616, Ben Jonson had addressed her as

LUCY, you brightness of our sphere, who are
Life of the *Muses* day, their morning-star!

She is the Muses' Venus because she was a lavish patron of the arts, and, interestingly, a collector of Holbein's work. The Oliver miniature bears a strong similarity to another of his paintings, namely the similarly circular miniature portrait of Frances Howard, Countess of Essex now in the Victoria and Albert Museum. The Countess was notorious not only for having divorced the Earl of Essex and for marrying Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset, but also for having his tutor, Sir Thomas Overbury, poisoned because he opposed the match. Jonson's masque *Hymenaei* (1606) had been written for her first marriage to the Earl of Essex, and the Countess of Bedford had performed in it. Both these countesses, Frances and Lucy, were ladies in the court circle of Queen Anne and both also performed in Jonson's *Masque of Queens* (1609). However, Oliver's miniature of the Countess of Bedford was probably painted some time after that performance. 1614 is the date given by Roy Strong and Graham Reynolds on grounds of the costume, an elaborate embroidery of fruit and flowers.

If 1614 is indeed the date for this painting, it bespeaks powerful contradictions around Protestant antipathy to the arts because in 1612, two years before Strong and Reynolds' date for the portrait, the Countess had fallen seriously ill and during her sickness underwent a conversion to Puritanism. As a result, she vowed not to attend court any more or wear cosmetics. Yet, the portrait, especially if it was taken in masque costume, is hardly that of a renunciate. Although it may be that her conversion was not after all so profound. She certainly broke the vow not to attend court, but is known to have kept the latter vow, and is reported to have looked conspicuously unadorned amidst all the other painted faces.

Oliver's portrait of the Countess reflects a shift in the art of limning, and indeed, he changed not only his technique but also turned to hitherto proscribed topics under the influence of Italian art: a head of Christ, and an image of the Blessed Virgin. The heyday of Elizabethan iconoclasm had passed, and this was necessarily reflected in its most highly developed art form.

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The miniature epitomizes both the ideological and technical problems presented by portraiture in early modern England. Portraits represent the desire for a resemblance, a remembrance of a living being in a way that was, in early modern England at least, understood to trespass on the sacred. To hold close the likeness of some "profane" love threatened to transgress Protestant, and especially Puritan, ideas about

both piety and eroticism; while to cherish a sacred picture was to revert to the very practices of Catholic worship that the English had spent the better part of the previous 100 years trying to uproot. This was probably why the miniature portrait flourished in the upper (though not exclusively aristocratic) echelons of a culture whose more zealous Protestant factions sought to banish all ornament – artistic and literary. In this era, the miniature replaced the monumental, and in a sense, took on some of its substances – stone and metal – but did so on the scale of jewelry. At that historical moment, as Shakespeare had put it in Sonnet 81, “Your monument shall be my gentle verse,” the diminutive *became* monumental. After the zenith of its achievement, the miniature continued to develop as an art form in England even as its supremacy was supplanted by larger paintings. But for a brief and precious period, the diminutive portrait perfectly fitted the post-Reformation ethos of iconoclasm, and the longing for beautiful but safely secular objects, which it left in its wake.

Notes

- 1 On Hilliard’s life, see *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Foskett, D. (1972) *A Dictionary of British Portrait Miniaturists*, London: Faber and Faber; and for a fuller account, Auerbach, E. (1961) *Nicholas Hilliard*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- 2 Lloyd, C. and Remington, V. (1997) *Portrait Miniatures from the Collection of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II*, London: Boydell Press, 62.
- 3 Quoted in Freedberg, D. (1989) *The Power of Images*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 213.
- 4 Llewellyn, N. (1991) *The Art of Death: Visual Culture in the English Death Ritual, c. 1500–c. 1800*, London: Reaktion Books, 54–55.
- 5 Murdoch, J., Murrell, J., Noon, P. J. and Strong, R. (1981) *The English Miniature*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, preface, n.p.
- 6 Murdoch *et al.* (1981), preface, n.p.
- 7 Strong, R. (1969) *English Icon: Elizabethan and Jacobean Portraiture*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- 8 Strong observes, “It may seem strange but it is extremely pertinent to begin a book on Elizabethan and Jacobean painting with an account of this destruction of religious art” (Strong, 1969, 2).
- 9 Edmund Campion was beatified by Pope Leo XIII on December 9, 1886, and canonized by Pope Paul VI in 1970. Relics of him are preserved in Rome and Prague, in London, Oxford, Stonyhurst, and Roehampton.
- 10 Strong (1969), 3.
- 11 Watt, T. (1991) *Cheap Print and Popular Piety 1550–1640*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 173.
- 12 Duffy, E. (1992) *The stripping of the Altars: Traditional religion in England, c. 1400–c. 1580*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 260. For an itinerary of the types of items destroyed, see Peacock, E. (ed.) (1866) *English Church Furniture, Ornaments and Decorations at the Period of the Reformation. As Exhibited in a List of the Goods Destroyed in Certain Lincolnshire Churches*, 1566, London.

- 13 Llewellyn, N. (2000) *Funeral Monuments in Post-Reformation England*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 53.
- 14 Neill, M. (1997) *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 40–41.
- 15 See Callaghan, D. (2003) “*Romeo and Juliet*”: *Text and Contexts*, Boston, MA, Bedford/St. Martins 436.
- 16 Quoted in Lloyd and Remington (1997), 33.
- 17 Stubbes, P. (1583) *Anatomy of Abuses*, London, 33. I have silently modernized titles and quotations from early modern documents here and throughout. For a fuller treatment of fashion in the period see Jones, A. R. and Stallybrass, P. (2000) *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 18 Stephen Gosson condemned those who use “ornaments to beautify their works, and set their trumpery to sale without suspect.” Gosson, S. (1579) *The School of Abuse*, London, 2–3.
- 19 Quoted in Lloyd and Remington (1997), 40.
- 20 See Reynolds, G. (1998) *British Portrait Miniatures*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 24, 14.
- 21 Stubbes (1583), 139–140.
- 22 Patricia Fumerton argues that miniatures “showed the self being private in public,” Fumerton, P. (1991) *Cultural Aesthetics: Renaissance Literature and the Practice of Social Ornament*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 70.
- 23 Quoted in Fumerton (1991), 67.
- 24 Sidney, P. ([1595] 2002) *An Apology for Poetry, or, The Defence of Poesy*, G. Shepherd (ed.), New York, NY.
- 25 See Lloyd and Remington (1997), 32.
- 26 Roberts, J. (1993) *Holbein and the Court of Henry VIII: Drawings and Miniatures from the Royal Library Windsor Castle*, Edinburgh: Antique Collectors Club Ltd, 11.
- 27 Lloyd and Remington (1997), 24.
- 28 Lloyd and Remington (1997), 12.
- 29 Roberts (1993), 84.
- 30 Murrell, J. (1983) *The Way Howe to Lyme: Tudor Miniatures Observed*, London: V&A, 24; Foskett, D. (1963) *British Portrait Miniatures: a History*, London: Methuen, 45.
- 31 Hoblein’s famous images of Henry VIII, of course, survive in larger formats.
- 32 Gaunt, W. (1980) *Court Painting in England from Tudor to Victorian Times*, London: Constable, 5–34.
- 33 The prayer book survived until the nineteenth century, but was then lost. Nonetheless, photographic evidence of it remains. See Fumerton (1991), 92 and Auerbach (1961), 78.
- 34 Yates, F. A. (1975) *Astraea: the Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century*, London: Routledge.
- 35 Quoted in Louis Adrian Montrose, “Idols of the Queen: Policy, Gender, and the Picturing of Elizabeth I, *Representations* (1999) September: 109.
- 36 Kinney, A. F. and Bradley Salamon, L. (eds) (1983) *Nicholas Hilliard’s Art of Limning*, Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 65. Raphaëlle Costa de Beauregard points out that “in medieval workshops, the painter of faces was an artist of superior talent who left the painting of the rest of the page to others.” Costa de Beauregard, R. (2000) *Silent Elizabethans: the Language of Color in the Miniatures of Nicholas Hilliard and Isaac Oliver*, Montpellier: CERRA, 13.

- 37 This treatise was circulated in manuscript during Hilliard's lifetime.
- 38 Chapman, G. ([1595] 1983) *Ovid's Banquet of Sense*, "Epistle to Royden," London, quoted by Saloman Bradley in Kinney and Saloman Bradley (1983), 108.
- 39 Kinney and Saloman Bradley (1983), 26.
- 40 Hilliard studio ms, quoted in Murrell (1983), 86.
- 41 Kinney and Saloman Bradley (1983), 87.
- 42 Kinney and Saloman Bradley (1983), 80.
- 43 Kinney and Saloman Bradley (1983), 27.
- 44 Reynolds (1998), 26.
- 45 *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.
- 46 Pope-Hennessy, 92. Hilliard.
- 47 See also Costa de Beauregard, R. (1991) *Nicholas Hilliard et L'imaginaire Elisabethain*, Paris: Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 223–255.
- 48 Fumerton describes this image as "the pinnacle of Hilliard's growing art of secrecy." *Cultural Aesthetics*, 81. See also Pope-Hennessy, J. (1966) *The Portrait in the Renaissance*, New York: Phaidon, 255–256.
- 49 Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* translated into English Heroical Verse by Sir John Harington (1591) Robert McNulty (ed.), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 385; quoted in Hulse, C. (1990) *The Rule of Art: Literature and the Painting in the Renaissance*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 11.
- 50 Donne, J. (1633) 'The Storm,' in *Poems*, London, 1633, 56–59.
- 51 Quoted in Hulse (1990), 11.
- 52 Hoby, T. (1900) *The Courtier*, London, 81; quoted in Pope-Hennessy, J. (1943) Nicholas Hilliard and mannerist art theory," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 6, 89–100; 92.
- 53 Strong remarks that this portrait together with that of Hilliard's wife forms "a marked contrast to his portraits of women prior to 1576, which are harder and more masculine in character. After France, the stress is on their charm, femininity and intimacy." Strong, R. (1983) *The English Renaissance Miniature*, London: Thames & Hudson, 93.
- 54 Kinney and Saloman Bradley (1983).
- 55 Stubbes (1583), 35–36.
- 56 Stubbes (1583), 38.
- 57 Quoted in Pope-Hennessy, 95; 96
- 58 "Touch" is a black, shiny stone.
- 59 Kinney and Saloman Bradley (1983), v; Edmond, M. (1983) *Hilliard and Oliver: Lives and Works of Two Great Miniaturists*, London: Robert Hale Ltd, 93–95; Auerbach (1961), 45.
- 60 Hoby, T. (1900) *The Courtier of Baldessar Castilio* London, 81; quoted in Pope-Hennessy (1943), 92.
- 61 Kinney and Bradley Salamon (1983).
- 62 Cary, J. (1981) *John Donne: Life Mind and Art*, Oxford: Faber and Faber, 79.
- 63 Stubbes (1583), 36.
- 64 Strong (1983).

“The Crown and Glory of a Woman”

Female Chastity in Eighteenth-Century British Art

Kate Retford

Between May 1780 and March 1781, Laura, Horatia, and Maria Waldegrave made a number of visits to Joshua Reynolds’ studio at Number 47, Leicester Fields, to sit for a portrait now in the collection of the National Gallery of Scotland (Fig. 20.1).¹ By this date, Reynolds was at the top of his profession: President of the Royal Academy; author of a number of “Discourses” on art; Knight of the realm; a busy, rich, influential, and well-connected society portraitist.² Over the course of the previous three decades, he had established a reputation based largely on his life-size “grand manner” portraits, loaded with classical and mythological allusions, redolent with stylistic and compositional tributes to respected Old Masters. On the one hand, Reynolds’ references to the rich, Venetian coloring of Titian’s work, his affiliation of sitters with figures such as Venus, his use of poses and compositions from Italian Baroque-era artists including Francesco Romanelli represented an attempt to raise the popular but frequently scorned genre of portraiture closer to the distinctly unpopular but hallowed domain of history painting.³ On the other, more prosaically, such allusions were also extremely appealing and flattering to Reynolds’ exalted clientele.

The Waldegrave portrait pays a variety of compliments to its sitters. The traditional device of the column and red drape, looking back to the works of Anthony van Dyck, indicates the elevated social position the sisters enjoyed as eighteenth-century aristocrats. There is more than a hint of the three Graces about the way the figures are posed and the variety of profiles with which we are presented, an allusion acknowledged in a number of reviews when the painting was shown at the Royal Academy exhibition of 1781.⁴ The women are



FIG. 20.1 Sir Joshua Reynolds: *The Ladies Waldegrave*, Scottish National Gallery, Purchased with the aid of The Cowan Smith Bequest and the Art Fund 1952.
 Source: © National Gallery of Scotland.

shown to be skilled in the elegant accomplishment of lace making, and are clearly ladies of fashion, wearing elaborately piled hair and dresses made of muslin (“the fashionable textile of the decade”).⁵ In addition, Reynolds’ portrait emphasizes the physical attractions of his youthful sitters, their powdered locks framing dark eyes, flushed cheeks, and pearly white skin. Indeed, when the *Morning Chronicle* reviewed this painting at the Academy, it paid tribute to the beauty of the ladies’ “own personal perfections” through juxtaposition with the sublime visual language evident in another of Reynolds’ contributions of that year: a painting of Lord Richard Cavendish posed against a stormy seascape.⁶ Thanks primarily to Edmund Burke’s *Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* of 1757, these two aesthetic categories were not only firmly opposed but also associated with, respectively, the masculine and the feminine. However, as well as all this, the three Ladies Waldegrave are depicted in a visual language intended to show them as modest, demure, and, above all, chaste women.

This is apparent in various aspects of the image. The most obvious elements of the iconography to convey the sisters' purity are the prominent locked drawer of the table around which they work, a traditional emblem of virginity, and the whiteness of their dresses. Many reviewers commented on Reynolds' decision to paint all three women garbed in white fabric, and one at least found his coloring to be "chastely beautiful."⁷ However, some considered that he had taken the device a little too far, and the *London Courant* was not alone in complaining of "too great a quantity of white drapery."⁸ White had long been established, was, and indeed still is recognizable as the emblematic color of purity and its associated virtues. The allegorical figures of Purity, Chastity, Fidelity, Humility, Modesty, Bashfulness, and Virginity in Cesare Ripa's famous *Iconologia*, translated into English in the early eighteenth century, are all garbed in this color.⁹

"The language of the eyes" is also particularly significant in this portrait.¹⁰ Either none of the sisters are bold enough to meet the viewer's gaze, or they are unaware of the scrutiny of an external presence.¹¹ Laura and Horatia both look down toward their work, apparently absorbed in their endeavors, while Maria, having to concentrate less as she holds a skein of silk for her sister to wind, glances up toward the right of the picture, possibly to imply that a fourth party has just entered their enclosed domain.¹² The motif of the downcast eyes, while linked to the narrative of the painting, would readily have been understood by contemporary viewers as signifying appropriate bashfulness. It was always the gaze that was supposed to give the real clue to the extent of female sexual virtue, most conduct book writers agreeing that a woman's eyes would be considered the "Interpreters of her Heart."¹³ In contrast to Laura's properly lowered, modest gaze, attentive to the silk she is winding onto a card, the Reverend James Fordyce described the very different eyes of an "abandoned" female: "formerly soft, virtuous, and downcast – those very eyes that effused the soul of innocence, have learnt to stare, and roll with unbounded wantonness; to dart nothing but unholy fire."¹⁴

A little earlier in Fordyce's evocative description, the cleric also observes that "loose" women "have forgotten to blush."¹⁵ This provides a further physiognomic clue as to how to identify sexual virtue in Reynolds' portrait. The heightened color of all three Waldegrave sisters' cheeks, reddened to a rather startling degree, would have spoken explicitly to contemporaries of their purity. The language of blushing is more notably specific to the period than the language of the eyes. It might seem strange that Laura, so absorbed in her work and solely in the company of her siblings, so apparently blameless, finds any need to redden. However, another author of conduct books, John Gregory, writing six years before Reynolds began his commission, provides an explanation of such private flushes. Certainly, he admits that "Pedants, who think themselves philosophers, ask why a woman should blush when she is conscious of no crime." But he is clearly confident in his unelaborated counter assertion to his female readership: "Nature has made you to blush when you are guilty of no fault, and has forced us to love you because you do so. – Blushing is so far from being necessarily an attendant on guilt, that it is the usual companion of innocence."¹⁶

The iconography of the locked drawer, the whiteness of the sitters' dresses, the lowered eyes, and the flushed cheeks, then, would have proclaimed the virtue of the Ladies Waldegrave to all who saw this portrait. And that was a considerable number of people, as portraiture in this period existed in a highly public forum. The genteel enjoyed touring painters' residences both in London and Bath, and a number of individuals, including Fanny Burney, went to see the Waldegrave portrait in Reynolds' studio while it was being prepared for display at the Academy.¹⁷ Portraiture consistently dominated "the Exhibition," as it was commonly known. In the year the painting under consideration went on show, 34.7 percent of the exhibits were portraits, with history painting, battle pictures, and literary subjects – the kinds of pictures the institution and, indeed, Reynolds himself as President, were supposed to be promoting – trailing behind at a mere 15 percent.¹⁸ Even when a portrait was removed from the Academy walls and transferred to the patron's home, it often maintained a public presence as visiting the houses of the gentry and aristocracy was a popular pastime in this era. Many would have viewed the Waldegrave painting at the Strawberry Hill residence of its owner, the sisters' uncle, Horace Walpole.¹⁹ Finally, such portraits were routinely published as prints, sometimes for the benefit of an intimate circle of family and friends, but often for much broader dissemination through the print shops. Reynolds was quick off the mark with his image of the Waldegraves, and a mezzotint by Valentine Green was published on December 1, 1781.²⁰

Success in as many of these different forums as possible was essential, as there were always competitors seeking to make a name for themselves and garner clientele. One estimate suggests a minimum of 111 portraitists active in London in the 1780s.²¹ For Reynolds, perhaps the most important of these contexts of display was the Exhibition, where, along with no fewer than 14 other paintings, he hung this portrait for his fellow artists, reviewers, potential patrons, and the wider public to scrutinize at their leisure. These exhibits were intended to demonstrate his range and facility as a portraitist, encompassing half- and full-length paintings of both men and women, adults and children – and, most significantly for this discussion, of both chaste and unchaste females. As Robert Jones has noted, Reynolds was fond of exhibiting portraits of respectable society women alongside images of less than respectable courtesans; of positioning women whose status required a certain propriety of demeanor against those known to be the mistresses of famous men.²² The exhibition of 1781 was no exception, and the demure bashfulness of the Waldegraves was set off against a very different, full-length portrait of Emily Warren, at that time the mistress of Robert Pott.²³ Leg exposed, brandishing a blazing torch, her expression surely recalling Fordyce's description of the dissolute woman's staring eyes "roll[ing] with unbounded wantonness," she is portrayed in the character of Thais, the courtesan of Alexander the Great who persuaded him to set light to the city of Persepolis. The visual contrast could not have been greater and, when the *London Courant* identified the characters in each of Reynolds' portraits in that year's exhibition, it juxtaposed "the wanton frenzy of his Thais" with "the domestic elegance of his Waldegraves."²⁴

The "Outworks" of Chastity

The visual tropes evident in Reynolds' portrait of Laura, Horatia, and Maria reverberate throughout later eighteenth-century female portraiture.²⁵ The obligatory appearance of chastity in such images has to be related to the fact that it was the defining female virtue in the literature of the period. Conduct book writers, novelists, poets, and pamphleteers joined forces to assert that without sexual virtue, whether an unmarried virgin or a faithful wife, a woman would be nothing. As Wetenhall Wilkes explained, no number of alternative attractions could make up for a blemished sexual reputation: "No Charm can supply its Place. Without it, Beauty is unlovely, wit is mean and wanton, Quality contemptible, and Good-breeding worthless."²⁶ And no blemish, once incurred, could ever be removed. It was made perfectly clear that it only took one slip for a woman to be lost to the ranks of the respectable for ever. Novels, particularly those of Samuel Richardson, repeatedly presented death as a preferable option to existence in a fallen state. Clarissa, one of Richardson's two most famous heroines (the other will be discussed later), has to endure a long and agonizing demise once she has been raped by Lovelace, even though she was unconscious when the assault took place.²⁷ Conduct book writers reinforced the message that chastity was a tangible but frangible object, Wilkes proclaiming "the least slip in a woman's honour, is never to be recovered."²⁸

In contrast, while sexual virtue was certainly a consideration for respectable men and by no means unimportant, chastity had nowhere near the same overwhelming pride of place in discussions of masculine merits. According to the principle of "the double standard," a man's culpability for his sexual behavior could not begin to be compared to the responsibility of a woman to maintain her reputation at all times.²⁹ In a famous article of 1959, Keith Thomas explored this phenomenon in detail, questioning why this might be the case; why some writers could deem prostitutes necessary to satisfy excessive male desire while insisting on the chastity of respectable women, and why only men could use their spouse's adultery as a justification to sue for divorce. His important conclusion was this:

The double standard ... is the reflection of the view that men have property in women and that the value of this property is immeasurably diminished if the woman at any time has sexual relations with any one other than her husband.³⁰

In essence, women belonged to men, whether to their fathers or their husbands, and, as their possessions, they could not allow themselves to be "used" by anyone else. Indeed, until the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, a husband could bring a "criminal conversation" case against his wife's lover, effectively attempting to secure a cash compensation for the loss and damage of goods. The principle that a woman is something to be owned is embedded in the transferral process at the center of the marriage ceremony, in which the bride is passed from her father's hands to those of her husband. This is visualized in a number of eighteenth-century portraits.

In c.1750, Francis Hayman painted Jonathan Tyers seated under a tree with his daughter, Elizabeth, while his recently acquired son-in-law, John Wood, stands in an elegant posture to one side. Tyers appears to be advising his daughter as to her proper conduct in her newly married state. He gestures to a dog, a traditional emblem of fidelity, which his offspring duly pats, while the statue behind them, consisting of a putto, a dolphin, and a dove, symbolizes love, long life, and peace.³¹ The Waldegrave portrait is redolent with these links between female chastity, male property, and the state of marriage. Single at the point of the painting's execution, all three women had entered the marriage market and would have been optimistic about their prospects. Indeed, those prospects were fulfilled as Laura married the Earl of Waldegrave the year after the portrait was exhibited, Maria was betrothed to the Earl of Euston two years later, while Horatia, in a slightly less advantageous position as the youngest sister, became the wife of Admiral Lord Hugh Seymour in 1786. The portrait, stressing their chastity along with their beauty, accomplishments, and aristocratic status, was an important means of advertising their qualities as potentially ideal wives. It emphasized their status as modest young women, loyal to their family's reputation, but also gestured ahead to the expected moment when that virginal chastity would be converted into a different type of sexual virtue; that of the loyal and devoted wife. In this way, Reynolds returned to the theme of his earlier painting of the Montgomery sisters, in which each of the female sitters' actual, imminent, or potential entry into the world of wedlock is defined by her position relative to a statue of Hymen, god of marriage.³²

A portrait such as that of the Waldegraves was thus a key tool in the establishment, upkeep, and assertion of reputation – and reputation was all when it came to sexual virtue. Indeed, according to many writers, if sexual virtue wasn't seen to exist, or, worse, if one's reputation was sullied in any way, then actual conduct could make very little difference. This became a truism to the degree that it slipped into being something of a running joke. In Henry Fielding's play, *The Modern Husband*, the anti-hero seeks to profit from his wife's adulterous activities with Lord Richly, and so wants to catch them *in flagrante delicto* in order that he can bring a lucrative criminal conversation case. His spouse initially quibbles, apparently fearing for her reputation, which she proclaims to be dearer to her than her life. Upon this objection, Mr Modern remarks that it is, "Very strange, that a Woman who made so little Scruple of sacrificing the Substance of her Vertue, shou'd make so much of parting with the Shadow of it." The retort is this: "'Tis the Shadow only that is valuable."³³

Portraiture could help to cast that all important shadow through metaphor and allegory; in this case through white dresses and the presence of a locked drawer.³⁴ However, the problem was that such signs were clearly a conceit: costumes could be freely selected by the artist and his sitters; suitable attributes could be decided on at will. A more apparently convincing and therefore preferable contribution to the all-important shadow of virtue was the physical expression of the internal merits related to sexual purity; biological evidence of modesty and meekness, the

"outworks" of chastity.³⁵ Physiognomy established the principle that the external form reflected the internal character, that qualities such as humility would imprint themselves on the body both through indelible physical characteristics and the mark of repeated expressions and gestures.³⁶ Sensibility, increasingly important from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, promoted the idea that emotive events and objects would cause the nerves of a creature of sentiment to reverberate, resulting in physical phenomena such as tears, palpitations, and faints.³⁷ Both sets of ideas, closely linked in the work of the famous physiognomist, Johann Caspar Lavater, established the notion that the body provided legible expression of the inner qualities of the individual.

However, something with which physiognomists had to engage was the idea that it could all be faked, and Lavater devoted a whole chapter of his *Essay on Physiognomy* to this anticipated accusation.³⁸ One answer was to scrutinize the features of a person ignorant of being observed, to catch someone unawares before they had time to contrive a desired appearance.³⁹ In Reynolds' portrait, none of the sisters seem conscious of the gazes of the thousands of viewers who would have seen the portrait at the Royal Academy or Strawberry Hill, and only one looks up at the putative newcomer to their gathering. Even more useful were those signs that could be deemed involuntary, physical evidence of character that would be difficult or impossible to fabricate or control; those physical reactions that could suggest "bodily authenticity."⁴⁰ Key amongst such signs was the blush, explored and defined in an important article by Angela Rosenthal as "an involuntary bodily 'performance'," as the unfalsifiable message of "talkative skin."⁴¹ Certainly, the heightened color of the cheeks of Laura, Horatia, and Maria could feasibly have been accused of cosmetic enhancement by the cynical viewer. However, the degree of suspicion with which makeup was viewed in England in the eighteenth century, combined with the status of the sitters, the privacy of their situation, and the additional, accompanying signs of their modesty, would have militated against such a reading.⁴² The blushes of the Waldegrave sisters could thus be taken as clear evidence of their modesty and inner virtue. The flushed cheek was a message of purity that could not only be captured visually by the artist, but that also had a spontaneity, a legitimacy, that rendered it superior to more obviously contrived symbols.

The Madonna and the Magdalene

Rosenthal proposes that the notion of female purity extruding through features and expressions became dominant in portraiture of the mid-1770s onwards, and was such a standard idea as to be targetted by satire by the end of the century.⁴³ Indeed, the broader canonization of female chastity has been specifically identified as a phenomenon of the eighteenth century, a period in which women, according to Tom Laqueur, ceased to be beings "whose desires knew no bounds in the whole scheme of things, and whose reason offered so little resistance to

passion,” and “became in some accounts creatures whose whole reproductive life might be spent anaesthetized to the pleasures of the flesh.”⁴⁴ The notion that females were desexualized in this era has much to do with Laqueur’s own research into medical theories of gender. In the early modern era, women were essentially perceived as inverted men and, therefore, female sexual desire, orgasm, and ejaculation were believed necessary in order for conception to take place. The key moment of change came when it was realised that women ovulated spontaneously; that there was no need for a female orgasm or even, therefore, for female desire in order for the generation of the species to continue. As a result, female chastity ceased to be something that needed to be learned through sheer hard graft on the part of the lustful woman, and began to be formulated as a natural female quality. The “wanton” was no longer someone who had failed to restrain herself; she was now inherently perverse.⁴⁵

While Laqueur’s findings have rightly been highly influential in this field, his conclusions have been qualified. From the point of view of this essay, two issues are crucial. First, there is very rarely a complete shift from one status quo to another. The pseudonymous Philogamus, writing as late as 1739, argued that women were more inclined to “lubricity” than men, pointing out that, as they “were principally designed for producing the Species ... we cannot wonder, if their Inclinations and Desires tend chiefly that Way.”⁴⁶ Older works such as Nicolas Venette’s *Conjugal Love* and *Aristotle’s Compleat Masterpiece* were reprinted throughout this period, continuing to assert the principle of female sexual desire well into the mid- and later eighteenth century.⁴⁷ Second, these polarized conceptions of female sexuality, the passionate and the pure, are not quite as different as may be supposed. Whether it was argued that women were lustful beings whose inexorable desires needed to be constrained, or whether they were configured as fundamentally chaste creatures who would never enter into sexual relations if it were not for their wish to please men, the core principle was the same. They must, at all times, be chaste. As Amanda Vickery has argued: “Whether the vision of the Madonna or the Magdalene was uppermost in male imaginings, the same modest demeanour was prescribed for women.”⁴⁸

The key word in this quote is “uppermost.” The Madonna and the Magdalene were, to a great extent, joined at the hip. They were always conceived in a dialectical relationship, antithetical yet reciprocal, each recalling and reinforcing the qualities of the other. Furthermore, even the eighteenth-century “madonna” had to deal with sex in some way, as it was only her prototype who could manage to bear a son and heir without having to lose her virginity. Certainly, respectable ladies had to be demure, modest, and restrained throughout their maidenhood and then not stray from the conjugal bed after marriage. But they still somehow had to secure husbands, retain their spouses’ sexual interest and propagate their family lines. As *Aristotle’s Compleat Masterpiece* put it: “Virginity, untouch’d and taintless, is the Boast and Pride of the Fair Sex; but they generally commend it to put it off.”⁴⁹

At this point, analysis of the Waldegrave portrait can be taken a little further. Certainly, all the signs of virtuous virginity are present, both physical and metaphorical. However, the sisters are also represented as desirable women, as sexually appealing creatures able to attract potential suitors. The locked drawer, which functions as an emblem of chastity, is painted in minute detail, contrasting with the folds and ruffles of the muslin that cascades around it. Indeed, this disparity in painterly technique began to grate on Walpole after a while, and he complained in 1783 that Reynolds' "journeyman ... has finished the lock and key of the table like a Dutch flower-painter."⁵⁰ This symbol, as a result, forms an arresting part of the image, inexorably drawing the viewer's gaze. It is the nearest object to the picture plane, and the way in which the light glints on the ring of the key suggests that it might be turned, that the drawer might be unlocked. The materiality, the palpability of this item, set off against a much broader brushwork in the rest of the painting, implies an invitation. It indicates the sexual purity of the women's bodies, but also foreshadows the moment when the right men will be given privileged access fully to enjoy those bodies.

The pose of Horatia is also worth re-examining. She certainly turns away from the viewer's gaze and lowers her eyes toward her lacework. Indeed, there is very little self-display in her pose as the artist presents the spectator with a *profile perdu* (lost profile) that conceals most of her features. One reviewer apparently did not know what to make of this posture; "why has Sir *Joshua Reynolds* given so scanty a portion of Lady Horatia's Profile? – Is it because it exceeded Art, to make a FacSimile – or wherefore?"⁵¹ The suggestion here is that Reynolds has rendered the detailing of his sitter's face, the likeness of the portrait, a subordinate consideration to the beauty and impact of the painting as a work of art. However, a more earthy reason is suggested in the *London Courant's* discussion; "the beautiful turn of the neck of the lady working at the tambour is not to be described."⁵² By bending her head round, the better to concentrate on her work, Horatia exposes the attractive long line of her neck for the benefit of the viewer, its curve vanishing into the curls at the base of her powdered coiffure. Her posture is sensual, the shadow under her chin leading the eye down around the edge of her bodice and outlining the curve of her breast. There is a hint of cleavage and a glimpse of her bosom through the gauzy fabric of her dress.

The Ladies Waldegrave thus have a more complex relationship with Emily Warren, portrayed as Thais, than at first might have seemed. Indeed, Marcia Pointon has emphasized in her analysis of this portrait that, in addition to the reference to the three Graces, the tambor held by Horatia is not so far from the tambourine of bacchanalian celebration. Classical referencing, evoking the sexuality and licentiousness of the pagan world, can thus be detected in both images:

Rather than being a question of a choice between femininity in its married or marriageable state and licentious objects of sexual desire exhibiting Bacchanalian excess, it was much more a question of a structural relationship between these two possible conditions.⁵³

And ultimately, when on display in the Academy exhibition of 1781, both paintings were operating in a space known to be attractive for the potential to spectate and speculate on other visitors. It was an environment with a flirtatious appeal. Take, for example, an episode at this exhibition narrated/invented by a writer in the *Morning Herald* on May 7. A “man of gallantry” observes to his female companion, while “gazing earnestly in the lady’s face,” that art “loses all its charms, when nature’s paragon exhibits her matchless beauties.” At this compliment, the woman responds as she should: “Nature, dipping her pencil into her most exquisite tints, gave the lady’s countenance such an angelic hue, as a Reynolds may attempt, but can never equal!”⁵⁴ The Waldegrave sisters may flush as the viewer gazes on their attractions, but their modesty can never be as attractive as that exhibited by a lady in the flesh.

Before and After

The theme of female sexuality is just as strong in William Hogarth’s pendants, *Before* and *After*, painted some 50 years earlier (Figs 20.2 and 20.3).⁵⁵ However, these paintings operate in a very different way to Reynolds’ grand manner portrait



FIG. 20.2 William Hogarth: *Before*. Oil on canvas, 372×447 mm, 1730–1731.
Source: © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.



FIG. 20.3 William Hogarth: *After*. Oil on canvas, 372×451 mm, 1731.

Source: © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

of the Ladies Waldegrave. In the first of the sequential images, a woman is importuned by a suitor. His romantic gesture, pressing his hand expressively to his bosom, is somewhat undermined by the leg he thrusts into her skirts. She pulls away from his advances, raising her hand as she turns her face, dropping the fruit she has been carrying in her apron in apparent alarm. However, the moment one turns to the sequel to this episode, it becomes clear that her resistance is a show of chastity, rather than an expression of the genuine article. Clearly in a state of post-coital exhaustion, the heightened color of her face ceases to be a modest flush and becomes the sign of someone who has recently been engaged in strenuous physical exertion. Her body language is now far from demure, her skirts hiked up well above her knees and her bodice pulled down to reveal her breasts as she turns to her equally exhausted and dishevelled consort. The clue to the outcome of his advances in *Before* lies once again in "the language of the eyes." While Hogarth's heroine may appear to be resistant, the way in which she looks over her raised hand toward the man making such a bold attempt upon her person indicates that she is already prepared to succumb. Rather than modestly lowering her eyes, the fact that she meets his gaze suggests her desire to consummate this

encounter. Furthermore, the apples that fall to the ground identify her as the daughter of Eve, prone to temptation.

Hogarth does not show the actual moment in which the couple are conjoined. It is the absent event that structures the two paintings; the space between, which the viewer is required imaginatively to fill. The moment at which the loss of virginity and/or sexual virtue takes place is indicated and framed, rather than gestured toward as in Reynolds' portrait of the Waldegraves.⁵⁶ These risqué paintings are a long way from that image of aristocratic women of marriageable age, and some of the reasons for this are worth detailing. Instead of the individual, the particular, Hogarth is dealing with the generic and, as a result, so much more is possible. When Robert Baker observed a painting of "A young lady undressing at her toilet by candlelight," exhibited by Joseph Wright of Derby in 1771, he wrote: "I presume this is not a portrait; for young ladies (at least, *modest* young ladies) are seldom represented in their pictures almost naked, and going to bed."⁵⁷ *Before* and *After* are not portraits of identifiable women, commissioned by their uncle and designed to display their charms to polite society. They are subject paintings intended to be enjoyed and savoured in private by an elite, male patron – John Thomson, MP. Furthermore, instead of the domestic setting of the Reynolds portrait, Hogarth has used a rural environment that signifies the visual language of the French rococo. The rules are therefore different as the artist aligns his representations with Watteauesque images of men and women indulging in flirtatious exchange in lush pastoral settings.⁵⁸ The paintings operate in an artistic framework that licences such behavior as part of a semi-foreign, titillating world of gallantry. Above all, however, instead of depicting propertied women – three daughters, all with considerable dowries, being offered to the attention of possible suitors – Hogarth has created a female character who is clearly from the lower echelons of society (identified by Aileen Ribiero, according to her costume, as perhaps a lady's maid).⁵⁹ Her chastity, as a result, simply does not count for as much. She is not a member of a wealthy family, which she can bring into disrepute; not an heiress whose value in the marriage market will be forever ruined by indiscretion. Class, as Lynda Nead has noted in a nineteenth-century context, is everything when it comes to female sexual virtue.⁶⁰

After is an extraordinary image for the eighteenth century in its suggestion of real parity between the couple after the act of consummation. While the rules of masculine sexual desire and feminine resistance are partly adhered to in the pendant, those principles that form some link to the Waldegrave portrait have gone in this picture. We are much more in the world of Philogamus, suggesting a female whose desires are just as vivid as those of her male counterpart, and who therefore must be kept in check.⁶¹ The potentially subversive quality to this representation was contained by the context of the commission, by its intended function as a "cabinet" painting to be savored by a wealthy male patron and his friends. It is significant that neither *Before* nor *After* were issued in print form. However, at the same time as Hogarth was producing these paintings, he was also working on another set of pendants on the same theme for the Duke of Montagu. These

were then engraved for the benefit of a broader audience in 1736.⁶² Although also initially conceived to function within a sexualized, masculine culture, the differences between these images and the versions executed for Thomson are significant in explaining Hogarth's decision to publish them. These are located indoors, moving the seduction from a Watteauesque pastoral setting to become a threatening presence in a domestic space. The woman's resistance in this alternative *Before* is considerably more convincing, as she makes a grab for and knocks over her dressing table. Here, we appear to be witnessing a rape scene. Indeed, when the image was translated from painting into print, one of a number of modifications was the alteration of the expression on the heroine's face in order to convey a greater sense of alarm. Montagu's sequel also moves away from a sense of a mutual, equal affair. This time, the woman clutches at and pleads with her seducer, who no longer holds her hand. Rather than both being seated, leaning toward one another in a state of shared fatigue, the woman sits as her assailant stands to pull up his trousers, presumably preparing for departure. Certainly, in the engraved version of Montagu's *Before*, it is made clear that Hogarth does not exonerate his female protagonist for getting into this situation. She may have been reading "The Practice of Piety," but she has also been devouring novels and the salacious poetry of the Earl of Rochester. This gives the viewer a clue, at least, as to how she has unwisely ended up alone with a suitor. However, she is not so corrupt that she can embrace the idea of actual sexual relations in the manner of her counterpart in Thomson's pendants.

The more conventional view of female sexuality evident in this much more public *Before* and *After*, emphasizing the adverse consequences of lack of chastity, is also apparent in Hogarth's highly successful print series, *The Harlot's Progress*, published in 1732.⁶³ Once again, the moment in which female virtue is lost is an absent, implied point in the narrative. In the first plate, Moll Hackabout has just alighted from the York coach and, eyes downcast, is a picture of female modesty in a corrupt urban environment. Colonel Charteris, a notorious rake nicknamed "the Rape-Master General of Britain," eagerly observes as the procuress, Mother Needham, draws Moll into a life of prostitution. His hand is deep in his pocket as his excitement grows at the thought of debauching this demure country girl. The story has moved on considerably by the following scene. Charteris appears to be out of the picture, and Moll is now the unfaithful mistress of a wealthy Jew. She attempts to distract her keeper from the surreptitious exit of her young lover by kicking over the tea table and snapping her fingers in his face. The moment of corruption has taken place somewhere between this and the previous image. In the case of *The Harlot's Progress*, however, not one but a total of five plates follow the loss of virtue, allowing Hogarth to elucidate the consequences of that event at length and in great detail. Moll's subsequent life of poverty, crime, imprisonment, disease, and, ultimately, death is carefully described through the sequence of images, a grisly narrative that unfolds in a manner akin to a picaresque novel.

The visual and the literary are closely intertwined in *The Harlot's Progress*. Text inscribed on a wig box (plate three) or a coffin plaque (plate six) facilitates

interpretation; objects require verbalization for their meaning fully to be understood (Moll is identified as a silly “goose,” but also as a beautiful “bell[e]” in the opening scene). Above all, the print series format meant that Hogarth could unfold his tale in a linear manner more commonly associated with literature. The relationship between painting and poetry (“ut pictura poesis”) had recently been explored at some length by the Earl of Shaftesbury in his famous tract, “A Notion of the Historical Draught or Tablature of the Choice of Hercules.” Anticipating Lessing, Shaftesbury had tackled the problem that, while a poet can present successive moments, an artist creating an individual painting has to work within a single instant. The Earl’s answer was a number of pictorial strategies that would create a sense of “repeal” and “anticipation,” that would indicate to the viewer what had gone before and what was to come.⁶⁴ Hogarth, however, was able to unravel a chronology through a sequence of distinct images, to separate, order, and control the different stages of his narrative, carefully elucidating cause and effect. Such detailing of the various, consequent ill effects of loss of sexual virtue, both a result of Moll’s foolishness and the failure of those around her, allowed *The Harlot’s Progress* to function as a morality tale in a broad marketplace.

The consequences endured by the Harlot, presented for the benefit of a relatively inclusive print-buying public, are not even hinted at in Thomson’s version of *After*, intended solely for the enjoyment of an upper-class male. However, to complicate this alignment of morality and publicity, it is worth looking at another, later, painting by Hogarth, which also deals with the theme of female sexuality. Originally called *Picquet; or Virtue in Danger*, this is more ambiguous and open than any image so far examined (Fig. 20.4).⁶⁵ In Hogarth’s own words, it depicts a lady who has “lost all at cards to a young officer[,] wavering at his suit whether she should part with her Hon^r or no to regain the loss which was offerd to her.”⁶⁶ While still in the realm of the generic, this is a female protagonist from the other end of the social scale to the lady’s maid of Thomson’s *Before*. Instead of a woodland setting in which the heroine has been gathering apples, Hogarth has described a well-appointed Palladian room, its walls hung with fine green damask. Instead of a mob cap and simple, rustic outfit, this elegant woman wears yellow satin and pearls in her hair. Property and reputation, both personal and familial, are factors in this woman’s decision as to whether or not she should relinquish her virtue, particularly as Hogarth includes clear evidence that she is married. For example, a bracelet bearing a miniature portrait of her husband rests in her opponent’s upturned hat, alongside the other items she has lost in the card game. The spectre of adultery is raised, and the narrative identified as the kind of scenario that could lead to a criminal conversation trial. Much more is at stake, and yet Hogarth leaves the narrative teasingly open. No further scenes ensue to tell the viewer whether this heroine capitulates or not, and no additional paintings outline the consequences of any lapse. The cause and effect progression of *The Harlot’s Progress*, the controlled sequential narrative offered by the device of the pictorial series, is denied. There is little of Shaftesbury’s recommended “anticipation” here, of a “*Prophecy or Prognostication*” of future events and outcomes.⁶⁷ *Picquet*



FIG. 20.4 William Hogarth: *The Lady's Last Stake*, also known as *Picquet; or Virtue in Danger*. Oil on canvas, 914×1054 mm, 1759.

Source: Buffalo, New York: Albright-Knox Art Gallery/Art Resource, New York and Scala, Florence.

gestures ahead to a pregnant moment that is never resolved: this is literally a “conversation piece” to invite speculation and discussion as to the outcome of events.⁶⁸

Significantly, Hogarth does not here indicate either female sexual desire or an over-stimulated romantic imagination as in the alternative versions of *Before* and *After*. This heroine does not appear to be someone who could be called a silly goose. *Picquet* is most challenging as a representation of femininity in the reasoned calculation that seems to be going into the lady's decision. Her finger resting on her cheek, her hand placed on the firescreen in an assertive pose, she deliberates as to the best course of action. The point that this is an issue of intellect rather than of passion is reinforced by the placid pet sleeping under the table. By the late 1750s, viewers would have been more than familiar with Hogarth's fondness for indicating sexual stimulation through the inclusion of an over-excited small dog.⁶⁹ Devices in the painting add to the suspense of the moment, rather than invite serious contemplation of the fate of the fallen woman: the clock is

topped with the figure of Cupid wielding the scythe of Father Time, its motto declaring “NUNC NUNC” – “now now.” The viewer awaits the lady’s verdict, her rational deliberation as surely connected to her elite status and wealth as the reactions of Moll Hackabout and the woman in Thomson’s *Before* are embedded in a stereotype of the more instinctual, less cerebral lower echelons.

Once again, *Picquet* was a painting initially executed to function within an elite, masculine culture, intended to hang in the home of Lord Charlemont. However, it also had a much wider audience, shown at the Society of Artists in 1761 and subsequently engraved as *The Lady’s Last Stake*, the title by which it is now most commonly known. Perhaps elements such as the cards being incinerated in the grate provided sufficient signage of the dangers of unchastity to temper the ambiguity of the image. Perhaps the fact that any putative moment of capitulation could only ever be supposed, the issue of female unchastity deferred, enabled this painting to operate according to different rules. Certainly, the calculation of the heroine’s decision does not require the viewer to engage with problematic questions of female sexual desire. But the fact remains that this is an ambitious image. Above all, its appeal relies on the uncertainty of a moment that was, according to the conduct book writers at least, supposed to be certain. The virtuous woman would, of course, choose any fate, even death, rather than lose her virtue. The fact that Hogarth’s heroine has anything to deliberate, even if her decision is ultimately the path of virtue, renders this a complex vision of female sexuality.

Samuel Richardson’s Pamela and her “Vartue”

Picquet; or Virtue in Danger could well be, in part, a play on the subtitle of Samuel Richardson’s famous and hugely successful novel of the previous decade: *Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded*.⁷⁰ This book, the first part of which was published in 1740, had been a phenomenal success and led to numerous spin-offs: plays, an opera, a fan, a series of waxworks, and a number of paintings, some of which were displayed in the supper boxes at Vauxhall Gardens. Such easy movement of fictional characters and events between various artistic, literary, and commercial environments was not unusual in this period. Terry Eagleton’s description of *Pamela* as “a multimedia affair, stretching all the way from domestic commodities to public spectacles” could also be applied to Moll Hackabout and the tale of *The Harlot’s Progress*.⁷¹

The story that caused such excitement was that of a virtuous serving girl, her adventures told in a series of letters to her parents and a journal. At the start of the novel, Pamela’s mistress dies, leaving her servant at the mercy of her rakish son, Mr B. He makes increasingly desperate attempts to seduce the heroine – repeatedly assaulting her, imprisoning her in his Lincolnshire country house, offering to maintain her as his mistress, and even planning a sham marriage. Throughout all this, Pamela remains steadfast in her refusal to capitulate. She repeatedly declaims that her sexual purity is of more value than wealth and riches (“millions of gold will not purchase one happy reflection on a past mis-spent life”)

and more precious than life itself ("I will die a thousand deaths, rather than be dishonest in any way").⁷² Eventually, her virtue wins over Mr B. He sees the error of his ways, is duly reformed, and the pair are married at the end of part one. Pamela's "reward" for being a paragon of chastity is thus her elevation from the status of a servant to that of a member of the upper ranks. Through this tale, Richardson tackled the assumption that sexual honor was important only for propertied women, that a nobleman's attempts to debauch his serving maid might be considered unimportant as "hurt[ing] no family."⁷³ Pamela insists that chastity is an issue of personal and spiritual conscience; "my *soul* is of equal importance with the soul of a princess, though in quality I am but upon a foot with the meanest slave."⁷⁴ Furthermore, she has the same sense of being the property of her parents as those with substantial dowries at stake. Questioning Mr B's claims on her as similar to those "a thief may plead to stolen goods," she declares, "while I have a father and mother, I am not my own mistress."⁷⁵

The success of *Pamela* was such that, in 1744, Joseph Highmore announced in the press that he was producing a series of 12 paintings telling her story, to be translated into prints.⁷⁶ Although each engraving was to be accompanied by an explanation engraved in the margin, the images were never intended as illustrations *per se*, but rather as a self-sufficient visual rendering of Richardson's novel. The second scene of the series, now in the Fitzwilliam, depicts a crucial moment, early in the book, when "all [Mr B's] wickedness appeared plainly" for the first time (Fig. 20.5).⁷⁷ The housekeeper, Mrs Jervis, can be seen departing through the window, leaving Pamela alone in the summerhouse and at the mercy of her master. Having told her "I will make a gentlewoman of you, if you are obliging, and don't stand in your own light" and forced two or three kisses on her, Mr B remonstrates with Pamela about her rejection of his advances, stepping forward and grasping her hand.⁷⁸ Pamela shuns him in a pose clearly intended to be more convincing than that of the heroine of Thomson's *Before*. This maidservant lowers her eyes and moves herself away with an expressive gesture, raising one hand to emphasize her refusal to capitulate and bringing both arms protectively across her torso.

Highmore's series of pictures operates very differently to *The Harlot's Progress*. In the Hogarth, the narrative and its visualization are one and the same; the viewer's understanding of the story is entirely dictated by the images themselves. The gaps between the prints are to be filled by a process of extrapolation, as the spectator is invited to surmise intervening events with the aid of narrative clues. Despite their relative independence, Highmore's images work in dialogue with an extant text, inviting both evaluation of the artist's selection and visualization of episodes and a comparison of his embodiments of Pamela and Mr B with those invoked in the viewer/reader's own mind by Richardson's text. The explanations that accompany the prints remind the spectator of the story, if necessary, and clarify the incidents being depicted, but also emphasize the images as dependent upon a prior literary invention. Gaps here are not to be imaginatively filled, but to be completed by recourse to the original.



FIG. 20.5 Joseph Highmore: *Pamela and Mr B in the Summer House*. Oil on canvas, 62.9×75.6 cm, c.1744.

Source: © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

However, by 1744, that original had come under numerous attacks and been satirized in a variety of literary forms.⁷⁹ Some critics lampooned Mr B, mocking him as a clearly incompetent seducer who, if he genuinely merited the title of “rake,” would have had his way with Pamela long before resorting to marrying her.⁸⁰ Many satirized Pamela’s incessant waxing about her virtue and its overriding importance.⁸¹ However, the key issue to emerge from what became known as the “anti-Pamelist” camp centered on the fact that, the moment Mr B offers marriage, the heroine accepts his reformation, seemingly forgets his frequently violent attempts on her person, and joyfully accepts his proposal. This led to the charge that her rejection of those earlier assaults had been merely tactical, designed to excite her noble suitor and frustrate him to the extent he would be prepared to yoke his family with that of a commoner in order to satisfy his lust. One pamphlet neatly summarized the message that the novel could be seen to convey; “when a young gentleman of fortune cannot obtain his ends of a handsome servant girl, he ought to marry her; and ... the said girl ought to resist him, in expectation of that event.”⁸² The most notable attack to make this point was Henry Fielding’s

Shamela, in which the heroine famously remarks: "I thought once of making a little fortune by my person, I now intend to make a great one by my virtue."⁸³

The issue of whether Pamela's rejection of Mr B is a cynical act of calculation or a genuine attempt to protect her chastity hinges on her physical reactions to his attempted assaults. Throughout the novel, Pamela blushes, screams, falls into hysterics, and faints, her bodily responses at once apparent testimony to her inner virtue and, frequently, the cause of her salvation as they usually manage to deter her attacker. As physical traces of her modesty, material evidence of her internal purity, they made themselves available to the artist attempting to translate her character from words into paint. Highmore was able to exploit the blush and the language of the eyes to indicate Pamela's genuine rejection of Mr B's advances in the summerhouse. However, the apparently involuntary nature of Pamela's described reactions was not enough to convince Richardson's detractors, who picked up and developed an insinuation by Mr B that even these were being faked.⁸⁴ Pamela's faints were called into question, the female protagonist in *A Dramatic Burlesque ... call'd Mock Pamela* using Richardson's heroine as inspiration for her own manufactured collapses: "O! what ails me? where am I? O! I faint, I die! (*sinking into the Chair*)."⁸⁵ Most significantly, even Pamela's blushes were accused of being false. The anti-heroines of *Pamela, or the Fair Imposter* and *Anti-Pamela* are able to make their "Colour ... come and go" at will, to replicate the ebbs and flows of the genuine flush in a manner impossible to achieve with rouge.⁸⁶ Shamela acknowledges this physical manifestation of modesty to be a tricky one to fake, revealing at the same time, however, how it might be done: "The more difficult task for me was to blush; however, by holding my breath, and squeezing my cheeks with my handkerchief, I did pretty well."⁸⁷ The notion of "talkative skin" could be exploited in order to lie, collapsing "bodily authenticity" and undermining one of the supposedly involuntary, and therefore unassailable, signs of virtue.

The views of the anti-Pamelists had clear visual manifestation in a group of images executed by Philippe Mercier.⁸⁸ In the *Daily Advertiser* of September 21, 1750, Mercier announced that his painting, *Pamela Rising from her Bed*, could be seen at his shop, and that the engraving was available for two shillings (Fig. 20.6). In contrast to the demure, self-protective pose of the heroine in Highmore's painting, this Pamela, shown in a moment invented by the artist, exposes her bosom to the viewer as she lifts herself from the bed, resting on one elbow and pushing back the curtain. As she emerges from the bedclothes, she reveals just as much leg as the woman in Thomson's version of *After*, her thigh exposed almost to the hip. Even with such lavish, immodest physical display and lack of relationship to a specific moment in the text, she could still be the Pamela of the Richardson novel if she were to appear unaware of being viewed, if she seemed ignorant of the fact that her semi-dressed condition was anything other than private. However, she not only meets the viewer's gaze, but also has a slight smile playing around her lips as she acknowledges the effect her loosely clad body will presumably have on that (heterosexual male) spectator. The gap between her obvious lack of



FIG. 20.6 Philippe Mercier: *Pamela Rising from her Bed*. Oil on canvas, 990×1250 mm, 1740s.

Source: © Christies Images/Bridgeman Art Library.

chastity and the endless protestations of virtue made by Richardson's heroine is highlighted by the missive visible on the table, signed; "your dutiful and ever-chaste Daughter Pamela."

Richardson did try to counter such criticisms, and various editions of *Pamela* suggest that he attempted to clarify matters, to save his character from the accusations leveled at her.⁸⁹ One tool available to the author was illustration, and Richardson's lavish, expensive, sixth edition of 1742 was adorned with no fewer than 29 engravings by Hubert Gravelot and Francis Hayman.⁹⁰ These seem to have been intended to proscribe any potentially subversive interpretations as they consistently present the reader with a visualization of Pamela as an elegant and demure young lady. They attempt to curtail the potential for lustful reactions to the text on the adjacent pages by controlling the parameters of the imagination. As with Highmore's paintings and prints, decisions had to be made as to which episodes from the story to depict, and it is significant that, despite their number, none of the images illustrate any of Mr B's lascivious attacks. They rather focus on the sequel to the first part of the novel, moving the emphasis away from the sexual struggle between the two main protagonists and onto the later, rather dull details of their married life.⁹¹

Highmore was not commissioned to produce his series by Richardson and, indeed, artist and author seem only to have met after the pictures had been



FIG. 20.7 Joseph Highmore: *Pamela in the Bedroom with Mrs Jewkes and Mr B.* Oil on canvas, 627×757 mm, 1744.

Source: Tate, London 2011.

completed. However, the fact that friendship ensued and Highmore went on to paint portraits of Richardson and his wife as well as scenes from his later novel, *Clarissa*, is usually taken as a sign of approval.⁹² Certainly, the rococo language of his images and the appearance and demeanor of Pamela, particularly in the second plate, recall the Hayman/Gravelot illustrations, and some of the same scenes are replicated. However, Highmore's depictions have a much more complex engagement with the issue of Pamela's chastity than the images in the sixth edition, and can be argued to fit neither the Pamelist nor the anti-Pamelist view exactly. For one thing, the artist tackles Mr B's attempts to molest his young charge head on. The three most "inflaming" episodes identified in *The Virgin in Eden* – "the Passages in the Summer-house, in Mrs *Jarvis's* Apartment, and at Night in *Pamela's* Chamber when she was undress'd." – are all included in his series.⁹³ The scene in the summerhouse may be demure, but that representing the last of these episodes, *Pamela in the Bedroom with Mrs Jewkes and Mr B.*, is much less so (Fig. 20.7). At this point in the story, Pamela is undressing, preparing to get into the bed she shares with another of Mr B's housekeepers,

Mrs Jewkes. She is ignorant of the fact that the figure apparently asleep in the corner, an apron cast over its head, is not the tipsy maid, Nan, but rather her tormenter in disguise. It will not be long before the most violent of Mr B's attacks will ensue, an episode described in *Pamela Censured* as "the grand *Coup d'Eclat*: A Scene so finely work'd up, that the warmest Imagination could scarcely form one more prevalent in the Cause of Vice."⁹⁴ Certainly, Highmore does not represent the moment when Mr B gets into bed and kisses Pamela as Mrs Jewkes holds her down, but rather the prelude to it. However, this scene is still every bit as titillating as the Mercier. Indeed, it may even be that this moment in the narrative was selected rather than the actual attack as enabling a more direct relationship between the heroine and the viewer, sidelining Mr B. The spectator certainly has a better view of Pamela's shapely leg and bared bosom than the official voyeur, tucked away in a corner, rather ridiculously peering out from behind his apron. Furthermore, it is significant that Highmore rejected an earlier version of this scene, left unfinished, in which Pamela retains her outer garments and therefore her modesty. Whilst the decision to show her instead in undress has been suggested as primarily to do with aesthetics, enabling a contrast between her light undergarments and the deep shadow of the room, the endless contemporary debates around her chastity make that insufficient explanation.⁹⁵

The light from the candle illuminates the figure of Pamela in *déshabillé*, her attractions deliberately highlighted through contrast with the pudgy figure of Mrs Jewkes. Her gown falls low around her bosom, revealing half of one nipple, as she unties and slips a finger into the top of her stocking, preparing to pull it off. The viewer is thus not only allowed to view her physical attractions, but is also offered the added allurements of a strip tease. Both the carelessly arranged bodice and the imagery of stockings – putting them on and taking them off – were established visual tropes in this period. Both appeared in a similar scene by John Carwitham in an illustrated piracy of Richardson's novel, *The Life of Pamela*, and were to be used again by Mercier in another version of *Pamela Rising from her Bed*.⁹⁶ They had also become a feature in the work of Hogarth, who had used a similar pose both for one of the prostitutes encountered by Tom Rakewell, and for the bunter in the fourth plate of *The Harlot's Progress* – neither of whom would seem likely prototypes for a virtuous Pamela.⁹⁷ The only element that saves Pamela's reputation in Highmore's painting is that she is apparently unaware of any presence bar that of Mrs Jewkes. Her modesty is thereby (just about) saved by her unconsciousness of both Mr B and the viewer. This is Highmore's answer to the fact that, in the novel, all such scenes are detailed by the heroine herself in letters or her journal, thus presented from her own perspective and apparently in ignorance of the large audience who will eventually read her account.⁹⁸ Richardson's literary device was to present himself merely as the "Editor," as the publicizer of writings intended to be private or to circulate within an intimate circle. Highmore's equivalent visual device was "the fiction of candour."⁹⁹ While he necessarily inverted the subjectivity of Pamela in the novel in order to objectify her to salacious effect,

his careful emphasis on her ignorance of an external presence served the same function of providing her modesty with some protection.

Conclusion: the Chaste and the Unchaste

The complexity of *Pamela in the Bedroom* again shows the blurring of the boundaries between the chaste and the unchaste, between the Madonna and the Magdalene. It demonstrates the problem of polarizing the Pamelist and anti-Pamelist camps. On the one hand, *Pamela Censured* could argue that Richardson's novel would inflame its readers, urgently recommending that it be kept from all impressionable young minds.¹⁰⁰ On the other, a respondent could make the counter claim that anyone who did become inflamed by reading about Mr B's attacks on his servant not only had a sordid mind, but was also disgusting in finding the thought of a woman in distress alluring.¹⁰¹ Such a black and white view of the novel has filtered through into some *Pamela* scholarship. T. C. Duncan Eaves was concerned to exonerate Highmore from any charges of "obscurity," while damning Mercier for representing the heroine as "vulgar, little more than a harlot" in a scene "in spirit utterly foreign to the novel."¹⁰² Yet the point is that the two were not so far apart. Pamela could be both an emblem of chastity and sexually alluring. She could at once excite Mr B and be genuinely attempting to rebuff him. The innocent virgin, trying to defend her honor, was at the same time an alluring figure with her heaving bosom and her air of helplessness. When Pamela weeps in distress after one of Mr B's attempts on her person, he declares: "I think I never saw her look better in my life!"¹⁰³ The tensions in Richardson's novel, therefore, circulated around tensions in the nature of chastity. Indeed, not only was virginity conceived as the prelude to its loss in marriage, but also the maintenance of that virginity required considerable knowledge of sexual matters. Pamela has to go to extraordinary lengths to protect her virtue, and to be more than a match for the rakish Mr B. Yet the knowledge and assertiveness this necessitates was easily used by detractors to undermine the authenticity of her chastity. She herself realizes that she has to be "a sauce-box, and bold-face, and a creature, and all because I won't be indeed what he calls me."¹⁰⁴ To quote Eagleton once more: "Pamela is forced to treat herself as a sexual being in order to avoid becoming one for others."¹⁰⁵

Richardson was at once presenting a morality tale to be preached from the pulpit and using titillation to make his book a more attractive, marketable product.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, in a letter in which he proclaims his desire "to avoid inflaming Descriptions," he also writes that he could not be too "spiritual" as he would then "catch none but Grandmothers."¹⁰⁷ Highmore's illustrations in many ways successfully capture this ambiguity, sitting in a nuanced, complex position between the polarities of the Pamela controversy. In the same way, *The Harlot's Progress* may be concerned to detail what happens to a young girl who falls prey to a bawd for the benefit of a large, print-buying audience, but the narrative still allows

Hogarth to depict sexual adventure, and to dwell on the features of a pretty heroine who appears in a state of *déshabillé* on more than one occasion. As Mark Hallett has argued, the series is open to a double reading, “as both a moralised *and* an eroticised set of images.”¹⁰⁸ Returning to the portrait with which this essay opened, it is not simply that the Ladies Waldegrave are sexually attractive as well as or in spite of being chaste. Rather, their alluring qualities are caught up with the signs of their chastity, with their downcast eyes and flushed cheeks. The desirable accompanies the didactic and the virginal is redolent with sex, whether through its potential to be lost or its necessary preoccupation with that possibility.

Notes

Many thanks to Mark Hallett and Sarah Monks for reading and commenting on a draft of this essay.

- 1 For details, see Mannings, D. and Postle, M. (2000) *Sir Joshua Reynolds: a Complete Catalogue of his Paintings*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 456–457.
- 2 See, for example, Wendorf, R. (1996) *Sir Joshua Reynolds: the Painter in Society*, London: National Portrait Gallery; Postle, M. (2005) *Sir Joshua Reynolds: the Creation of Celebrity*, London: Tate Publishing.
- 3 For Reynolds’ “historical portraits,” see Perry, G. (1994) “Women in disguise: likeness, the grand style and the conventions of ‘feminine’ portraiture in the work of Sir Joshua Reynolds,” in G. Perry and M. Rossington (eds) *Femininity and Masculinity in Eighteenth-Century Art and Culture*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 18–40; Pointon, M. (1997) *Strategies for Showing: Women, Possession and Representation in English Visual Culture, 1665–1800*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, chapters 2 and 5. Nathaniel Hone’s *The Conjuror*, 1775, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, links Reynolds’ *Montgomery Sisters: “Three Ladies Adorning a Term of Hymen,”* 1773, Tate, with an engraving of Francesco Romanelli’s *The Slumbering Silenus Tied up with Tendrils*.
- 4 *Morning Chronicle*, May 5, 1781; *Public Advertiser*, May 1, 1781. See Pointon (1997), 218.
- 5 Aileen Ribeiro in Penny, N. (ed.) (1986) *Reynolds*, London: Royal Academy, in association with Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 293
- 6 *Morning Chronicle*, May 5, 1781. Joshua Reynolds, *Lord Richard Cavendish*, 1780, private collection.
- 7 *The Ear-Wig; or, An Old Woman’s Remarks on the Present Exhibition of Pictures of the Royal Academy*, London, 1781, 14.
- 8 *London Courant*, May 7, 1781. See also the *Whitehall Evening Post*, May 1, 1781.
- 9 Ripa, C. (1709) *Iconologia: or Moral Emblems*, London, 12, 30, 38, 52, 63, 79.
- 10 Savile, G., Marquess of Halifax ([1688] 1969) “The Lady’s New Year’s Gift; or, Advice to a Daughter,” in J. P. Kenyon (ed.) *Halifax: Complete Works*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 297.
- 11 See Berger Jr, H. (1994) “Fictions of the pose: facing the gaze of early modern portraiture,” *Representations*, 46, 87–120.

- 12 See Mark Hallett in Postle (2005), 130.
- 13 Wilkes, W. (1751) *A Letter of Genteel and Moral Advice to a Young Lady*, 3rd edn, Dublin, 119.
- 14 Fordyce, J. (1766) *Sermons to Young Women*, 4th edn, Dublin, 2 vols, 1, 72.
- 15 Fordyce (1766), 1, 72.
- 16 Gregory, J. (1774) *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters*, London, 27.
- 17 Barrett, C. (ed.) (1892) *Diary and Letters of Madame D'Arblay*, London, 4 vols, 1, 329. See Belsey, H. (1987) "A visit to the studios of Gainsborough and Hoare," *Burlington Magazine*, 129, 107–109; Rouquet, J. A. (1755) *The Present State of the Arts in England*, London, 42–43.
- 18 Pointon, M. (1984) "Portrait painting as a business enterprise in London in the 1780s," *Art History*, 7, 2, 187–205; Pointon, M. (2001) "Portrait! Portrait!! Portrait!!!," in D. H. Solkin (ed.) *Art on the Line: the Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House, 1780–1836*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 93–109.
- 19 *A Description of the Villa of Mr Horace Walpole ... at Strawberry-Hill near Twickenham, Middlesex*, Strawberry Hill, 1784, 5. See Tinniswood, A. (1989) *A History of Country House Visiting: Five Centuries of Tourism and Taste*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell; Retford, K. (2006) *The Art of Domestic Life: Family Portraiture in Eighteenth-Century England*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, chapter 5.
- 20 For Reynolds and the print market, see Clayton, T. (2005) "'Figures of fame': Reynolds and the printed image," in Postle (2005), 49–59. See, more generally, Clayton, T. (1997) *The English Print 1688–1802*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press. For the movement of portraits between different contexts, see Retford, K. (2003) "Reynolds' portrait of Mrs Theresa Parker: a case study in context," *The British Art Journal*, 4, 3, 80–86.
- 21 Pointon (1984), 190.
- 22 Jones, R. (1998) *Gender and the Formation of Taste in Eighteenth-Century Britain: the Analysis of Beauty*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 129. The "shock[ing]" proximity of "portraits of notorious prostitutes" and "pictures of women of rank and virtue" in exhibitions was noted in a newspaper article in the *Morning Post*, May 8, 1786, and the *Morning Herald*, May 9, 1786.
- 23 Joshua Reynolds, *Thais*, Royal Academy 1781, Waddesdon Manor, The National Trust.
- 24 *London Courant*, May 3, 1781.
- 25 See Desmond Shawe-Taylor's (1990) discussion of Reynolds' portrait of Lady Bamfylde, 1776–1777, Tate, in *The Georgians: Eighteenth-Century Portraiture and Society*, London: Barrie & Jenkins, 159–160.
- 26 Wilkes (1751), 82.
- 27 Richardson, S. ([1747–1748] 1985) *Clarissa; or, The History of a Young Lady*, A. Ross (ed.), Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- 28 Wilkes (1751), 82.
- 29 For the double standard, see, for example, Gowing, L. (1996) *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words and Sex in Early Modern London*, Oxford: Clarendon Press; Fletcher, A. (1995) *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England, 1500–1800*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press. For a rejoinder, see Capp, B. (1999) "The double

- standard revisited: plebeian women and male sexual reputation in early modern England,” *Past and Present*, 162, 70–100.
- 30 Thomas, K. (1959) “The double standard,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 20, 2, 195–216, quoting 210.
 - 31 Francis Hayman, *Jonathan Tyers with his Daughter, Elizabeth, and her husband, John Wood*, c.1750, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection. See Allen, B. (1987) *Francis Hayman*, New Haven, CT and London, 101.
 - 32 See Pointon (1997), 74–79.
 - 33 Fielding, H. (1732) *The Modern Husband; a Comedy*, London, 4–5.
 - 34 For allegories of chastity, see Warner, M. (1985) *Monuments and Maidens: the Allegory of the Female Form*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, chapter 11.
 - 35 The phrase is from Fletcher (1995), 392.
 - 36 See Lavater, J. C. (1789) *Essays on Physiognomy*, transl. T. Holcroft, London, 3 vols; Home, H., Lord Kames (1774) *Elements of Criticism*, Edinburgh, 5th edn, 2 vols, 1, chapter 15.
 - 37 Barker-Benfield, G. J. (1992) *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press; Todd, J. (1986) *Sensibility: an Introduction*, London: Methuen.
 - 38 Lavater (1789), 1, chapter 19. See Porter, R. (1985) “Making faces: physiognomy and fashion in eighteenth-century England,” *Etudes Anglaises*, 38, 4, 383–396.
 - 39 Lavater (1789), 1, 161–162.
 - 40 Todd (1986), 110.
 - 41 Rosenthal, A. (2004) “Visceral culture: blushing and the legibility of whiteness in eighteenth-century British portraiture,” *Art History*, 27, 4, 566, 572.
 - 42 On makeup in the eighteenth century, see Corson, R. (1972) *Fashions in Makeup: from Ancient to Modern Times*, London: Peter Owen, chapters 10–12; Rosenthal (2004), 583–586; Porter (1985), 389.
 - 43 Rosenthal (2004), 572, 581.
 - 44 Laqueur, T. (1990) *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 4.
 - 45 See also Fletcher (1995), 383–397.
 - 46 Philogamus (1739) *The Present State of Matrimony: or, The Real Causes of Conjugal Infidelity and Unhappy Marriages in a Letter to a Friend*, London, 11–12.
 - 47 Venette, N. (1750) *Conjugal Love; or, the Pleasures of the Marriage Bed*, London, 20th edn; *Aristotle’s Compleat Master Piece*, London, 30th edn, 1771. While the 20th edition of *Conjugal Love* was also the last, *Aristotle’s Compleat Master Piece* was reprinted into the nineteenth century.
 - 48 Vickery, A. (1998) *The Gentleman’s Daughter: Women’s Lives in Georgian England*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 93. See also Childs, F. (1984) “Prescriptions for manners in English courtesy literature, 1690–1760, and their social implications”, D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 286–287 and LeGates, M. (1976) “The cult of womanhood in eighteenth-century thought,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 10, 1, 26–27.
 - 49 *Aristotle’s Compleat Master Piece*, 30.
 - 50 Lewis, W. S., Smith, W. H. and Lam, G. L. (eds), (1947–1983) *Horace Walpole’s Correspondence*, London: Oxford University Press, 48 vols, 29, 285. Walpole is here referring to the fact that portraitists such as Reynolds made extensive use of apprentices and assistants to work on their paintings.

- 51 Newspaper cutting, Whitley Papers, British Museum, Reynolds box f.33.
- 52 *London Courant*, May 7, 1781.
- 53 Pointon (1997), 220, 216.
- 54 *Morning Herald*, May 7, 1781.
- 55 For discussions of these pictures, see Hallett M. and Riding, C. (2006) *Hogarth*, London: Tate Publishing, 76–79; Paulson, R. (1991–1992) *Hogarth*, New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 3 vols, 1, 218–220.
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Serial Portraiture and the Death of Man in Late-Eighteenth-Century Britain

Whitney Davis

Social Legitimation and Serial Portraiture

British portraiture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has typically been explicated by art and social historians (to speak in general terms for the moment) in terms of social legitimation. According to this account of the matter, in a portrait a painter tries to find means to project an image of his or her sitter, the portrait subject, to a community of beholders (possibly even a “public”) that will tend visually to secure the sitter’s reputation and rank, even to idealize, improve, or celebrate it, and even when the picture had restricted or “private” circulation (for example, as a keepsake or memorial). By implication, such a portrait should also exemplify the bonds and standards of affection, beauty, status, achievement, power, or renown canonized within the community, or at least in the process of being canonized *for* the community by its image- and taste-makers, including the portrait painters themselves. In sum, the portrait legitimates its maker, its sitter, *and* its beholders, though in different ways.

The legitimationist model of portraiture, of course, must refer largely to the fine arts of painting and sculpture patronized by the gentry and aristocracy, by professional men, and, increasingly, by a wealthy middle class. Throughout the modern history of British art, notably in the Georgian era, portrait-like imaging in other contexts or media could be decidedly non-legitimationist: in political caricature in the graphic arts, a recognizable pictorial image of a public personality (or personification) could readily satirize him or her, even viciously attack. But it is not obvious that such caricatures should be considered portraits if they were not produced in a portrait event – a sitting with a portraitist or like practice of securing the image. In Britain between 1700 and 1900 it was unlikely that a well-known person’s official or paid portrait sitting with a well-known portraitist would result in overt satire or

hostility, or indeed in the pictorial registration of any substantial doubts or disputes about the sitter's social identity. More exactly, it was unlikely, at any rate, that such results would have been explicitly intended – what the portraitist, his or her patron, and an expected public thought they wanted to see. Despite legitimizationist intentions, portraits often relay unintended pictorial effects and entrain unpredictable representational consequences – even unmanageable ones. Indeed, legitimation in a portrait, as Louis Marin showed in a classic study of the “portrait of the king,” is virtually doomed pictorially to falter and fail in certain respects. In particular, a picture unavoidably has a separate – a different – life from the subject that it depicts. And this gap, this difference, cannot be fully controlled, or at least as fully controlled as wholesale legitimizationism would require.¹

In this essay, I consider this dynamic in the special but nonetheless instructive case of “serial portraiture,” a pictorial context in which the legitimation of a portrait – and hence the legitimation of its painter, patron, and public – can be strained and stressed. By serial portraiture, a category that has not really been singled out in the study of portrait traditions in world art, I mean a portraitist's practice of making discriminably different portraits of a sitter at discriminably different points in the sitter's life and in part as a portrayal of the trajectory of the sitter's life from the earlier to the later periods marked by the portraits. Serial portraiture partly overcomes one of the supposed deficits of portraiture, namely, that a portrait must depict a sitter at a *particular* point in time despite its capacity to alter, often to idealize, his or her physiognomical appearance at that time. A *sequence* of portraits of a person, each portraying him or her at a *different* time, can be used to track, even to update, his or her entire life history. Serial portraiture, then, can accrue some of the properties of biography: it can narrate a history or represent a human “character” in development that could only be inferred (but cannot be explicitly projected) in a portrait that depicts the sitter at a certain time and place in life and especially at a particular moment in the expression of his or her identity and personality. Serial portraiture can as it were “novelize” the portrait.²

In the Greco-Roman, medieval, and early modern monarchies, portraits of rulers were serially produced as a mechanism in the legitimation of individual and dynastic power. (Of course, they were also produced in sets, that is, as a group of many physical iterations of the same portrait, and in sequences, that is, as remakings of a prototype portrait when needed.) A portrait of a young prince could allude to his anticipated future as a ruler; it depicted his fitness to govern by displaying the youthful qualities (his athletic or martial prowess or his procreative virility) associated with his qualification for kingship. Later portraits of the same ruler – the prince become king – could assimilate these images. A portrait of this king when aged and infirm could reimagine his defects in terms derived from preceding images of his accomplishment.

Or so the portraits were probably intended by their patrons and makers. As Marin has argued in the case of portraits of Louis XIV, images of the king's corporeal identity in a duration defined by his mortality, especially depictions that relayed

unflattering physiognomic characterizations, could threaten the projection of rulership as an eternal and immutable, as a divine, condition. The dialectic of the “king’s two bodies” – his sacral–juridical body on the one hand and his corporeal–morbidity body on the other – generated intricate challenges for ruler-portraits. (These difficulties sometimes prevented the very possibility of portraying the king in a portrait likeness in the modern sense.) To be sure, serial portraiture could assert the vitality of the king’s sacral–juridical body throughout his entire human lifespan *despite* its inherent tendency to remind those observers who could inspect the entire run of images of the morbid historicity of the king’s mundane corporeal body. But the king’s mortality – and, as we will see, the mortality of the portrait itself – inevitably surfaced in the series, and possibly or potentially as the very story, the “novelization,” pictured by the series.

Sir Joshua Reynolds and Serial Portraiture

In this essay I examine aspects of serial portraiture in the pictorial practice of Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792), and especially of its morbidities and mortalities, in relation to the unquestionably legitimizationist aspirations of his patrons and manifestly legitimizationist intentions of his pictures. In British painting, Reynolds is an obvious candidate for this investigation. First, the sheer quantity of Reynolds’ portrait production enables us to make certain statistical observations about repetition, variation, sequence, and seriality in his oeuvre. David Mannings’ catalogue of Reynolds’ portraits has made careful forensic distinctions (most of which I have accepted here) between different portraits of the same person, on the one hand, and replicas, versions, and copies of one portrait of that same person, on the other hand. Serial portraiture has not been an absolutely explicit topic of Reynolds scholarship. But Mannings’ catalogue shows that it was, or became, a major mode of production for him. And art-historical explanation has begun to address it as such. For example, Mark Hallett has described what he calls “temporal sequencing” in Reynolds’ display of portraits of the same sitter in successive exhibitions in terms of Reynolds’ management of social “celebrity” and the need for “the continual replenishment – from one year to the next – of [a] hyperbolic image of bravery, beauty, and fame.” Without at all gainsaying Hallett’s findings, however, and because Hallett has thoroughly covered the legitimizationist side of the story, I will take a somewhat different direction here.³

Second, Reynolds was credited with innovations in the portraiture of his time: he found new and striking means to secure the desired or desirable image of his sitters. In particular, he advanced the pictorial construction of a putative expressiveness of interior thought, emotion, and personality. It was called “character” at the time; now it might be called “selfhood” or “subjectivity.” His techniques literally re-animated portraiture as it had been practiced in Britain earlier in the century. Notably, for example, they quickly overshadowed and definitively outdated what

the painter Joseph Farington later called the “imbecile performance” of Reynolds’ own painting master, Thomas Hudson (1701–1779), who had “lost no time in the study of character, or in the search of variety in the position of his figures: a few formal attitudes served as models for all his subjects.”⁴ As William Combe wrote of contemporary portraits in 1777:

This Addition of Character, whether Historical, Allegorical, Domestic, or Professional, calls forth new sentiments to the Pictures; for by seeing Persons represented with an appearance suited to them, or in employments natural to their situation, our ideas are multiplied, and branch forth into a pleasing variety, which a representation of a formal Figure, however strong the resemblance may be, can never afford... This interesting Cast of Character gives, to the well-painted Portrait, a right to demand a place in the Collection of those who are not only ignorant of the Original, but are careless about it.⁵

Farington’s formula for Reynolds’ achievement was exact so far as it went: Reynolds’ portraits “possessed the rare quality of uniting the most faithful resemblance to the happiest traits of expression.” Nonetheless Farington recognized the peculiar challenge of Reynolds’ practice and its results, for he implied that “faithful resemblance” and “expression” (or “individual likeness” and “assumed character”) need *not* be successfully united and typically were not intended to be united.⁶

To be sure, the selfhood pictorially constructed in Reynolds’ portraits was not simply the objective visualization of the real inner personality of a sitter, as patrons liked to think. Reynolds himself did not believe that painting can fully “investigate the peculiar colouring of [someone’s] mind.” As he wrote in the mid-1780s, “the habits of my profession unluckily extend to the consideration of so much only of character as lies on the surface, as is expressed in the lineaments of the countenance.”⁷ Even here Reynolds recommended a light, quick touch; in his Fourth Discourse at the Royal Academy, he advised portraitists to avoid “all the minute breaks and peculiarities in the face” of a sitter.⁸ In this regard, undoubtedly Reynolds’ approach was calibrated to yield a convincing impression of a highly individualized temperament. But if we are to believe the poet William Mason, who observed Reynolds’ practice with a canny eye, Reynolds “judiciously applied to such [eminent sitters] as had the strongest features, and whose likeness, therefore, it was easiest to hit.”⁹

Equally important, Reynolds deployed configurative practices, including serial portraiture, that in some respects were inimical to a personalization of interiority. It is hard to imagine, for example, how a sitter depicted many times throughout his life could display the very *same* expression – as in many of Reynolds’ serial portraits – even if he possessed a stable life-long character. Despite the strong impression of momentary expressive likeness created in many of Reynolds’ portraits, then, it remains possible to see them as operations of repetition and typification, including the effects that became most evident in

serial portraits. In Reynolds' heyday, one commissioned a portrait by him in order to get the "look" of temporally specific expressiveness *regardless* of personal familiarity or expectation of further acquaintance with the artist and whether or not other portrayals of this supposedly fleeting interior awareness were ever made. But if a new portrait *were* made, it could suggest that the expressiveness of the sitter was as much an invention of Reynolds' style as the condition of producing it.

At the beginning of Reynolds' career, in the late 1740s and early 1750s, seriality could hardly have been seen by him as an element of his portraits or as a horizon of his practice as a painter. Of course, Reynolds surely hoped that portrait commissions on the part of one patron would lead to commissions from others, and possibly even to repeated commissions from satisfied customers. But the emergence of these sequences was gradual. To an extent they were always deferred to the future rather than realized in the daily economy of the studio. It would be several or many years before a patron might *return* to Reynolds to commission a new likeness. Even if one portrait could be produced in expectation that new portraits might follow some day, the concrete actualization of this sequence could never be definitively resolved. Another, a new, portrait could always be added to the series in the future, even after the death of the sitter, the subject of the portrait likeness. Indeed, the final horizon of serial portraiture was not really the sitter's death. It was, of course, the *painter's* death.

Serial portraiture, then, has emergent temporalities partly independent of the concrete realization of particular portraits in the series. In Reynolds' case, a handful of multiple portraits and serial portraits tied to his circle of personal dependence, association, and friendship helped to organize his practice and solidify his reputation in the early part of his career. Many of these productions were buttressed by, if not actually generated in, his affiliation with intimate societies that tended to perpetuate favorable conditions for serial portraiture, notably the Literary Club, which Reynolds founded as a forum for Samuel Johnson in 1764, and the Society of Dilettanti, to which he was elected in 1766. Many of Reynolds' important portrait series depicted men who were members of one or both of these clubs as well as his major patrons.¹⁰

Toward the end of his career, in 1784, Reynolds succeeded Allan Ramsay as Principal Painter to George III, an appointment he had long believed he deserved. As the king's painter, Ramsay had devoted himself to making many replicas of the portrait he produced on the occasion of the king's coronation in 1761. It is only a superficial paradox, however, that the king, who admired Ramsay's work and detested Reynolds' person, never commissioned any court portraits of his new painter. Even if the king had tolerated Reynolds, the official long-standing institution of serial portraiture into which Reynolds was finally inducted, bound as it was to conventions of idealization and generalization, did not conform especially well to the aspect of seriality that had emerged in his work.

Reynolds himself made cryptic comments on the importance of repetition in the painter's art. He told his assistant James Northcote, for example, that

“a painter should have two pictures in hand of precisely the same subject and design, and should work on them alternately.” He continued:

if chance produced a lucky hit, as it often does, then, instead of working upon the same piece, and perhaps by that means destroy that beauty which chance had given, [the painter] should go to the other [picture] and improve upon that. Then return again to the first picture, which he might work upon without any fear of obliterating the excellence which chance had given it, having transposed it to the other.¹¹

Here Reynolds probably referred to a synchronic practice of replication, to be distinguished from the diachronic practice of serial portraiture. Moreover, as far as we know Reynolds did not actually paint a portrait in doubles or twins that were present in the sitting room at the same time (though he and his assistants frequently worked with the same portrait likeness in several painted iterations); in the remarks recorded by Northcote, the painter was commenting on such “subject pictures” as *The Strawberry Girl*, one version of which was exhibited in 1773 (Nos 2165, 2166).

Biography and History in Reynolds’ Portraits

In the remainder I will focus on these aspects of Reynolds’ practice. But there are wider reasons to consider Reynolds’ practice of serial portraiture. Reynolds reflected explicitly on the relations between his acclaimed (and lucrative) practice as a portrait painter, commercially sustained in part by its serial and related replicatory possibilities, and his philosophical (and conventional) defense of history painting and the “grand style.” Reynolds’ practice and his theory were often contrasted, even in his own time. But we might speculate that Reynolds’ serial portraiture implicitly proposed a new kind of history painting that happened to be consistent with his market situation.

Moreover, Reynolds was personally intimate with the exponents of the biographical approach to human life that had begun to take hold in Britain in the later eighteenth century, in part as a precipitate of indigenous philosophies of human nature – notably (from Reynolds’ point of view) in the circle of Johnson, James Boswell, David Garrick, Oliver Goldsmith, and other members of the Literary Club.¹² Within this circle, Reynolds was credited with painterly recognition of some of its notions about character, truth, and history. Indeed, despite Reynolds’ view that his thought had been shaped by Johnson, he can be seen as having partly *preceded* the literary men in pursuing biography: founded *by* Reynolds, the Literary Club promoted his signature style.

I do not have space to address these important matters. But it is worth noting that Reynolds’ circle drew a distinction between identifying the “character” of a man (Reynolds tried his hand at written “characters” of Johnson, Garrick, and Goldsmith) and writing his biography, let alone a general history. Portrait painting

could be aligned most readily with the former enterprise rather than the latter. In Northcote's view, for example, portraiture seems to be "in many respects similar to that of writing a distinct character of an individual, which, when it is done with justice and nice discrimination, I apprehend to be a greater effort of genius than to write the life or memoir." At the same time, however, the best portraiture, Northcote went on, "would be found to contain many of the highest merits of even history itself." Indeed, "it can scarcely be denied, that portrait, in its greatest degrees of perfection, becomes a species of history, as it must possess its first merits, character, and expression;" certainly "history is not degraded by the introduction of dignified portrait."¹³ But in history, a narration of "a life" as much as an expression of "character" must be attempted. As we will see, then, seriality in Reynolds' portraiture subsisted in part as a means of interrelating "character" and "life" (just as it served to interrelate expression and likeness), even though these poles of personal identity could also be dramatically *contrasted*. Such seriality contributed to the general sense that Reynolds' portraits, as the painter Henry Fuseli put it in 1810, found an "exalted place between history and the drama," or as Northcote put it most succinctly, "assume[d] the rank of history."¹⁴

Defining Reynolds' Serial Portraits

Definitive instances of serial portraiture in Reynolds' work, such as the portrait series of Viscount Keppel to be considered below, shaded into cognate practices in Reynolds' studio (including the production of about twenty *self*-portraits between the early 1740s and 1788) that cannot always be rigorously categorized as serial.

For example, Reynolds used models whose "portraits" appeared in several pictures, such as a lively "beggar boy" who modeled for *Boy with a Portfolio* (No. 2028) and several other subject pictures (see No. 2016), and a working-class baby (the child of a street drunkard) on whom Reynolds supposedly modeled the likeness in *The Infant Samuel Johnson* (No. 2150), a peculiar entry in the portrait series dedicated to remarkable (and by no means flattering) likenesses of Reynolds' friend and mentor. But these likenesses were probably not meant to be pictures or portraits of the child models.

More important, as already noted, Reynolds and his assistants produced replicas (sometimes three or four or more) of many portraits. (As Farington put it succinctly, "the school of Sir Joshua resembled a manufactory."¹⁵) Some were probably made at the same time as the prototype portrait(s) or the autograph portrait(s). But some were made at a later time (though copying the prototype or another replica) and in recognition of a change in the sitter's circumstances or in consequence of a buyer's desire to acquire a portrait of the sitter after it had been produced. The prototype(s) and/or autograph(s) and any replicas could be reproduced in a series of what David Mannings has painstakingly collated as "versions" of a portrait, that is, transfers of the likeness to a different format (from half-length to full-length, from full-length to full-length equestrian, etc.). Again, these versions could have been made at the same time as the prototype, if any. But some could be made

years after the sittings had generated the portrait likeness, creating disconcerting disparities between the latest version of the likeness (as well as existing prototypes, replicas, and versions) and the current aspect of the sitter.¹⁶ Reynolds' portrait of the Marquess of Rockingham, painted in 1766–1778 (No. 1858), was replicated in 1781–1783 for Lady Rockingham (No. 1859, given to the Prince of Wales in 1786), Lord Fitzwilliam (No. 1860), and Lord Hardwick (No. 1861), when the sitter was 15 years older. Naturally this disparity might motivate the creation of a serially new (a current) portrait, though in the case of Lord Rockingham (a major force in Reynolds' Whig circles) it did not happen to do so.

In addition, changes could be made in an existing portrait – prototype, replica, or version – to take account of developments in the sitter's life. Reynolds updated his 1776 portrait of his niece Theophila (No. 1390) in one or two sittings in 1781 at the time of her marriage and updated his 1778 portrait of his great friend Edmund Malone (No. 1180) in 1788. One or more of the several portraits of Johnson were reworked at later times.¹⁷ But the practice was not confined to portraits of Reynolds' intimates. To cite typical examples, the collar and badge of the Thistle, awarded in 1763, were added to a portrait of William Douglas, fourth Duke of Queensberry, painted in 1759–1760 (No. 520), and a 1765 portrait of Sir William Boothby in military uniform was later overpainted, some time before 1782, to give him a plain red coat (No. 207). To take a more dramatic example, a portrait of John Dunning, first Baron Ashburton, painted in 1782 (No. 540), was used to produce a new portrait of him and his wife (No. 542), who sat for her side of the picture in 1786–1787; Lord Ashburton had died in 1783 and the portraits of man and wife were seamed together in 1787, presumably at the request of Lady Ashburton. In the most literal interpretation of this picture, of its material identity, a fully alive Lady Ashburton would seem to be gazing fondly at a well-preserved four-year-old corpse of her husband – or more exactly to be gazing at his *portrait* as he looked two years before his death four years earlier, though unnervingly this effigy has still managed to touch her thigh.

Reynolds' fluency and speed in his autograph portion of the quasi-industrial production of these chains of portraits was often remarked upon, despite changes and "frequent failures" along the way in realizing the likeness – what Northcote called "all its stages of rude imperfection."¹⁸ Reynolds did little to dispel the public impression that he could complete the face in *one* sitting, capturing "the attitude and expression," as the actress Sarah Siddons recalled, in the "twinkling of an eye."¹⁹ Indeed, Reynolds' replicatory industry may have contributed to the impression that he was engaged in considerably more autograph portraiture (that is, in the production of discriminably new portraits) than he actually was. Put the other way around, Reynolds' immense industry could be sustained in part by a reasonably restricted number of carefully orchestrated episodes of portraiture, serial or not, in which he was seen in a portrait event to produce a current autograph likeness. This public element of Reynolds' practice probably helped occlude its less visible and perhaps less savory elements – an extensive use of assistants, the generation of non-autograph versions and copies sold at full price, and the like.

For reasons that should already be apparent, a definitive list of the serial portraits in Reynolds' oeuvre cannot be made. The plethora of replicas, versions, and copies emanating from his studio (not to speak of productions like ten or more knock-off *Strawberry Girls* made after his death) constitutes a shifting ground against which clear cases of serial portraiture must be assessed. Probably Reynolds encouraged a considerable degree of permeability between – or public uncertainty about – the replicatory categories in question. But based on more than 100 clear cases (distinguished in Mannings' catalogue as two or more portraits, or portrait "types"), two observations about seriality in Reynolds' practice can be made.

Gender Distribution of Reynolds' Serial Portraits

First, Reynolds was more likely actually to manufacture – concretely to realize in paint – serial portraits of male sitters than female sitters. Although any count must be approximate, Reynolds produced about 45 sets of serial portraits of female sitters and about 90 sets of male sitters, that is, about twice as many serial portraits of different men as serial portraits of different women. This finding requires explanation in light of Reynolds' *overall* portrait production: although Reynolds produced somewhat more portraits of different men than of different women (in an overall ratio of about 4:3), that is, he had somewhat (though perhaps not visibly) more male than female sitters overall, he certainly did not have *twice* as many male sitters overall.

There might be no full and final explanation for this phenomenon, and a closer examination (e.g. looking at Reynolds' production in a given year) might tell a more nuanced story.²⁰ But it seems likely that social and ideological factors account for part of the disparity. Female sitters had fewer opportunities to secure and to display the transitions and transformations of social identity that typically warranted a new portrait (whether a variant replica/version or a new serial portrait) among male sitters in Reynolds' era: departure from school or university, stops on the Grand Tour (especially a sojourn in Rome), an advancement in military rank, a political triumph, publication of a book or promulgation of an idea or an invention, the attainment of honors, a new institutional affiliation, or the establishment of an economic liaison or a personal friendship with persons of note. Depending on the circumstances, some transitions in female social identity (for instance, the final stages of pregnancy, a dubious romantic liaison, or widowhood) could not always be commemorated decorously or delicately enough in a portrait, even if engagement to marry or the early years of maternity were commonly depicted and painters were sometimes left in possession of portraits of the "discarded mistresses" of male patrons.²¹ Other transitions among women (for instance, marriage or aristocratic succession or coronation) could be displayed by men as well. Therefore they cannot account for the disproportionate representation of men in serial portraits documenting these social changes.

Given contemporary social identifications of gender, the pictorial implications of serial portraiture also had differential ramifications for men and women. Serial portraiture inevitably tended to suggest the ultimate horizon of the sitter's mortality. Inherently it situated the physiognomy and consciousness displayed by the sitter at any particular point in his life in relation to the future time of his corporeal dissolution, death, and decay – a time marked as increasingly imminent in each iteration contributed to a sequence of portraits that immanently became serial as it emerged over time. Reynolds' depictions of Johnson overtly represented his friend's struggle with the tics and the morbid obesity of his body; other series, such as the portraits of Keppel considered below, recognized the sitter's advancing age and pictorially dealt as much with the irreversible losses of his life as with its notable triumphs. Reynolds' portraits of male sitters often did not shy from disconcerting physiognomies of age when the real date of the portrait (or the putative time of the portrait event) called for it. Usually any decrepitude in an older man's body could be balanced by a pictorialization of his continued social vitality and the perdurance of his character, although this balance, as we will see, inherently became more and more difficult to preserve as portraits of an aging man accumulated in a series of likenesses of him.

By contrast, a complementary projection of female morbidity, though it sometimes surfaced in Reynolds' portraits of old ladies, could not but be taken as inappropriate, unflattering, and cruel. In particular, the "decline" of a woman's beauty, as it would have been called, was all too easy to mark in serial portraiture. It is unlikely that a young beauty, as that status had been socially defined, would have wanted to display a later portrait of her aged (and supposedly less-beautiful) self or to commission a series of portraits cumulatively marking her supposed loss of beauty. (With a handful of exceptions, most of the 45 or so portrait series of women depicted them in their youth and early middle age.) By the same token, women, unlike men, were not usually encouraged to reflect energetically upon the fact of their eventual demise, let alone to wrestle passionately with it; they were generally expected to adopt an attitude of passive and pious resignation. It is telling that Reynolds' sister Frances ("Fanny"), who kept house for him from 1753 until the late 1770s and was especially friendly with Johnson, produced an extraordinary poem on this very subject. In the poetic diegesis, her explicitly stated cure for anxious and melancholic ruminations on death – whether the death of her friends and loved ones or her own future death – is faithful Protestant religion.²² Her attitude probably did not endear her to Reynolds, who avoided religiosity as far as he possibly could.

The Materiality of Reynolds' Serial Portraits

A second general characteristic of Reynolds' practice of serial portraiture relates to its material dimension. In addition to using pigments of dubious origin, such as a "fictitious" ultramarine purchased from a foreign peddler (we are told that it quickly changed into a "muddy green"),²³ Reynolds conducted numerous experiments

with paints and their application. He became notorious for the instability and transience of his paintings. Their colors, especially the vital pinkish or ruddy colors (or “carnation”) of living healthy flesh, tended to fade, often reverting to an unhealthy-looking greenish- or grayish-white when the lake or carmine disappeared and the so-called dead coloring of the ground stood forth. In itself, the procedure of dead coloring followed by passes of tinting and glazing was not unusual; a procedure of dead coloring and second and third painting was spelled out in Reynolds’ favored handbook, Thomas Bardwell’s *Practice of Painting* of 1751. But Reynolds’ combinations of pigments and oils were unusual, his colors were unstable, and his pace, it seems, was too quick (he might have misconstrued Bardwell’s recommended three *layers* of painting separated by sufficient drying to need only three *sessions* of painting). Patches of paint literally lost adhesion, if they had ever had it, and fell from the canvas. (In one episode, the entire face of one portrait fell away as a hapless assistant transported it; Reynolds, of course, was solely responsible for painting the faces.) The paintings crinkled, cracked, and fissured. It turned out that many portraits had considerably less lifespan than the portrait subjects themselves.²⁴

At least some part of Reynolds’ multi-leveled activity of replication probably addressed this constant problem. Refreshments and replacements of prematurely aging and degenerating portraits were sometimes needed in part or in whole. In addition, Reynolds and his assistants were continually engaged in projects of restoration, repairing the damage to and the decay of portraits that had been made at earlier times. Some of these occasions admitted possibilities of serial portraiture: they enabled Reynolds to update an earlier portrait of a once-younger sitter, or even to create a more recent portrait of a now-older sitter. Results of the latter kind would typically be “invisible” to us because the new portrait or part-portrait would have covered the old portrait in part or in whole. But radiography has revealed cases, including the full-length portrait of Keppel considered below, in which Reynolds reconfigured a painting to such a degree or in such an important respect that his work on it might be regarded as much as an instance of serial portraiture (for there is no reason seriality cannot inhere in one work as its history over time) as simple restoration or revision.

The full significance – practical, aesthetic, and social – of these overlapped practices is difficult to reconstruct. It has been said that Reynolds’ “persistence in following practices which he knew perfectly well would seriously shorten the life of his pictures can only be described as perverse.”²⁵ Naturally Reynolds’ patrons were discomfited by unwelcome developments in their paintings and – perhaps more important but less likely to be mentioned – they were uncomfortable with the implications of a portrait’s degeneration for their own past identity and their future likelihood of being remembered, at least in images, after *their* demise. Reynolds’ circle certainly took the postmortem commemorative function of portraiture to be its chief human justification or rationale. According to Johnson, for example, “every man is always present to himself, and has, therefore, little need of his own resemblance; nor can desire it but for the sake of those whom he loves, and by whom he hopes to be remembered.”²⁶

One episode can stand for many. Between his 50s and his 70s, Sir Walter Calverley Blackett (1707–1777), MP for Newcastle-upon-Tyne, sat for two or more different portraits (and probably several replicas and versions) by Reynolds. Of the surviving pictures, one showed him (aged 42 or later) with a favorite dog (No. 179) and another showed him (aged 58) in mayor's robes (No. 180). He was sufficiently irritated by the fading of one iteration of one of these pictures – perhaps the earliest, painted in 1759, now untraced – that he was said a few years after his death in 1777 (aged 70) to have written an epigram inscribed in gold letters on the painting:

The Art of Painting clearly was designed
To bring the features of the dead to mind,
But this damned painter hath reversed the plan
And made the picture die before the man.²⁷

Unluckily for Sir Walter, the epigram could actually have said that “the man died before the picture.” Reynolds seems to have been working on a *new* painting in the very month of Sir Walter's death and probably beyond it, for it seems to have been paid off by executors in 1778. This final painting has sometimes been identified as the half-length now in Raleigh, North Carolina (No. 181), said by its late nineteenth-century owner, a family relation of Sir Walter's, to have been painted in 1777. But Mannings points out the Raleigh portrait is probably a studio replica of the *first* portrait, begun in 1759, which by then had passed, it seems, to Sir Walter's nephew (later his heir and executor) – even as Mannings accepts the late date for the replica. If this painting was produced in the last decade of Sir Walter's life, the image would have appeared 20 years *younger* than Sir Walter himself appeared at that time and a decade younger than he had *already* appeared in his mayoral portrait. One might well have said, then, that the man had faded as much as the 20-year-old image of him, which had actually been refreshed, it seems, by a current replica! Obviously the letter-writer in 1780 relayed a joke penned by Sir Walter at Reynolds' expense. But these involutions suggest that he also repeated anxieties (perhaps emanating from Sir Walter and his relations) about family, continuity, and identity: as Mannings notes, there was a set of unusual (and probably contentious) patronymic, marital, patrimonial, and paternal complexities in Sir Walter's life, and we might speculate that they made him sensitive to the deliquescence of the portrait that was going to help relay his likeness and a memory of his social identity in the future. No picture has been found with the inscription.

It is fair to say that serial portraiture could function as a part-antidote to the deterioration of paintings even as it could represent the decline, death, and decay of the subjects (and even if, and sometimes because, it had portrayed them when young and vital). If the manifest aim of Reynolds and his assistants must have been to preserve his paintings from decay, the paintings themselves – as paintings and as pictures – could backhandedly figure mortality, and sometimes the

complete annihilation in due and quick time of someone's lineage, life, and legacy. In a figurative sense there is a reason *why* a portrait should not outlast its sitter (or vice versa, though not in the case of Sir Walter) in the same way that there is a sense in which the sitter can readily outlast his portrait (or vice versa, though not, again, in the case of Sir Walter). In his practice as a portraitist, as the price of constructing unusual expressiveness in the painted image Reynolds also fully submitted himself to the unpredictability and recursion of these temporal relations – framed by the inevitability of the eventual death of sitter, painter, *and* painting.

Reynolds' First Portrait of Augustus Keppel (1749)

At this point I can turn to a portrait series I have already mentioned. Reynolds' first known portrait of Augustus Keppel, second son of the second Earl of Albemarle, was signed in 1749 (No. 1036; Fig. 21.1). In that year, 24-year-old Commodore Keppel, already appointed to the naval commandership-in-chief of



FIG. 21.1 Sir Joshua Reynolds: *Commodore The Honourable Augustus Keppel*. Oil on canvas, 1270×1015 mm, 1749.

Source: © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, UK. BHC 2821.

the Mediterranean, sailed to Algiers with orders to settle the British Crown's complaints against the Dey, who had tolerated, if not instigated, piracy against British shipping.

Keppel met Reynolds, then 27, when he had to put in to Plymouth for sudden repairs, and encountered the painter while visiting a local nobleman, Richard Edgcumb, an amateur painter and a patron and friend to Reynolds (see Nos 560–563), at that time still residing in his native Devonshire and locally known for his portraits of naval officers. Supposedly it was Richard's father, the first Baron Edgcumb (see Nos 554–557) and ally of Sir Robert Walpole, the Prime Minister, "who persuaded many of the first nobility to sit for [Reynolds] for their pictures" after the painter had returned from Rome in 1752.²⁸ According to some scholars, Reynolds' "early intimacy" with Keppel and the Edgcumb family gave him the opportunity to "teach himself the arts of politeness" that became the touchstone of his success in London.²⁹ Certainly the patronage of the Edgcumbs and Keppels established a solid platform for Reynolds' rapid ascent into the highest circles of British aristocratic patronage; it was through the Keppels, for example, that Reynolds was introduced to William Augustus, Duke of Cumberland, the second son of George II, Reynolds' highest-ranking patron to date when he painted him in the late 1750s (Nos 1884–1893). Reynolds later painted Augustus' mother Anne, his uncle William (two portraits), his older brother George, the third Earl (in a series of three portraits), his sister Elizabeth (in a series of four portraits, including a famous picture of her as a bridesmaid at the wedding of George III and Queen Caroline in 1761 [No. 1052]), his daughter, and his nephew.

Keppel sailed from Plymouth on May 11, 1749 and arrived at Algiers on June 29; Reynolds was Keppel's guest on board. Reynolds was said by later chroniclers to have painted several portraits of officers of the British garrison at Port Mahon in Minorca, where Keppel put in between August and December. Therefore commentators have assigned the portrait event of the first portrait of Keppel to this context. As Mannings suggests, however, there is some likelihood that the portrait had been painted *before* the two men left England. It was the kind of concrete demonstration of the young painter's precocious talent that could have led to Keppel's invitation to sail with him; as Farington put it, "some of the pictures which Reynolds painted while he was in Devonshire have a depth of tone and colour wholly unlike the flat and insipid pictures of the artists who were then most celebrated in London."³⁰ Certainly it seems to have been assumed by both parties that Reynolds' voyage with Keppel would enable the painter to travel on to Rome, where he would remain for two years in study of the Italian masters. One of his first projects on his return to England was a second portrait of Keppel, a full-length (No. 1037). It can be regarded as a *remaking* of the 1749 portrait in light of the Italian studies made possible for Reynolds by Keppel's generosity.

In 1749, the year it was signed, Reynolds' portrait of Keppel was meant to be visibly contemporary. On December 15, 1748, Keppel had attained the rank of captain of three year's standing; the elements of the undress uniform of this

rank that he wears in the portrait, along with elements of a junior captain's uniform, had been introduced in the Navy only half a year earlier.³¹ In the portrait, young Keppel, slim and alert, stands still, right hand thrust into a partly unbuttoned waistcoat and left resting on the hilt of his sword. If this pose was conventional, the officer's expression is highly individualized: Keppel listens intently, with lips slightly parted and brows drawn together. His smooth, tanned face has a feral energy and a "giaour charm" that belies his calm posture.³² It would seem that the captain attends to the cannon being fired from the principal ship, presumably Keppel's boat, the *Centurion*, visible in the distance. Seven ships in all are visible; Keppel took a squadron of seven ships to Algiers. The event depicted by the cannon-fire occurred at Algiers. On Keppel's arrival, the *Centurion* mistakenly returned the Dey's 21-gun salute with shot, as if at war. In audience with Keppel, the Dey supposedly "wondered at the insolence of the King of England in sending him an insignificant beardless boy" and threatened to execute him, upon which Keppel retorted that "if it was [the Dey's] pleasure to put him to death, there were Englishmen enough on board [the ships] to make him a glorious funeral pile." The episode, real or not, solidified Keppel's growing reputation as a warrior-diplomat, popular among the rank-and-file, though it would have been premature for the Commodore and the painter to anticipate this public image when the portrait itself was painted. Regardless, Reynolds' painted figure of Keppel "is instinct with the cavalier spirit of England;" the event was "bound to have impressed itself on [the painter's] memory as a most unfortunate prelude to a difficult mission."³³ Indeed, one of our most complete sources for the apparent narrative of the painting was Reynolds himself, who claimed the role of eye witness to the dramatic events.³⁴

For this very reason, however, we should retain the possibility that the portrait of 1749 collated *several* images of Keppel configured in *several* episodes of painting, and in particular that the Commodore's facial likeness, though fitted to the events at Algiers, might have been secured by Reynolds in the more comfortable environment of Plymouth for the reasons noted already. Indeed, if the portrait did not include the puff of smoke denoting cannon-fire in the distance, we might not locate it in Algiers at all; the not-very-Moroccan topography resembles a bay at Plymouth where Reynolds had painted Keppel's host Edgcumb. Perhaps the smoke was added by Reynolds at Port Mahon to a *finished* portrayal of Keppel when the painter made portraits of Keppel's officers and officers of the British garrison. Perhaps, in fact, the detail was added even later (for example, when this portrait of Keppel passed to a brother, likely in 1764) *after* Keppel's fame had grown, in part as the very consequence of Reynolds' *succeeding* and more well-known pictorializations of Keppel's daredevil character. The painting can be attributed stylistically to Reynolds' pre-Italian years and the likeness can be dated to Keppel's early 20s. But neither obviates the possibility that the painting contained retrospective elaborations of an image that had been initiated in Plymouth.

Reynolds' Full-Length Portrait of Keppel (1752)

Reynolds' full-length portrait of Keppel (No. 1037; Fig. 21.2) seems to have been made at the same time as a full-length of the Commodore's older brother, George (No. 1054). In June, 1753, the pictures were noted by Reynolds as finished; Reynolds probably provided the engraver, Edward Fisher, with the date, 1752, that appears on the print of No. 1037 that Fisher made in 1759. The portraits of the brothers were made in London, where Reynolds had set up his new studio a few months after his return from Italy.

Reynolds' first biographer, Edmund Malone, noted that the full-length portrait of Augustus "attracted the publick notice," and made Reynolds' sudden reputation as England's "greatest painter" since Van Dyke; according to Farington, "the public ... were captivated with this display of animated character, and the report

of its attraction was soon widely circulated."³⁵ Along with a closely related portrait of the military officer Sir Robert Orme, painted in 1756 (No. 1366), and who later served with Keppel against the Americans, Reynolds kept this *tour de force* in his studio until it passed to George's family. Even when the picture was no longer new, it announced his mode of portrait painting and advertised his practice.

The portrait likeness in the painting of 1752–1753 repeated the likeness presented in the portrait of 1749. Indeed, the later painting *alluded* to the earlier. Keppel's head was reoriented to turn to the right rather than to the left, refocusing his thoughts from the right background, the ships in the bay in the painting of 1749, to the left foreground, the spot to which the officer is pointing in the painting of 1752–1753. But the head in the painting of 1752–1753 swivels in the same way on the same horizontal axis on an upright body as in the painting of 1749. And as in the the earlier painting



FIG. 21.2 Sir Joshua Reynolds: *Captain The Honourable Augustus Keppel*. Oil on canvas, 2390×1474 mm, 1752–1753.

Source: © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, UK. BHC 2823.

the subject gazes into the distance rather than engages the implied viewer's eyes. Reynolds reworked the painting (probably though not certainly while it was still in progress) to emphasize this effect, perhaps securing the visible parallel between the earlier and later portraits. Radiography shows that in an earlier stage of the picture of 1752–1753, Keppel's head had tilted down to the left, along the line of his pointing left arm, creating "a more intimate rapport" between the painted subject and the implied viewer.³⁶

In the right side of the background in the painting of 1752–1753, Reynolds included a stormy seascape with shipwreck, complementing the scene of the supposed Bay of Algiers in the painting of 1749. The left background depicts a rocky hillside rising steeply up behind Keppel; it is virtually a repetition, though with the addition of what seem to be ruined blocks to suggest a decrepit building, of the steep overgrown cliff looming behind Keppel in the painting of 1749. The storm and shipwreck alluded to, if they were not intended directly to depict, Keppel's valor in saving his crew after his first boat, the *Maidstone*, was lost at sea in chasing a French privateer in 1747.³⁷ Like the portrait of 1749, the portrait of 1752–1753, then, referred to Keppel's reputation – his "character" – as a courageous leader in dangerous situations. In reworking the painting, Reynolds eliminated a Grecian column that had stood in the left foreground and to which Keppel had been pointing. Without the column, Keppel's gesture in the finished picture is more difficult to understand. But if the scene shows the coast of France where the *Maidstone* had wrecked it was necessary to rework the landscape to eliminate its Classical aspect. Standing on a rocky promontory jutting over a narrow inlet far below, presumably Keppel is guiding his stricken crewmen to shore, though no one else is actually visible. With his lips parted, he seems to be speaking; coupled with the gesture of pointing, he seems to say "Here" or "There." The portrait conforms, then, to the emerging mid-eighteenth-century possibility of "history painting in modern dress," to use Edgar Wind's phrase.³⁸

Keppel's distinctive pose was reproduced by Reynolds in portraits of other sitters, or was imitated by them: directly by Frederick Howard, the Earl of Carlisle, a great patron and friend, in 1769 (No. 946); less directly by "Omai" the Tahitian c.1776 (No. 1363) and the dashing John Hayes St. Leger in 1778 (No. 1813). Art-historical controversy has erupted over its source or sources. Reynolds duplicated the pose of a French bronze statuette of Apollo after Pierre Legros the Younger.³⁹ Many of Reynolds' viewers, however, would probably not have readily recognized this model despite its popularity in Britain. They would have associated the figure of Keppel in the portrait with such figures of gods and heroes as the Apollo Belvedere (a distant model often cited as a source for the painting) and Apollo descending from the heavens to the seashore described in the opening lines of the *Iliad* (a possible literary reference). Earlier British paintings had integrated this Classical imagery with portraits of distinguished men, such as Ramsay's 1747 portrait of *Norman, Twenty-Second MacLeod of MacLeod* (closely similar in pose to the Keppel), possibly known

indirectly to Reynolds.⁴⁰ At any rate, the painting of 1752–1753 was visibly intended to display Reynolds' new mastery of the iconographic and stylistic traditions, both Classical and Italian, that he had acquired in Rome since the earlier portrait of Keppel had been completed. In particular Venetian prototypes inform the dramatic shadowing of Keppel's face (Reynolds placed the right side of the face in darkness, and allowed dark shadows under the lower lip, at the philtrum, and below the eye on the side of the face, which remains illuminated) and the muted but distinctive coloring, a silvery gray-green that washes over the entire scene.

The painting asserts the painter's full command of configuration. Keppel's long nose juts in the same direction as he is pointing with his right hand, creating a dynamic chiasmus in the figure – the impression that he flies, floats, and alights like an ancient god. In a signature Reynolds effect, fitful light falling from the implied viewer's right catches the left side of his face, especially his high forehead; the gold in the buttons and brocade of his coat, breeches, sword, cuffs, and buckles; and the white threading in his shirt and stockings. The wind blows strongly from the same direction; it pushes back the collars and the lower flap of Keppel's coat (the flap had initially been closed, but Reynolds, as the print shows, later altered it to emphasize this motion), his cuffs, the foliage above him, and the spume in the distance. An odd detail leaps out at the viewer in the near right foreground: in front of Keppel's left foot on the directional line in which he is striding, Reynolds placed a multi-colored snail- or sea-shell or small rounded polished rock. (As it does not appear in the print of 1759, it could have been added to the painting after that date.) Whether or not it had some personal significance for Keppel, it reminds us of the *painterly* basis of the configuration, underscoring its imaginative, fantastical, or fantasmatic appearance; it would seem to remind the viewer – if any reminder were needed – that Reynolds' virtuoso touch can be found throughout the painting and in its smallest details.

If the painting proclaimed Reynolds' maturity, it also pictured Keppel's increased age and authority. Despite the fact that the depicted event had transpired in 1747, two years *before* Keppel's exploits in Algiers, the picture evidently portrayed him as he appeared in sittings in London in 1752–1753. Compared to the 24-year-old figure in the painting of 1749, the figure of the 26- or 27-year-old Keppel in the portrait of 1752–1753 has become somewhat portly, with a double chin and a waistcoat beginning to strain. His brows appear to be heavier and more grown together; a hint of a mustache, of a heavy beard even when clean-shaven, shows that he no longer is the "beardless boy" who confronted the Dey of Algiers. Despite the real gap of three or four years, the commander in the portrait of 1752–1753 appears to be 10 or 12 years older than the young captain in the painting of 1749. We come to see, then, that the painting is not simply an anachronistic representation of an exploit in Keppel's youth. It is a *reenactment*: Keppel is portrayed, I think, in the action of *recollecting* – first and foremost for the portraitist – the naval actions that had made his name. The rocky promontory

is the studio floor, and Classical ruins and background sea-scape were a painter's props: the scene has been reconstituted by the painter in transcribing the movements of his sitter's memory, perhaps provoked (we might suspect) by the sight or the feel of one little sea-shell or wave-polished rock – maybe the only “real” object in the scene, perhaps a real remnant or memento of the actual event commemorated in the picture, even if *it* was added into the picture many years later as a retrospective specification of this very image. The very possibility of the portrait emerged in the recollection and revisioning in which the patron and painter engaged within the portrait and between this portrait and the portrait of the sitter that had already been made, including the likeness of 1749 and the lower layer of the picture in 1752. And this in turn called for serial reperformance by the sitter and serial repainting and repicturing by the artist, reshaping the ramifying involutions of an increasingly distributed image. For an image in the strict sense, of course, always exists *between and among* pictures, and pictures in the strict sense always exist between and among episodes of painting.

Reynolds' Third Portrait of Keppel (late 1750s)

In the late 1750s, Reynolds produced a third portrait of Keppel (Mannings calls it the “third portrait type”) in two known autograph versions (Nos 1038, 1039). A version had been engraved by 1760, providing the *terminus ad quem* for the figure.⁴¹ In one of the autographs (No. 1039), Keppel wears the undress uniform of a captain of more than three years' standing in which he had appeared in 1752–1753. In the other (No. 1038), he appears in a flag-officer's undress uniform, with his blue coat and white waistcoat elaborately decorated with thick gold braid. Because Keppel had become Rear-Admiral of the Blue in December, 1762, this autograph, slightly larger than the other, was likely made in 1763 to commemorate his advance. Presumably it required no sittings; Keppel was at sea for most of 1762 and 1763 and not available anyway. Beyond updating the uniform, Reynolds made no adjustments in the likeness of his sitter, secured in sittings in 1759 or before.

Rear-Admiral Keppel stands before a calm sea with sunlight breaking through white clouds at the horizon, though storm clouds have gathered overhead. No ships are shown. Behind him on his left, a large tree crowned with foliage and vines reminds us of the backgrounds in the portraits of 1749 and 1752–1753, and Keppel's pose echoes the portrait of 1749; he faces to his left and gazes over the right shoulder of the implied viewer. Left hand in pocket (rather than on sword) and right hand on stick (rather than in waistcoat), he stills seems as if he is about to speak – or, if we pursue the logic of the emerging image in the series of portraits, as if remarking on something in his mind's eye. Here, however, no reenactment is presented as the *mise-en-scène* of the portrait itself. Keppel quietly displays his identity, including his advancing age. The principal transformation in his status, his advancement in rank, is plainly visible.

However, the corporeal difference between the vivacious, precocious youth in 1749 and the stolid senior captain in 1759 (advancing to the flag-officer in 1763) is marked. In light of the previous portraits, Keppel is shown to have in mind (possibly in the portrait event itself) his own memories, emotions, and reflections. Only 10 years separated the sittings that produced the portraits of 1749 and 1759–1763 respectively. But the weight of these years was great: although Keppel continued to have and to wear his own reddish-brown full head of hair, his fleshy visage had become middle-aged and his corpulent frame could no longer be envisaged in the scene or as the site of any kind of athletic derring-do, whether reenacted in the studio or not.

Considered in its serial position, then, the portrait relocated the character of the officer from the actions of his body to the motions of his mind. As always, Reynolds highlighted the head of the sitter. In the previous portraits, Keppel's head was framed by lighter-colored bluish-gray clouds in turn surrounded, away from the head, by darker storm-clouds. In the portrait of 1759–1763, that scheme was reversed: Keppel's curly hair can barely be distinguished against the background of roiling, russet-brown storm clouds directly behind his head. It is only in the far distance that shafts of sunlight slip beneath the storm to brighten the clouds at the horizon, striking the faraway surface of the sea visible between Keppel's stick and his coat. In this position, the bluish glint of the waves seems to reflect the blue of Keppel's coat, informing us pictorially that the sea- and cloudscape (and the naval life it signifies) is the natural mirror of the inner currents and contents of Keppel's mind. These effects were not as visible in the portrait of Captain Keppel painted in 1759 as in the portrait of the Admiral replicated four years later. Reynolds seems to have undertaken further to dramatize the Admiral's increased sense of responsibility, and to some extent, perhaps, to mark the forebodings of tension, conflict, and turmoil that might have accompanied it.

Reynolds' Rockingham Portrait of Keppel (1765)

Two years later, Reynolds began a new portrait; it might have been finished as late as 1767. Compared to the portrait of Rear-Admiral Keppel finished in 1763, constructed by inserting the likeness of 1759 into a new background, this portrait was based on new sittings (three or four in the summer of 1765), and it managed to discover a new vitality in the sitter's image. Produced in two autograph versions (Nos 1040, 1041), the portrait was painted for Lord and Lady Rockingham (the second Marquess of Rockingham led the Whig faction to which Keppel, and probably Reynolds, adhered politically), though one version (No. 1041; Fig. 21.3) seems to have been kept by Reynolds himself.⁴²

In the bust format adopted for this portrait, Keppel appears less corpulent (though his double chin is obvious) than in the more capacious format adopted in 1759 and 1763; he still has a head of hair, but his hairline has receded and a



FIG. 21.3 Sir Joshua Reynolds (1728–1792): *Rear-Admiral Augustus Keppel*. Oil on canvas, 762×635 mm, 1765.

Source: © National Portrait Gallery, London.

substantial amount of gray appears in the wispy red-brown. Although the format did not permit Reynolds to show an admiral's full uniform, Keppel's coat and collar are buttoned up and folded over to show his stripes; and instead of a white lace kerchief at the throat above the shirt, which appeared in the portraits of 1759 and 1763, his kerchief is laced with gold thread. In Lord Rockingham's replica, his skin now looks yellow-green, possibly a result of the fading of lake and carmine; in Reynolds' replica, the Admiral's face appears more ruddy below his hatline, consistent with the sun-color that Reynolds had given him in the earlier portraits. As before, Reynolds used very dark shadows (a dab of dark brown at the base of the philtrum, and a very dark brown, almost black, shadow just below the right side of the nostrils) to emphasize Keppel's familiar prominent nose despite the near-frontal perspective of the head.

It was surely part of Reynolds' – and Keppel's – desire to recall the earlier portraits by retaining the pose of the sitter's head: Keppel appears to gaze off to one side and, with lips parted, seems to be about to speak. Compared to the earlier portraits, however, and perhaps recollecting the posture initially adopted but then rejected for the grand picture of 1752–1753, in this portrait Keppel's head tilts

slightly *downward* to his left so that his eyes appear to engage something close by at the implied viewer's eye-level – most likely another person implied to be standing to the viewer's left and conversing with Keppel. In the context of the Rockingham commission, we might imagine this implied participant to be Lord Rockingham himself. Regardless, the picture visibly solicits the beholder to occupy this vantage point, that is, to move to the left in order to engage Keppel's eyes. It is not a coincidence, I think, that this is the very spot to which Keppel was shown to be pointing in the famous gesture in the full-length of 1752–1753, that is, the vantage from which his heroic actions were witnessed by his sailors in 1747 or at least where this aspect of the narrative was reenacted to be taking place in 1753. In the painting of 1765, then, movement to this spot literally takes the viewer back in time.

Indeed, if the viewer moves from the frontal to the lateral vantage point in observing the picture, which constructs two images as a result of its modulations in painting, Keppel's face and figure actually seem to grow younger. For obvious geometrical reasons, as we move from center to our left Keppel's portly figure "slims down" and appears to look more like the buoyant, athletic young man depicted in the portraits of 1749 and 1752–1753. With a sure touch Reynolds laid the gray into the brown of Keppel's thinning hair, running it along the right side of the strands, so that it catches real light chiefly from the right; viewed from the *left*, the brown locks of hair are oriented to the standpoint and the gray oriented axially is much less visible. It is as if the portrait of 1765 magically converts itself into the portrait of 1749 – a picture that retrospectively can be seen as anticipating the later position from which the viewer can return into it. The figurative object of Keppel's address becomes clear: pro- and retroleptically, Keppel is *thinking of himself* and his history, real and pictured, and as it were *between the portraits*. The distinctive expressiveness that contemporaries remarked upon in Reynolds' portraiture was partly secured in this interaction in serial portraiture, whether or not the series could be viewed or recollected by anyone but the sitter and the painter. It is conceivable (perhaps likely on the visual evidence of seriality in the configurations) that the portraits of 1749, 1752–1753, 1759–1763 (in one or the other replica), and 1765 (in one replica) were simultaneously available to be seen in Reynolds' studio, some of them possibly as late as 1768 (for the 1749 picture) and 1779 (for the 1765 portrait). They might easily have been displayed as a sequenced group, the only case I can find in which serial portraiture in Reynolds' career could have been exhibited by him as such.

Reynolds' Portraits of Vice-Admiral Keppel (1780)

Fourteen years after the portrait of 1765 had been painted, and after a stormy career in the senior ranks of the Navy, Keppel was court-martialed in a trial motivated by political rivalries and personal animosities. A Whig sympathetic to the cause of the Americans, Keppel had been accused by his second-in-command,



FIG. 21.4 Sir Joshua Reynolds (1728–1792): *Vice-Admiral Augustus Keppel*. Oil on canvas, 1270×1015 mm, 1779.

Source: National Maritime Museum (BHC 2822). © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, UK.

a member of the Court party, of failing to pursue the French at the Battle of Ushant in July, 1778. He was spectacularly acquitted in February 1779. In a group of paintings begun in May 1779 (probably completed by June 1780), Reynolds produced four portraits (all replicas appear to be substantially autograph) (Fig. 21.4) to be distributed to Keppel's supporters, including Edmund Burke (despite his disagreement with Whiggery).⁴³ They show a stout, flushed, perhaps bibulous and obviously aged and unhealthy Keppel; he was 54 years old at the time but in the pictures appeared older. Wearing undress flag-officer's uniform (he had attained the rank of Vice-Admiral in 1770), he displays the sword that had been officially restored to him on his acquittal. He wears powdered hair in all but one of the replicas; in a painting that probably went to Keppel's family, he seems to wear his own reddish-brown hair, shown at this juncture to be very gray.

Reynolds rarely worked up a portrait from a painted study. But what seems to be a study for this portrait group has survived (No. 1047). Its forceful rendition of Keppel's perturbed and ferocious aspect during this fraught period of his life bespeaks Reynolds' hand.⁴⁴ But the agitated personality depicted in the study was

toned down when the image was transmitted into the finished pictures. In the best, presented by Keppel to his lawyer John Lee and considered at the time to be a “very exact likeness” (No. 1042), Keppel is literally shown to have weathered the storm (dark clouds blow away behind him) and to have retained unshakeable confidence in his judgment. The portrait echoes the portrait of 1763, the painting that portrayed Keppel at flag-officer’s rank for the first time and announced that his character could be discovered as much in his judicious thought as in his daring action. Because the trial had turned on the issue of Keppel’s supposed *inaction* at the Battle of Ushant (what the court finally accepted as his good judgment in *restraining* his second’s ill-advised action), the portrait fitted into Reynolds’ established representation of Keppel’s character.

Nonetheless we must remark on two striking departures from the existing series. First, the portrait did not idealize Keppel, though it caught his likeness. Despite his erect carriage, the Admiral appears bruised; his face shows the “fatigue and expense” occasioned by the trial that Reynolds had noted in a sympathetic letter which congratulated Keppel on his acquittal.⁴⁵ For the first time Reynolds portrayed the broken nose which had disfigured Keppel since youth, when he had been ambushed by footpads (maybe an allusion to the controversial court martial) and which was said at the time to give him a “vulgar and unpleasant air.”⁴⁶ Indeed, the pictures marked the fact that Keppel’s naval career was over, even though he had successfully defended his reputation (established 30 years earlier and recollected through the entire series of portraits) and had maintained his honor. Keppel was ordered into retirement in April 1780, when the paintings were probably still underway. In fact, the circumstances of the portrait event meant that the paintings could best be regarded as tokens of the triumph of Keppel’s lawyers and of his political faction – not of the man himself.⁴⁷

Second, Keppel is portrayed looking directly at the implied viewer, a departure from the “characteristic” Keppel who had appeared in earlier portraits. His lips are pursed and he seems silent. Possibly this configuration alluded to his trial, at which many of Keppel’s officers spoke on his behalf and at which his own brief speech could be read as querulous. Regardless, the very quality with which Keppel had been identified in the earlier image – the flow of his action, the play of his mind, and the stream of his speech – has wound down and virtually come to a halt. We can still recall the youth in the middle-aged man: Keppel’s pose, as in the portrait of the newly created admiral in 1763, recollects the pose of the young “giaour” of 1749. But unlike the subtle recursion constructed in 1765, there is no image in this portrait that this youth could return.

Reynolds’ Last Portrait of Keppel

We should not be surprised, however, to find that Reynolds made a strenuous attempt to *reattach* an image of the dying Keppel to the famous picture of his early manhood. A new portrait was given to the Prince of Wales in the summer of

1786; in August of that year, Reynolds' records note that a debt was due for a painting of Keppel, already transferred to the royal patron, which must be the portrait hanging in Carlton House by 1792 (No. 1049). The portrait might have been painted in the summer of 1786, but more likely in the preceding summer; between September 1785 and spring 1786, Keppel made a long trip to southern Italy to nurse his failing health. On October 2, 1786, he died. It is not clear whether Reynolds required any sittings for this painting: the face, while frontal, relays the likeness presented in the paintings of 1779–1783 probably devolved in turn from the painted study. Its frozen visage suggests that Reynolds painted from memory (or even from a mask) and possibly that the earlier portraits were not available to him any longer.

Regardless, Reynolds was unable to retrieve the vitality of his sitter. Though now retired for some years, a bewigged Keppel wears full-dress admiral's uniform and seems to perform the role of national institution; we are in the domain of reenactment again. As in the portraits of young Keppel in 1749 and 1752–1753, his left hand rests on the hilt of his sword – presumably the sword, betokening his acquittal, that had been displayed so conspicuously in the portrait group of 1779–1783. Directly in front of Keppel's left foot Reynolds has included what seems to be a replication of the peculiar sea-shell or wave-stone placed in the same position in the full-length of 1752–1753, though the reader will not be surprised if I speculate that the token was pictorially invented in this late hour and inserted into the 35-year-old prototype that it was meant to recall (that is, that as painting it belongs to the image of 1786 as it encompassed all the pictures of the subject). Leaning awkwardly on an anchor, the old ex-admiral stands precariously on two stones or blocks placed on a rocky promontory jutting above a stormy inlet. In the late nineteenth century, the paper in his hand could be seen to list naval orders. But as he was not serving when the picture was made, this missive must have been a memento, a script calling for a replay in the studio, a reenactment ranging all the way back from the Battle of Ushant to the triumph of the *Centurion* and wreck of the *Maidstone*. More exactly, it was the painter's *image* of a portrait event (or recollection of the previous portrait events) that could not actually be performed at this late hour.

Below in the background, a shipwreck, a ruined fortification, or a stone jetty (it is hard to tell) appears above the waves; we could be off the coast of France or in the Bay of Algiers or at harbor in England or, of course, all and none of these. The setting does allude to the full-length of 1752–1753, but with the notable exception that the creaky old veteran, unlike the bounding captain in the earlier portrait, is still, stiff, and silent – a virtual corpse.

At this time Reynolds' own physical powers were declining and his business had severely dwindled.⁴⁸ And in his construction and execution of the portrait he appears to be dismayed by the situation, the picturing event, in the same way as the subject himself appears to be ill-fitted to the peculiar context of narration and recollection into which his figure has been inserted; it is as if the painting sees the *rigor mortis* of the image that the picture tried to project. It is quite possible that

Keppel never sat for the painting and perhaps never even saw it. At the conscious level, Reynolds presumably had taken the job out of loyalty to his friend and out of respect for the intended royal recipient of the painting.

At the level of replication itself, and in part outside the domain of conscious awareness, Reynolds must have grasped the paradigmatic status of this picturing event within his lifelong practice of serial portraiture, a practice continually extended by the recurrence of commissions to return to the likeness of a sitter who had been painted several times before. In this last representation of Keppel, there was virtually nothing left to paint – nothing left to draw out of Reynolds' serially accumulated pictorial resources for depicting his long-time patron and nothing left to discover in his friend's memory of his past and hope for his future. The portrait must be regarded as a valedictory in the series; Reynolds must have understood it to be final, and in a real sense fatal. Indeed, as the valediction *of* the series it was the virtual conclusion of the open-ended movement that had been unleashed more than 30 years earlier, the last entry in a series that had painted itself to its end at the same time as its subject and its maker approached their own deaths. In this portrait, then, there was no turning back. Like a soul already departed, the image hovered ghost-like about the remains of pictures that could no longer be painted.

Notes

- 1 Essential social histories of British portrait painting in the period considered in this chapter are Pointon, M. (1993) *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-Century England*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, and Solkin, D. (1993) *Painting for Money: the Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. Useful analytic terms for interpreting portraiture of this (or of any) period are developed in Rosenthal, A. (1996) *Angelika Kauffmann: Bildnismalerie im 18 Jahrhundert*, Berlin: Reimer; see also her (2006) *Angelika Kauffmann: Art and Sensibility*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. The term "portrait event," for example, is Rosenthal's. For caricature in the period, see especially Rauser, A. (2008) *Caricature Unmasked: Irony, Authenticity, and Individualism in Eighteenth-Century English Prints*, Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press. Marin's ([1981] 1988) deconstructionist *Portrait of the King*, M. M. Houle (trans.), Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, drew some of its inspiration from Kantorowicz, E. H. (1957) *The King's Two Bodies: a Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. I have explored the involutions of pictorial legitimization in Davis, W. (1992) *Masking the Blow: the Scene of Representation in Late Prehistoric Egyptian Art*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- 2 To be sure, this is a view that might be more common among literary scholars than among art historians. A typical statement was made long ago by Donald A. Stauffer, author of a ground-breaking study of English biographical writing: "Biography has this advantage over painting: that it moves through time, and, if the biographer is at all skilful, he can suggest his hero's various moods and appearances as he goes through life, while the painter is necessarily limited, except in some esoteric sense, to the

- portrayal of a moment" (1941, *The Art of Biography in Eighteenth Century England*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 444–445).
- 3 Mannings, D. (2000) *Sir Joshua Reynolds: a Complete Catalogue of His Paintings*, 2 vols, London, Yale University Press; Hallett, M. (2005) "Reynolds, celebrity, and the exhibition space," in M. Postle (ed.) *Joshua Reynolds: the Creation of Celebrity*, London: Tate Publishing, 49–60 (quotation from 41).
 - 4 Farington, J. (1819) *A Memoir of the Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, in E. Malone (ed.) *The Literary Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, 5th edn, London, cxxxvi–cxxxvii. David Mannings (1983) emphasizes the "self-control" and "equanimity" that sitters were expected to display in Hudson's and like portraits – traits tending, of course, toward uniformity in the expression of personality ("Shaftesbury, Reynolds, and the recovery of portrait-painting in eighteenth-century England," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 48, 319–328).
 - 5 *A Poetical Epistle to Sir Joshua Reynolds*, London, 1777, ii–iii. Combe remarked on the naturalism and vivacity of Reynolds' portraits in order, however, to set up a satire on the paintings' tendency to fade.
 - 6 Farington, *Memoir of Reynolds*, clxii.
 - 7 Hilles, F. W. (ed.) (1952) *Portraits by Sir Joshua Reynolds*, London: Heinemann, 74; this was one of the opening statements in Reynolds' literary "portrait" of Samuel Johnson.
 - 8 Wark, R. R. (ed.) (1959) *Discourses on Art*, San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 72. The so-called "breadth" of Reynolds' painting could be its gravest defect. As Benjamin Haydon wrote upon visiting the retrospective exhibition in 1813, Reynolds' paintings "looked careless, slobbering, unfinished... Sir Joshua's mind triumphed over the ignorance of his hand. He knew effect, but his means of attaining it were inadequate; his breadth was emptiness" (Pope, W. B. [ed.] [1960–1963] *The Diary of Benjamin Robert Haydon*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, I, 310).
 - 9 Mason, W. (1859) "Anecdotes of Sir Joshua Reynolds, chiefly relative to his manner of coloring," in W. Cotton (ed.) *Sir Joshua Reynolds' Notes and Observations on Pictures, Chiefly of the Venetian School*, London, 50.
 - 10 These series include the portraits of John Manners, Marquess of Granby, whose military career was tracked in Reynolds' paintings; Frederick Howard, fifth Earl of Carlisle, a long-time supporter and collector of Reynolds; George Selwyn, an intimate friend; and Charles Watson Wentworth, second Marquess of Rockingham, the Whig leader. Three of Reynolds' sitters were eventually members of both the Literary Club and the Society of Dilettanti: David Garrick (though all paintings of him by Reynolds were completed before his election to the Society in 1777), Bennet Langton (painted in 1759 and elected to the Society in 1765), and Charles James Fox (painted in 1762, elected to the Society in 1769, and painted again in 1782). Reynolds painted one-off portraits of many members of both clubs. It would not be too extreme to say, then, that Reynolds produced a complex and partly serial pictorial biography of the clubs themselves. I thank Christopher Tradowsky for his compilation of data about these series.
 - 11 Northcote, J. (1818) *The Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, London, II, 7. In a comment on the art of Shakespeare, Reynolds wrote that the "mind appears to me of that nature and construction that it requires being employed on two things in order that it may do one thing well... If I was to judge from my own experience, the mind always desires to double, to entertain two objects at a time." Although he gave the example

- of “reading and writing,” surely he also had in mind the doubleness of seeing (with which we might identify the expression of the sitter) and painting (with which we might identify his or her likeness) (“Reynolds on Shakespeare,” in *Portraits by Reynolds*, 135). There is no space here to consider the details of Reynolds’ practice in this respect, in particular his use of a mirror in the portrait event.
- 12 See Tscherny, N. (1986) “Reynolds’s Streatham portraits and the art of intimate biography,” *Burlington Magazine*, 128, 994, 4–10, and Wendorf, R. (1990) *The Elements of Life: Biography and Portrait-Painting in Stuart and Georgian England*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 227–260.
 - 13 Northcote (1818), I, 241–244.
 - 14 Knowles, J. (ed.) (1831) *The Life and Art of Henry Fuseli*, London, II, 214–215; Northcote (1818), II, 306.
 - 15 Farington (1819), clxxxix.
 - 16 The point has been well made by Hallett: “the painted portrait, rather than standing as a bulwark against the passage of time ... ended up cruelly mimicking time’s inexorable ravaging of the celebrity’s body and reputation” (Hallett, 2005, 46). I will pursue it below.
 - 17 For this series and the complicated story of its reworkings, see Lustig, I. S. (1987) “Facts and deductions: the curious history of Reynolds’s first portrait of Johnson,” *The Age of Johnson*, 1, 161–180.
 - 18 Northcote (1818), I, 241.
 - 19 For Mrs Siddons’ recollection of Reynolds painting *Mrs Siddons as the Tragic Muse*, see Walpole, H. (1937) *Anecdotes of Painting in England*, F. W. Hilles and P. B. Daghliah (eds), New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, V, 61; this was only one, however, of several accounts of this famous sitting (see Wendorf, R. [1995] *Sir Joshua Reynolds: The Painter in Society*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 153–156. In a letter to a potential client in 1777, Reynolds explained that three 90-minute sittings were usually required, “but if the sitter chooses it the face could be begun and finished in one day” (Ingamells, J. and Edgcumb, J. [eds] [2000] *The Letters of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 69 [September 9]).
 - 20 Hallett has discovered that in the 1770s Reynolds exhibited considerably more portraits of women, especially of aristocratic “beauties,” than men (Hallett, 2005, 43); some of these portraits belonged to series in my sense.
 - 21 Brewer, J. (1997) *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, New York, NY: Farrar Straus Giroux, 311. Evidently the portraits of the mistresses had had an expected public at one point – the patron himself or a circle of his friends and peers (though not, presumably, a fully public circle, or a family one).
 - 22 The text of the poem was printed by Northcote (1818), I, 271–272.
 - 23 Mason (1859), 54.
 - 24 See especially Kirby Talley, Jr, M. (1986) “‘All good pictures crack’: Sir Joshua Reynolds’s practice and studio,” in N. Penny (ed.) *Joshua Reynolds*, London: Royal Academy of Arts, 55–70. The catalogue of British paintings at the Huntington Library makes especially fulsome and useful comments on the material condition of the Reynoldses in the collection, several of which are pathetically ruined: Asleson, R. (2001) *British Paintings at the Huntington*, S. Bennett (ed.), New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
 - 25 Kirby Talley (1986), 55.

- 26 Northcote (1818), I, 239–240.
- 27 For the details (and varying accounts) of this episode, see Mannings (2000), 90. A more elaborate satire was penned by Combe (*Poetical Epistle*); the poet tells us, for example, how Reynolds' portrait of his fair beloved, "Maria," became a "pallid Ghost" a mere 12 months after Reynolds had made it.
- 28 Mason (1859), 50.
- 29 Wendorf (1995), 32. Of course, the Edgcumbs were not the only conduits of Reynolds' success.
- 30 Farington (1819), cxliii.
- 31 According to O'Malley, L. (1912) "Reynolds's first portrait of Keppel," *Walpole Society* 1, 78.
- 32 The quoted phrase is O'Malley's (1912), 83. It literally refers, of course, to a man who smites the Turks.
- 33 O'Malley (1912), 81, 79.
- 34 In a letter written from Port Mahon in December 1749, Reynolds said that Keppel took him along when the British officers waited on the Dey (*Letters*, 7 [December 10]). The events of this meeting, however, were narrated by the newspapers. In the first edition of his biography of Reynolds, Northcote relayed the story without reservations (see *Memoirs of Sir Joshua Reynolds, Knt*, London, 1813, 23–24, from which I take my quotations), probably following Reynolds' lead. In the second edition (1818), he was more circumspect (*Life of Reynolds*, I, 32).
- 35 Malone (1819), I, xx, Farington (1819), clxi.
- 36 The quoted phrase is Mannings', in Penny (1986), 181.
- 37 For this event, see Keppel, T. (1842) *The Life of Augustus Viscount Keppel, Admiral of the White, and First Lord of the Admiralty in 1782–3*, London, I, 93–97. Its connection with Reynolds' portrait was accepted within the Keppel family (Keppel, 1842, I, 146–147).
- 38 The phrase is Edgar Wind's in "The revolution of history painting" [1938–39] in J. Anderson (ed.) (1986) *Hume and the Heroic Portrait*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 88–99; indeed Wind had Reynolds foremost in mind.
- 39 See Postle, M. (1995) "An early unpublished letter by Sir Joshua Reynolds," *Apollo* 141, 400, 15, fig. 7.
- 40 As David Solkin (1986) has shown, both figures adopted the gesture of *adlocutio* used in Roman sculptures of magistrates ("Great pictures or great men?: Reynolds, male portraiture, and the power of art," *Oxford Art Journal* 9, 42–49). Desmond Shawe-Taylor (1990) has suggested a relation between Reynolds' portrait of Keppel and the "Prima Porta" portrait of the emperor Augustus, perhaps involving a play on Keppel's Christian name (*The Georgians: Eighteenth-Century Portraiture and Society*, London: Barrie and Jenkins, 56–57).
- 41 The first and larger version of the print, engraved by Edward Fisher, included the date of Keppel's victory at Quiberon Bay on November 20, 1759 (see Keppel (1842), I, 280–290); a smaller version was published by Fisher early in 1760.
- 42 For No. 1041, see Ingamells, J. (2004) *Mid-Georgian Pictures in the National Portrait Gallery*, London: National Portrait Gallery, 304–305, no. 5572. The portrait (presumably the version in Reynolds' possession) was engraved and widely published by William Doughty right after Keppel's acquittal at his court martial in 1779. This print updated the 1765 portrait image: an inscription on the early state of the print tells us that it portrays the sitter as "Commander in Chief of a Squadron ... in the

- Channel soundings &c in the year 1778;" Keppel took command of the Channel fleet on March 22, 1778 (Keppel, 1842, II, 19–24), and the caption alluded to his disputed action against the French on July 27, 1778 (Keppel, 1842, II, 39–54).
- 43 For the context and contemporary representations of Keppel's court martial, see Crossland, J. (1996) "The Keppel affair," *History Today* 46, 1, 42–48, and Lincoln, M. (2002) *Representing the Royal Navy: British Sea Power, 1750–1815*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 53–59. Burke's reflections on the political character of Keppel were occasioned, at least rhetorically, by viewing his replica of Reynolds' portrait; see "A letter from the Right Hon. Edmund Burke to a noble lord," in *The Works of Edmund Burke* (London, 1884), V, 146–151. Keppel's biographer, however, resisted Burke's word-portrait of his ancestor (and his supposed Burkean politics) and insisted on Keppel's life-long Whiggery (Keppel, 1842, 422–425).
- 44 The likeness of Keppel in this group might have been influenced by, or partly based on, the visage of Neptune in Bernini's *Neptune and Triton*, sketched by Reynolds from a cast in the Royal Academy (see Herrmann, L. (1968) "The drawings by Sir Joshua Reynolds in the Herschel album," *Burlington Magazine*, 110, 789, 657). But I do not find the visual parallel to be especially convincing.
- 45 *Letters*, 81, February 12, 1779.
- 46 According to Keppel's biography, "in his early manhood, a blow received from the butt-end of a pistol, in a scuffle with foot-pads, fractured the bridge of his nose. His face, by this accident, was seriously and permanently disfigured; yet the lively and benevolent expression of his eyes, redeemed the countenance from extreme plainness" (Keppel, 1842, II, 419). For contemporary reactions to Keppel's appearance, see Mannings (2000), 290.
- 47 Becoming Viscount in 1782, Keppel entered Parliament and served briefly as First Lord of the Admiralty in Lord Rockingham's government. These events were commemorated, it seems, in a new version of the portrait of 1779–1780, probably painted in 1781–1783 but intended, like others in the group, to go to one of Keppel's helpmeets at trial, the advocate Thomas Erskine. Although this painting (No. 1048) required new sittings and Mannings has defined it as a sixth portrait type, the likeness evidently derived from the study (No. 1047). In No. 1048, Keppel, now a very hot and furious potato, appears in a red velvet suit (though leaning on his officer's dress sword) and faces right instead of left. But otherwise the painting repeats the earlier images (that is, the *fifth* portrait type).
- 48 Cf. Reynolds' remarks in his last *Discourse* in the President's chair at the Royal Academy in 1790: "My age, and my infirmities still more than my age, make it probable that this will be the last time I shall have the honour of addressing you from this place. Excluded as I am, *spatiis iniquis*, from indulging my imagination with a distant and forward perspective of life, I may be excused if I turn my eyes back on the way which I have passed" (*Discourses*, 265–266).

Virtue, Vice, Gossip, and Sex

Narratives of Gender in Victorian and Edwardian Painting

Pamela M. Fletcher

Victorian and Edwardian narrative painting is populated with fallen women, profligate sons, heroic soldiers, and virtuous governesses. Like characters in the realist fiction of Dickens, Trollope, and Eliot, these figures and their exploits filled the canvases of the popular modern-life “subject pictures” shown at the Royal Academy and widely reproduced in engravings and newspapers. Why were such narrative paintings so popular? How did viewers relate and respond to them? What kinds of social and institutional contexts shaped viewers’ responses? What does the pictures’ popularity tell us about Victorian society and its uses of the visual?

For Victorian audiences, the process of reading a painting was based on the expectation that a visual image could be translated into text, that is to say, that pictures told stories. The process of reading began with the title and the accompanying text in the catalogue, which often provided a literary reference or created a story of its own. The images themselves were painted in a realist mode, encouraging the understanding of the pictures as extensions of life, filled with characters who had histories and futures. The particulars of the depicted situation were read through physiognomy, details such as the prints, books, and other attributes that represented aspects of the characters’ personalities and histories or foreshadowed their futures, and a narrative backdrop of some sort. This source could be an actual literary text, with or without an excerpt published in the catalogue, or, in the case of many modern-life subjects, could rely on association with conventional formulaic stories, such as “the fallen woman” or “the profligate son.” All of these factors initiated a model of reading a situation through accumulated detail, in a process similar to that of reading a realist novel.

This mode of interpretation was dependent on a particular set of social institutions and practices, most importantly the annual Royal Academy summer

exhibition and its wide coverage in the periodical press. The Royal Academy had been founded in 1768 for the advancement of art in Great Britain, and consisted of three main components: an art school, a professional association of artists, and an annual public exhibition. The exhibition, including hundreds of paintings and hundreds of thousands of visitors, was the single most important artistic event of the year and was reviewed in almost every newspaper and magazine, both as a social event and as an annual display of the progress of British art. A description of the fashionable opening-day private view conveys a sense of the atmosphere:

At four in the afternoon the crowd was so thick that it was only possible to move round the rooms with the greatest difficulty. In front of many of the pictures the artist, surrounded by a knot of friends, was modestly answering questions, explaining details, or receiving congratulations. Other knots of people discussed golfing prospects or week-end trips, while a few looked at the pictures.¹

As this account suggests, the social aspects of being at the Academy extended to the role the pictures played in the experience. The most commonly recognized motive for attending the Academy was to get “conversation,” and jokes abounded about viewers who used the Academy to bone up on popular pictures as topics of conversation for awkward social situations, such as making conversation with shy dinner party companions or unattractive dance partners.² While serious art critics routinely disparaged those who looked to the Academy “to furnish gossip for suburban dinner-tables,” this was a common view of the Academy’s purpose.³ As the ladies’ magazine the *Queen* advised its readers in 1898, “a Royal Academy exhibition, like a new play, creates conversation. It is a subject on which anyone can dilate at a dinner party or an afternoon tea.”⁴

This rationale for attending the Academy and the nature of the enjoyment to be had there had important implications for how viewers approached individual paintings and the kinds of paintings to which they were drawn. Throughout the Victorian and Edwardian period, critics described viewers’ engagement with paintings as extensions of everyday life and personal experience. Writing about William Powell Frith’s *Railway Station* in 1862, Tom Taylor described the parameters of this kind of response:

There is nothing here that does not come within the round of common experiences. We are all of us competent to understand these troubles or pleasures, anxieties or annoyances: there is no passage of these many emotions but we can more or less conceive of ourselves as passing through.⁵

As Taylor indicates, narrative paintings of modern life such as Frith’s scene of the crowd on the platform at Paddington station are the perfect fit for this mode of looking, presenting the contemporary world in naturalistic form and inviting viewers to relate to the picture through the lens of their own experience.

Examples abound in the critical literature of this kind of response. In his review of the Academy of 1877, Henry James described this kind of viewing, noting that spectators' conversations focused "on the subject of the picture – projecting themselves into the story" and went on to recount a typical response to Marcus Stone's *Sacrifice*, an image of a young woman burning a letter, while an older woman weeps:

Two ladies stood near me, entranced; for a long time they were silent. At last – "*Her mother was a widow!*" one of them gently breathed... The most appreciable thing to them was the old woman's wearing a widow's cap; and the speaker's putting her verb in the past tense struck me as proof of their accepting the picture above all things as history.⁶

As viewers supplied histories, motives, and potential futures for the characters in modern-life paintings, they told stories about what was or should be proper behavior in various circumstances.

In one sense, then, such pictures had a didactic function. As theorists of narrative such as Hayden White have argued, the cause and effect structure of narrative implies a moral interpretation of events, linking action to reaction, act to consequence.⁷ Narratives of virtue rewarded and vice punished thus served to confirm the validity of a moral system and social code. Accordingly, nineteenth-century narrative paintings are often (and quite convincingly) interpreted as conservative cultural productions, shoring up middle class identities, moral values, and claims to political and social legitimacy. Gender was a critical element of this middle class identity, as traditional gender roles served to reinforce the middle class ideal of the family and the home as the basis of social and political order. The possibilities of narrative, however, exceed such univocal readings. All narratives have gaps and indeterminacies that must be filled in by the reader or viewer's imagination. Even if the general outlines of a depicted narrative were clear, viewers had significant leeway in interpretation, as they fleshed out the stories and characters on view, leaving room for playful or even oppositional readings.

Artists, too, played with narrative, and many Victorian modern-life scenes are less straightforward than they first appear. The codes and conventions of narrative could be engaged, adapted, challenged, subverted, or mocked, with a corresponding effect on the moral narratives they provoked. As Victorian narratives of gender were challenged by new roles for women, organized feminism, and the rise of the professional classes and office workers over the course of the late nineteenth century, the parameters of narrative painting could be stretched and expanded to address these new stories. The rise of alternatives to the Academy over the course of the century also changed the possibilities for narrative, as different social and artistic spaces encouraged alternative modes of understanding paintings.

Victorian Values: Fractured Families

The family and the home were central sites for Victorian definitions of gender, as they remain for us today. Traditionally historians have seen an increasing division between public and private spheres as the new economic structures of the Industrial Revolution took hold. The public sphere of work was associated with the profit motive and masculinity, while the private sphere of the domestic realm was the safe haven of morality and femininity. Recent scholarship has challenged this doctrine of “separate spheres,” calling attention to women’s roles in public life and men’s involvement in family and child rearing. But however complex individual experience was in actual practice, the division between “public” and “private” was an important ideological distinction. The family was the point of contact between the two spheres: both a private refuge of intimacy and relationship, and an economic and social unit, which educated future citizens and served as the central site of consumption. As Samuel Smiles wrote in his bestselling book *Self-Help* of 1859,

The Home is the crystal of society – the very nucleus of national character; and from that source, be it pure or tainted, issue the habits, principles and maxims, which govern public as well as private life. The nation comes from the nursery.⁸

The family was thus a centrally important and dangerously fragile construction, as it both guaranteed the security of the social and political order of the public sphere, and was potentially under threat from it.

The fallen woman: *Past and Present* (1858) by Augustus Egg

In 1858, Augustus Egg (1816–1863) exhibited three paintings, now known as *Past and Present*, at the Royal Academy. They were accompanied in the catalogue by an invented text:

August the 4th. Have just heard that B– has been dead more than a fortnight, so his poor children have now lost both parents. I hear *she* was seen on Friday last near the Strand, evidently without a place to lay her head. What a fall hers has been!

As this last sentence suggests, the narrative of the picture drew on the stock story of the “fallen woman,” whose inevitable progression through the stages of seduction to prostitution and ultimately suicide was a widely shared cultural myth.⁹

The circumstances of the wife’s “fall” were read through the accumulated visual detail in the central picture, which lends substance and particularity to the overarching narrative. The unfaithful wife has thrown herself on the ground before her unhappy husband, who holds the incriminating letter crumpled in his hand. Behind him on the wall hangs a print after Clarkson Stanfield’s painting *Abandoned* and his own portrait miniature, while her complementary portrait is surmounted by an

image of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise. The mirror between the two picture groupings reflects the open door through which she will soon be cast out. One of the couple's two young children looks up to see the unfolding drama, while her sister remains absorbed in building a fragile house of cards upon a stack of French novels. All of these naturalistic details provided a symbolic amplification of the narrative moment. For example, *The Times* noted that the "card castle has a French novel for its foundation, – a Hogarthian indication of the source of their mother's perversion," while the *Saturday Review* read the same detail as a harbinger of the future: "the shock of her fall shatters the card-castle which her two unconscious little girls are building further back in the room – an incident most ingeniously exact in its moral analogy."¹⁰ The other two panels – which flanked the central scene of the disrupted home – take the family's tale several years forward in time. In one the outcast wife huddles beneath the Adelphi arches on the Thames, a location the *Art Journal* described as "the lowest of all the profound depths of human abandonment in this metropolis."¹¹ The feet of a young child protrude from beneath her shawl, while the posters above her head advertise plays entitled "Victims" and "A Cure for Love." While her proximity to the river might suggest the possibility of suicide by drowning – the conventional end for the fallen woman – her longing gaze is directed upwards, toward the three-quarters moon that lights the scene. This detail visually links the mother with her now-grown daughters, one of whom gazes from her bedroom window up at the same moon in the third painting in the series. The portraits of their parents that once hung in the parlor now hang on their bedroom wall, reuniting the broken family in memory and sentiment.

The picture was quite popular when exhibited at the Academy, and received much press attention. Most reviews employed this mode of "reading" the picture through symbolic detail and, if they quibbled over details, most found the moral of the story quite clear. The *Art Journal* called it a "domestic wreck" and the *Saturday Review* described it as the story of "a wife fallen, and a family destroyed."¹² In short, deviant female sexuality has destroyed the family and the home. As art historian Teri J. Edelstein has noted, this subject was extremely topical. For much of the nineteenth century, divorce could only be granted through an act of Parliament and was both expensive and uncommon. The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 made divorce available through the law courts, and thus made it more accessible.¹³ A woman's adultery was grounds for divorce (a man needed to have committed adultery plus an additional offense, such as desertion) and the potential threat to the Victorian family was the subject of much public discussion. Egg's painting seems to dramatize this fear, as the wife's infidelity raises the specter that the children are illegitimate and points to the dissolution of the home. The moral message to viewers thus seems quite clear, as the painting functions as a cautionary tale. As Edelstein points out, at least one review explicitly understood the painting in this way:

In these days, when matrimonial litigation has become so popular, and cheap divorces apparently so desirable, the general publication of such a picture as this cannot but produce a beneficial and wholesome effect.¹⁴

But was the viewer obliged to take this kind of condemnatory view? The catalogue text – which is often called a diary entry, but might also be a letter – seems to encourage the viewer to evaluate the depicted events. The phrases “I have just heard” and “I hear” suggest that information about the family is circulating in the social world of gossip and evaluation. The viewer is addressed by this voice, invited to become part of this conversation. Tellingly, the tone of the voice is both somewhat prurient (“What a fall hers has been!”) and pitying, as the daughters are identified as “poor” victims.

The painting itself does seem to suggest a certain amount of sympathy for all the members of this disrupted family. In the moment of discovery, the father looks grief-stricken rather than angry, and children and the home look well tended, indicating the mother has not shirked her domestic responsibilities and maternal affection. Seated beneath the Adelphi arches years later, the mother retains the classic profile of a lady, as she looks longingly at the moon, while she protects the child in her arms, demonstrating maternal feeling for *all* her children.¹⁵ Indeed, the very arrangement of the pictures arouses pity, as mother and daughters yearn for one another across the scene of their broken home. The physical separation of the paintings of mother and grown children may even, as art historian Julia Thomas has argued, offer an implicit condemnation of the institutions and norms that divide them.¹⁶

The paintings, then, makes an alternative moral reading of the situation available. But it is not easy to know how many viewers actually interpreted the triptych in this way. There are hints in the critical response that suggest the narrative was not as transparent as many critics wanted to believe. *The Times* critic confessed, “Mr. Egg’s picture is not easy to read. Perhaps the difficulty of at once unraveling the meaning of the sad history increases the crowd before it,” and the famed Victorian art critic John Ruskin introduced his notice of the picture by noting it had been misread: “As I see that several mistakes have been made in the interpretation of this impressive picture in the public prints, I give the true reading of it, though I should have thought it was clearly enough legible.”¹⁷ Ruskin’s discussion of the picture in a private letter suggests at least one alternative and, in his view, erroneous, reading. Writing to his friend Mrs John Simon, he chides her for constructing a romance around the scene:

My dear lady, it is *you* who have constructed the French Romance – it is quite worthy of George Sand as you have put it – but to us plain English people, the probability of its being not at all that way, seems a thousandfold. The picture does not pretend to represent a pretty story – but a piece of very commonplace vice.¹⁸

Mrs Simon’s reading of the picture hints at the possible existence of other readings, interpretations in which the woman’s “sin” was transformed into a grand passion. Perhaps because of this potential, some critics worried about the impact of the painting on its viewers, particularly young women. *Sharps London Magazine* asked “Who can put *that* in his gallery, for honest women to look at?” and the

Athenaeum complained about this “impure thing that seems out of place in a gallery of laughing brightness, where young, unstained, unpainted and happy faces come to chat and trifle.”¹⁹ The critics are clearly expressing a fear of moral contamination – like the wife’s disastrous exposure to French novels – but is there also a fear that viewers might be moved to sympathy? As *The Times* noted, the picture “evidently succeeds in impressing those who stand before it deeply and genuinely.”²⁰ In either case, there is the clear expectation that the picture will have an impact on the viewer beyond the aesthetic, engaging emotion and potentially shifting moral standards.

The use in this discussion of the evidence of written reviews to explore the story of *Past and Present* also calls attention to one final point: the role of the critic and the press in the interpretation of Victorian pictures. Pictures and their meanings were discussed and debated not just by those who stood before the paintings at the Academy, but also by critics and readers in the vast Victorian periodical press. The circulation of periodicals throughout the nation and the colonies vastly expanded the “audience” for pictures, but it could also serve as a substitute for individual interpretation. The critical reception in newspapers and journals must thus be read both as a discourse of its own, one concerned with professionalization of the critic’s role and entertainment value, and as a record or trace, admittedly imperfect, of wider patterns of interpretation.

Fallen men: *Newgate: Committed for Trial* (1878) by Frank Holl

Newgate: Committed for Trial (1878) by Frank Holl (1845–1888) depicts the nuclear family under a different kind of stress (Fig. 22.1). This time it is the men who are at fault, and the Victorian family destroyed by male transgression. The drama unfolds in a cell at Newgate Prison, where prisoners on trial receive visitors. A group of well-dressed women enter through the door at the rear, but the main drama of the scene is marked by the strong diagonal sweep of the cell bars, which separates the incarcerated men from their families. To the left, a young man with an anguished expression moves toward the bars that separate him from his young family. His wife leans in toward him, as their gazes meet. In the center, another woman huddles defensively over the baby in her arms, as her husband watches in a pose of crouching menace.

Holl based the picture on a visit to Newgate, facilitated by his friendship with the Governor of the prison. In a letter he wrote to the curator of the Picture Gallery at Royal Holloway College in 1887, Holl described his experience:

I witnessed this scene some years before I painted the picture ... and I shall never forget the impression it made upon me... Prisoners of all sorts of crime were there – the lowest brutal criminal – swindlers, forgers, and boy thieves – all caged together, awaiting the results of their separate trials, and in one or two cases, the misery of their friends in seeing them in this hopeless condition, fell but lightly on their brains dulled by incessant crime.²¹



FIG. 22.1 Frank Holl: *Newgate: Committed for Trial*. Oil on canvas, 1878.

Source: Royal Holloway, University of London/The Bridgeman Art Library.

Holl's emphasis on the reality of the depicted scene locates the picture in quite a different realm from Egg's imagined drama. Holl, together with Luke Fildes and Hubert von Herkomer, was part of a group of artists working in the 1870s who have come to be called the social realists. Many of them worked as illustrators for the *Graphic*, a newspaper that regularly featured full-page documentary wood engravings of urban life and poverty. These comparatively realistic depictions of the plight of the poor or unfortunate were meant to evoke sympathy, even philanthropy or social activism.

When these themes were translated into large oil paintings for the Royal Academy, the somber scenes stood out among the fashionable society portraits and anecdotal narrative paintings that filled the walls of the average Academy exhibition. Critics had mixed feelings about the appropriateness of such subjects. As a writer for the *Art Journal* complained about *Newgate*, "how an artist personally so healthy, bright, and manly can year after year give way to this melancholy habit of mind and brush is beyond comprehension."²² Whether or not they appreciated such scenes, however, critics did recognize the painting as an attempt to arouse the viewer's sympathy. The *Saturday Review* predicted it would "no doubt excite a good deal of admiration for its pathetic qualities," while several critics compared the picture to other forms of sentimental narrative, including "low-class melodrama" and "the least admirable scenes of Dickens."²³ The source of the

picture's emotional impact is the vivid rendering of ruptured families, given powerful visual form in the organizing compositional division of the prison bars that separate the incarcerated men from their families. In each grouping, man and wife adopt corresponding poses across the set of iron bars, visually identifying the family groupings and dramatizing their division.

But is the enforced absence of the father from the family unit a loss or a protection? The critic for the *Saturday Review* resented the picture's claim on his compassion:

Prisons are an institution which one would be glad to find unnecessary; but this state of mind may be arrived at without a painter's help, and one may fairly resent an attempt to enlist sympathy for an imaginary person whose claims to it are in no way suggested to us.²⁴

The heart of the critic's complaint is that the picture does not give enough information about the imprisoned figures for us to judge whether or not they are worthy of sympathy.

From the figures in Mr. Holl's picture we can learn nothing beyond what is stated in its title. One may be naturally sorry for a man who finds himself thrust into Newgate; but it may also be that there would be much more cause for sorrow if he were allowed to go free.

While the picture dramatizes the emotional impact of separation, it does not explicitly point to the cause or suggest the after-effects of that separation. What crimes are the men charged with? Are they in fact guilty of them? The fact that men are awaiting the outcome of their trials emphasizes the uncertainty of our moral judgement, as their guilt or innocence has not yet been established. The picture's narrative structure invites us to speculate about the individual vignettes, but gives minimal clues as to what crimes have been committed, and what will happen to the affected families as a result. Unlike the detailed symbolism and temporal span of *Past and Present*, we are given simply a single dramatic moment and the details of past and future are left to our imaginations.

There are, however, some clues to guide our interpretation. Class status is one of the most significant of these codes. The family on the left seems to be of the striving middle or lower middle class, judged by the evidence of the man's suit and tie, and his wife and children's coarser cloaks, striped stockings, and headscarves. According to the principles of Victorian physiognomy – the idea that character was inscribed on a person's facial features in a legible and systemic fashion – the husband's high brow and straight nose also denote a somewhat elevated class status. In contrast, the family grouping at the center of the scene seems to be of a lower class. The woman's low brow and the husband's protruding jaw were easily read by critics as signs of viciousness; William Rossetti described the pair as "a prisoner of hyaena-like savagery who browbeats his wife, an ill-used, slovenly, half-brutalised woman, seated with her baby."²⁵

These class identifications are confirmed in Holl's daughter's account of the painting. In her biography of her father, A. M. Reynolds discussed the picture at length and identified the characters. The group on the left was inspired by a scene Holl had witnessed at Newgate when the wife of a "young man of good family" visited her imprisoned spouse for the first time. He "had filled a trusted position in one of the largest and most important banking houses. Falling amongst evil companions, he had been tempted to misappropriate a very large sum of money." As Holl painted the scene, however, he turned his attention to another group:

a poor woman with her baby and little girl, leaning against the railing dividing her from the brute who had probably half killed her before doing the deed which took him to a safeguarded asylum between the walls of Newgate, and released his wife from a life of martyrdom at the hands of the big, burly bully.²⁶

In family lore, at any rate, the class distinction between the two family groups and their circumstances were quite clearly drawn.

The painting thus offers us two axes of identification and interpretation. Masculine and feminine spheres are divided by the prison bars that segment the canvas, but the individual family groupings are identified by class. The painting thus diagrams the complex intersection of gender roles and class identifications. Femininity is represented as relatively stable, as both wives are characterized primarily as mothers protecting their children. But the versions of masculinity on display are deeply inflected by class. Both men reach for their families, but with vastly different intent. The "swindler's" hands reach eagerly toward his family, as if to embrace them, but are confined by the bars, as his wife reaches out to mirror his blocked gesture. The "brute" reaches his hands out in a similar motion, but the look on his face and his crouching pose of menace imply a different and more threatening "embrace." His wife reacts to the implicit threat, folding her body protectively over the child in her arms. The middle class family has been sundered by the man's fall into temptation in the public realm of work and money, but their emotional ties remain intact. In contrast, the working class family is not connected by those bonds of affection, and the implication is that the woman and child will be protected rather than harmed by the father's removal. Working class masculinity could be a potent source of fear for middle class culture, as it held out the threat of social or political unrest or even violence. The image of the working class man as good husband and father was a counter to this fear, implying that all classes were bound by similar ties and beliefs.²⁷ Holl's picture seems to offer us good and bad versions of private masculinity: the lower middle class man who sins at work, but whose love for his family invites sympathy and prevents him from being a threat to society; and the working class man who is better kept safely behind the bars of Newgate Prison.

The separation between the men and their families, of course, is enforced by the warders. As Holl described his visit to Newgate, "a Warden walks between the two gratings, who can hear and see everything that takes place between the

friend and prisoner.”²⁸ The authoritative gaze patrols even the most intimate of relationships. There is a warder on both sides of the barrier, enacting the two faces of authoritative masculinity. On the male side of the barrier, he stands tall and watchful, monitoring the prisoners’ behavior. On the visitor’s side his back is turned to the viewer and the prisoners, as he greets the female visitors, serving as their protector, the mediator between criminals and the public of vulnerable women. Significantly, the women he greets as they enter the room seem to be of a higher social class than the other visitors; they wear veiled hats and gold jewelry, and were identified as ladies both by William Rossetti and the critic for *The Times*. Representing the law as a protective force, the warders stand as an alternative model of masculinity to the criminals, ensuring female safety through the exercise of vigilance and the implicit threat of physical force.

Confessions: Sexuality and Psychology

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, the social and artistic conditions supporting modern-life narrative painting began to change. Perhaps the most significant was the enormous shift in gender roles and relations. The feminist movement of the late nineteenth century and the increasingly militant suffragist movement of the early twentieth century both changed actual women’s lives and challenged the traditional definitions of femininity, masculinity, sexuality, and marriage. The “marriage problem” was a particularly hotly debated area of gender relations and in 1888, a *Daily Telegraph* invitation for letters on the topic of “Is Marriage a Failure?” drew 27 000 responses. The controversy began with an article by the prominent feminist Mona Caird in *The Westminster Review* in which she equated marriage and prostitution. In deliberately making such an inflammatory comparison, Caird and other feminists hoped to expose the inequities of the Victorian marriage contract. Her article succeeded in launching the question into the public arena, and the issues of the sexual double standard and women’s desire to have lives outside of the domestic sphere generated widespread public discussion well into the following decade.²⁹

The same period witnessed tremendous changes in the art world. While the Academy remained the most important and popular exhibition venue for contemporary art, its prestige and power were increasingly challenged. Alternative exhibition societies were formed in direct opposition to the Academy, such as the New English Art Club, founded in 1886 as a home for artists who identified themselves with modern French art. There was also an enormous change in the contemporary art market, as commercial galleries – which had first come into their own as a distinct institutional form in the 1850s – spread rapidly across London’s West End.³⁰ As these new venues vied to attract audiences and differentiate themselves from one another (and from the Academy), they helped shape new, more fragmented publics for art, and supported the emergence of new aesthetic values. The new styles of aestheticism and impressionism were accompanied by a

new set of aesthetic standards, which focused on the formal properties of a work of art over its subject matter, and new social contexts for reception, aimed at more exclusive and fashionable audiences.

While the “decline of subject-painting” was widely heralded during the period, narrative painting and themes of gender did not disappear, as two examples from the last years of the nineteenth-century – *The Confession* (1896) by Frank Dicksee and *The Doll’s House* (1899) by William Rothenstein – demonstrate. Visually, the two paintings have much in common. They are both interior scenes, with a man in black and woman in white absorbed in a silent moment of psychological intensity. Both paintings use a compressed space, dramatic lighting, and dark tonality to create a feeling of emotional tension. And in each, the artist has called our attention to the texture of paint, particularly in the handling of the women’s white dresses. Despite these visual similarities, however, the vastly different contexts of their creation and reception led to radically different interpretations of the two pictures and their relationships to narrative.

The Doll’s House (1899) by William Rothenstein

William Rothenstein (1872–1945) studied at the Slade School under Alphonse Legros and then in Paris, a typical path for a late nineteenth-century generation of artists who tried to forge their careers outside the boundaries of the Royal Academy system. In Paris, he met Charles Conder, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and Edgar Degas, and the latter’s artistic example and informal critical tutoring had an enormous influence upon him and his work. Upon his return to London in 1894, he exhibited at the New English Art Club and commercial gallery spaces, such as the Carfax Gallery. He did not, however, exhibit his work at the Royal Academy during these years, preferring to carve out an artistic identity in opposition to its standards and traditions.

The Doll’s House was painted in Vattetot, a seaside town in northern France where Rothenstein, Conder, Augustus John, and William Orpen spent the summer of 1899 in a makeshift artists’ colony. In his memoirs, Rothenstein described the summer as an idyllic time of painting, talking, drinking, and bathing naked in the sea by moonlight.³¹ These kinds of artistic excursions, with their social and sociable freedoms, were a feature of the new definition of the artist as a “bohemian.” No longer modeling their artistic identity on the professional Royal Academicians with their expensive London houses, these artists self-consciously enacted the role of “outsiders,” forging their own alternative communities. The picture is a kind of reflection of this communal practice, as Alice Rothenstein, the artist’s wife, and Augustus John served as the models for the figures. As the artist later recalled, the picture was inspired by John’s sartorial experiments with a local tailor: “he [John] presently appeared, a superb figure, in a tight jacket and wide pegtop trousers; so superb that I painted him standing beside my wife, my wife sitting on the staircase.”³²

While Rothenstein’s description of his inspiration is rather light-hearted, the picture itself is decidedly dark, even mysterious, in tone. The staircase dominates

the scene, as the bright artificial light that seems to illuminate the scene disappears into its dark corner. The bleak stairwell offers no identifying details of a specific location or event, and the drama of the scene lies solely in the imagined relationship between the two figures. They are in close proximity, as she sits on the staircase with her male companion standing confidently before her, one foot raised on the step. This casual physical intimacy is in sharp contrast to the psychological disjunction between them, as she seems lost in thought with an undecipherable expression on her face, while he impassively meets the viewer's gaze. Rothenstein's picture thus has a fundamentally different relation to narrative than those of Egg or Holl. The visual codes and conventions of symbolic detail, stock characters, and physiognomic identification are all absent from the image. The implicit story comes only from the imagined relationship between two figures in this compressed and dramatically lit space.

The picture's title does, however, tie it to a specific narrative, Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House*. The play charts the disintegration of the marriage of Nora and Torvald Helmer over the course of a few dramatic days, as she realizes that he sees her only in terms of his own needs and public reputation. Later commentators have identified the painted moment as the scene in Act Three when Nora's friend Mrs Linde and Nora's blackmailer Krogstad are waiting together in the Helmer's parlor for the dance on the upper floors to end. This meeting, however, is an emotional reunion of former lovers, and neither the mood nor the setting of the scene seem precisely to match the painting. And while contemporary critics certainly recognized the reference to the play, the identification of a specific scene or character was rarely made. (In one exception to this general rule, Max Beerbohm identified the figures as the main characters, Nora and Helmer, in his review of the New English Art Club in 1903.³³) The title, it seems, invokes the possibility of narrative meaning, but frustrates any attempt to pin that meaning down. It also, of course, suggests a thematic association, as the play's depiction of female emancipation from a stifling marriage seems to give substance and history to the depicted couple's relationship.

Rothenstein had been introduced to Ibsen's plays by Charles Conder when they first met in Paris. Back in London in the mid-1890s he met the actress Janet Achurch and saw her perform the role of Nora. As he recalled, "We were all mesmerised by Ibsen in those days."³⁴ Ibsen was controversial when his plays were first staged in England, and many critics attacked the playwright's depiction of marriage as a hypocritical and stifling institution. The titular invocation of Ibsen thus serves to identify his painting with those associations of the modern and the daring. Rothenstein's visual references carried a similar set of associations. *The Doll's House* was part of a larger interest in the psychological interior among the artists of the New English Art Club in the years around 1900.³⁵ Influenced by Degas, artists such as Rothenstein, Orpen, Albert Rutherston, and Walter Sickert all painted haunting interiors populated by women and, less frequently, men in various fraught and ambiguous situations. One characteristic of these paintings was a mood of tension, privacy, and sexual intimacy, conveyed by looming empty or abruptly compressed spaces.

The reception of the picture acknowledged both these modern associations, and the picture's visual and thematic links to more mainstream narrative painting. The first documented exhibition of the picture was at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900, where it won a silver medal and the admiration of Henry Tonks and John Singer Sargent. In his memoirs, Rothenstein suggests that it had been shown the previous year in London, where it received no comment, but no record of such an exhibition has been established.³⁶ The painting was included in the Glasgow Exhibition of 1901, and exhibited in London at the spring exhibition of the New English Art Club in 1903, when its reception was framed by the knowledge that it had won acclaim in Paris. The social contexts and aesthetic "horizon of expectations" of the New English Art Club were also important contexts for its reception, as the venue's reputation as a home for French-influenced painting and its more self-consciously "artistic" audience established a primarily aesthetic criteria for evaluation. Accordingly, a critic for *The Times* conceded that it was "a work, obviously, of great ability, but so literal a translation of Ibsen that one is obliged, wrongly enough, to give it the precise degree of admiration that one feels for Ibsen."³⁷ The critic's mixed evaluation here reveals the tension between his aesthetic evaluation, and his sense of appropriate subject matter. As the critic is aware, he is meant to judge the work on its formal qualities, but is "wrongly" swayed by its unhappy invocation of narrative. Such tensions between judging the work's aesthetic quality and its dramatic effect were a common thread in its reception. Writing in the *Academy*, C. Lewis Hind noted that the "romantic" painting "means whatever you may like it to mean," but quickly moved to an appreciation of the painting's formal qualities as the basis for his judgement of it: "in truth of tone, a desirability to which Mr. Rothenstein does not always attain, the best picture he has painted."³⁸ Commenting on the picture many years later, Augustus John made fun of viewers who responded to the implied story:

I appear to be ready for the road, for I am carrying a mackintosh on my arm and am shod and hatted. But Alice seems to hesitate. Can she have changed her mind at the last moment? But what could have been her intention? Perhaps the weather had changed for the worse and made a promenade inadvisable: but we shall never know.³⁹

By 1950 the picture's value lay firmly in its form and facture, and dramatic narrative had been exorcised from its meanings.

Problem pictures: *The Confession* (1896) by Frank Dicksee

In contrast, the reception of *The Confession* by Dicksee (1853–1928) at the Academy in 1896 emphasized the story it seemed to tell. Dicksee was of an older generation than Rothenstein, and had exhibited his first work at the Academy when the younger artist was just four years old. He specialized in pre-Raphaelite inspired romantic genre paintings, such as *Romeo and Juliet* (Royal Academy 1884) and *The Redemption of Tannhäuser* (Royal Academy 1890), and his pictures were



FIG. 22.2 Sir Frank Dicksee: *The Confession*, 1896.

Source: Private collection © The Art Gallery Collection/Alamy.

widely reviewed and reproduced. The Academy was the center of his career, and he was elected Associate Royal Academician in 1881, made a Royal Academician in 1891, and elevated to President of the institution in 1924.

In the context of the Academy and Dicksee's career, the anguished conversation depicted in *The Confession* (Fig. 22.2) was interpreted by most viewers and critics as a modern instance of the familiar fallen woman narrative. The critic for the *Daily Telegraph* referred to it as a "domestic drama" and explained, "His consternation leaves no doubt as to the nature of the confession, which the gesture of his dying companion, pointing in self-accusation to her nuptial ring, still further emphasises."⁴⁰ The woman's wedding ring was picked out by many reviewers, as it seemed to fix the couple's relationship and locate the picture within the topical frame of the "marriage problem." The picture's relation to more self-consciously modern painting was noted by Claude Phillips in the *Academy*, who gave its artistic and dramatic qualities equal emphasis:

the self-set task ... has been a double one. He has indulged in the *tour de force* of a white picture, and has at the same time realised with a certain melodramatic force the scene in which a consumptive woman on the point of death makes to her husband a confession, which, if we are to judge by the significant exhibition of the nuptial ring, is one of infidelity.⁴¹

In the end, though, the picture's story seemed the most salient feature of the work, and most reviews concentrated almost entirely on deciphering its narrative.

This task was made somewhat more difficult by the picture's dramatic ambiguity. A strong light shines on an attractive young woman in white, who leans forward in her arm, her entwined arms stretching out to the man seated opposite her in the window seat. He hugs one arm tightly to his chest, as the other hand grasps and covers his face in a gesture of extreme emotion. As in the Rothenstein, we see a dramatic moment of confrontation and emotion, but the details of the situation are unclear. The viewers' interpretative task was complicated by the dramatic changes in the social meanings of marriage and female sexuality since Egg exhibited *Past and Present*, and at least some viewers wondered if it was the man who had "fallen." A writer for the society magazine *Truth* reported:

The longer one looks at the sickly-looking lady in the green arm-chair who is so earnestly talking to the agitated and attenuated gentleman in the Inverness cloak, sitting in the window seat, the more one wonders what the "Confession" is, and why it is being volunteered, and to whom it is being made. I have already heard these questions answered in half-a-dozen different ways.⁴²

This list of questions opens up a wide range of speculation: is it the man or the woman who has "sinned"? What was the nature of the transgression? Why is the guilty party now confessing? How will the confession be received?

In its narrative ambiguity and focus on topical questions of modern morality, the painting is an early example of a "problem picture." The term referred to ambiguous, and often slightly risqué, narrative paintings of modern life, which invited multiple, equally plausible interpretations. Adapting the conventions of Victorian narrative painting to a changed set of social conditions, the pictures posed morally, as well as narratively indeterminate "problems." Viewers responded enthusiastically, debating possible "solutions" at the Academy exhibition, in letters to the artists, and in newspaper competitions and the genre became a popular and much-publicized fad in the early years of the twentieth century. In the hands of John Collier, the foremost practitioner of the type, pictures such as *The Prodigal Daughter* (1903) and *The Fallen Idol* (1913) provoked debate about some of the most pressing social questions of the early twentieth century, including the nature of modern marriage and the rights of women. Collier identified himself as a feminist and a social liberal and his problem pictures were quite deliberate attempts to challenge social orthodoxy.⁴³ In the case of *The Confession*, such speculation about the couple's relationship might result in the assigning of guilt to the male rather than the female half of the couple, enabling an oppositional inversion of the "fallen woman" narrative. In the context of the "marriage problem" debate, Dicksee's painting offered opportunities for viewers to debate the meanings and flaws of contemporary marriage.

Such explicitly social re-evaluations, however, remain in the realm of speculation. The picture's psychological mood and dark tone seem to have dominated viewers' responses, and more than one review used the language of

psychology to describe the woman's state. She was described as a "woman of the svelt [sic] nervous possibly hysteric type" in the *Gentlewoman*, and "sick alike in mind and body" by the *Queen*. (It is interesting to note that these are both women's magazines.) Dicksee's painting was one of a cluster of pictures on the theme of confession around the turn of the century, including John Collier's *A Confession* (1902) and *The Sinner* (1904), and Albert Rutherston's *Confessions of Claude* (1901). While viewers might disagree about *who* was confessing in such pictures, they were rarely confused as to the nature of the sin, which was always sex. As philosopher Michel Foucault has argued, the nineteenth century's supposed "repression" of sexuality can be more fruitfully understood as productive discourse identifying sexuality as the key determinant of identity, a "secret" that defines its owner.⁴⁴ Narrative ambiguity allowed for speculation about the social meanings of sex but in the end such pictures may be even more constricting than the Victorian "fallen woman" narrative, as they leave little scope for other forms of identity or emotional bond.

Conclusion

Art history is filled with tales of viewers who mistakenly invent stories to explain modernist or even abstract art. From the viewers who misread James McNeill Whistler's aesthetic *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl* (1861–1862) as an illustration of Wilkie Collin's novel *The Woman in White* or as a "fallen woman" to the cartoon satirizing Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* as an image of rush hour on the New York subway, the figure of the naive viewer imposing a prosaic linear narrative on an evocative or abstract work is a potent source of humor.⁴⁵ What makes this trope so attractive and so persistent? What does it tell us about the role of narrative in modern art and art theory? Its most obvious function is to establish both a public investment in narrative and a critical disdain for it. In other words, narrative marks a division between the popular and the expert understanding and appreciation of art.

Mapped against a history of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art, this critical apparatus serves to divide a Victorian tradition of popular narrative painting from a modern tradition of formal experimentation. As a result, Victorian narrative painting – one of the most characteristic and popular forms of art in nineteenth-century Britain – is positioned as irredeemably old-fashioned, an impediment that sophisticated artists and viewers needed to overcome. Clive Bell's scathing interpretation of *The Doctor* (1891) by Luke Fildes is perhaps one of the most famous examples of this evaluation. Writing in 1913, Bell attacked the popularity of the picture of a professional doctor anxiously attending the sickbed of a working-class child: "it is worse than nugatory because the emotion it suggests is false. What it suggests is not pity and admiration but a sense of complacency in our own pitifulness and generosity."⁴⁶ Bell understands the emotional and even social functions of moralizing narrative essentially as modern scholars do, but he

judges it very differently. For him, it is a hypocritical kind of moralizing, and a degradation of the visual. Bell was one of the voices of the new critical standards of formalism, which identified successful modern art with a repudiation of narrative strategies and appeal, an appraisal intimately linked for many critics with a sense of the Academy audience as provincial and inartistic, in contrast to the sophisticated viewers who gathered in the more rarified spaces of the Grosvenor Gallery, the New English Art Club, or the Carfax Gallery. This reading of art history and aesthetic value exerted a powerful hold on historical perceptions of the aesthetic and social value of narrative painting, and continues to influence contemporary judgements and interpretations. Such a view, however, prevents us from seeing the oppositional or experimental possibilities of visual narrative, or acknowledging its many pleasures.

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