

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

Society of Dilettanti (act. 1732–2003)

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Society of Dilettanti (act. 1732–2003) was founded by a group of gentlemen who met each other in Italy while on the grand tour. Thus travel to Italy, and later Greece, became a requirement for membership. The word *dilettante* is of Italian origin and its adoption by the society to refer to a lover of fine arts is its first recorded use in English.

Early organization and membership

One of thousands of British associations that were formed during the Enlightenment, the Dilettanti originally met for informal conversation in London during the first years of the society's existence. The probable initiators of the society, in 1732, were Gustavus Hamilton, second Viscount Boyne (1710–1746); Charles Sackville, earl of Middlesex; Sir Francis Dashwood, later eleventh Baron Le Despencer; Joseph Spence; Sir James Gray; Sewallis Shirley (1709–1765); William Ponsonby, later Viscount Duncannon and second earl of Bessborough; William Denny; and William Strode (c.1712–1755), who had been intimates both in Italy and upon their return to England. Unlike many other organizations in clubbable eighteenth-century London, the Society of Dilettanti formalized its meetings by recording its rules, membership list, minutes, and finances. At the first recorded meeting, at the Bedford Head tavern, Covent Garden, on 6 March 1736, were present Thomas Archer (1695–1768), a Warwickshire landowner and politician, eventually first Baron Archer, who was the society's first recorded president; Lord Boyne; John Howe (1707–1769); Sir James Gray; Dashwood; George Gray [*see under* Gray, Sir James]; William Degge (b. 1698); Sir Hugh Smithson [*see* Percy, Hugh, first duke of Northumberland]; Sir Brownlow Sherard, fourth baronet (d. 1748); Thomas Whitmore (d. 1773); and Denny. On 14 April 1743 Horace Walpole provided a succinct summary of the group's early reputation in a letter to Horace Mann, claiming that the Society of Dilettanti was 'a club, for which the nominal qualification is having been in Italy, and the real one being drunk; the two chiefs are Lord Middlesex and Sir Francis Dashwood, who were seldom sober the whole time they were in Italy' (Walpole, *Corr.*, 18.211).

Early patronage

While Walpole's observation was astute, by mid-century the Society of Dilettanti became more than just a dining society. In the spirit of its mottoes—*Viva la virtù, Esto praeclara, esto perpetua, Grecian taste and Roman spirit*, and *Seria ludo*—the organization pooled its financial resources to effect a change in British taste. In the 1740s it sponsored Lord Middlesex's series of Italian operas in London. The group also began a tradition of giving its aesthetic nod of approval to select painters by inviting one to serve as 'painter to the society'. With this position often came

commissions by the Dilettanti and its members. Consequently the society came to own an esteemed collection of portraits and portrait groups by such artists as George Knapton, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Sir Thomas Lawrence, Frederic, Lord Leighton, John Singer Sargent, and John Ward. By the 1750s the Dilettanti and its members had developed a reputation for artistic patronage, and in 1755 Francis Hayman's committee of painters approached the Dilettanti for support in founding an academy of arts. While interested, the Dilettanti asked a high price for their support, including the right to choose half the academy's artists as well as the president. Thus the negotiations failed and Britain had to wait another decade for its academy, although, following the foundation of the Royal Academy in 1768, many presidents, including Joshua Reynolds, Benjamin West, Thomas Lawrence, and Charles Lock Eastlake, became members of the Dilettanti. Financial support for the Royal Academy began in 1775 when the Society of Dilettanti founded a scholarship to send students of the Royal Academy to study in Italy and Greece.

The Dilettanti met in a series of taverns, but during the eighteenth century active consideration was given to buying or constructing a building of their own, for use as meeting rooms and as a museum for their collection. A site in Cavendish Square was bought in 1747, but the plan had been abandoned by 1756 and the land was sold. The scheme was revived in 1761, when Dashwood approached George III for a site in Green Park, but this was unsuccessful. For most of the century, from 1757, the society met five times a year at the Star and Garter in Pall Mall.

The Dilettanti's most influential and longstanding interest began in the early 1750s when it sponsored James Stuart and Nicholas Revett's Athenian expedition to observe, record, and publish significant monumental remains of Greek antiquities. The society probably sponsored the Athenian project because of Stuart's success in publishing *De obelisco Cæsaris Augusti e Campo Martio nuperrime effosso* (Rome, 1750), and it elected Stuart and Revett as members *in absentia* in 1751. After spending nearly three years in Athens, where they met Robert Wood and James Dawkins, who were returning from Palmyra and Baalbek, Stuart and Revett resided in London to prepare the first volume of *Antiquities of Athens*. In addition to the support of its individual members, the Society of Dilettanti granted the two men 20 guineas to offset publication expenses in 1757. When offered to the European public in 1762 the book was widely hailed as a milestone in the history of architectural representation, despite the savage critiques of Julien-David le Roy and Johann Joachim Winckelmann. Le Roy, no doubt, was piqued by Stuart's footnotes, which were a series of unrelenting attacks on his *Les ruines des plus beaux monuments de la Grèce* (Paris, 1759). Winckelmann, on the other hand, was appalled by the great care and expense spent on what he considered minor Hellenistic monuments. Nevertheless, the Dilettanti were inspired by *Antiquities of Athens*, both in its subject matter and in its empirical precision. As a result the society decided to organize a similar expedition to the Ionian coast of Asia Minor in 1764.

The first Ionian expedition

The Ionian mission was the first archaeological expedition to Asia Minor to be organized and subsidized by any British institution. It was administered by a

committee consisting of James Caulfeild, first earl of Charlemont, Lord Middlesex, Wood, Lord Le Despencer, Thomas Brand (c.1717–1770), Sir James Gray, William Fauquier (1708–1788), Lord Bessborough, and James Stuart. Choosing an expert in inscriptions, Richard Chandler, author of *Marmora Oxoniensia* (1763); an expert in architecture, Nicholas Revett; and a talented topographical artist, William Edmund Pars, the Ionian committee set aside £2000 for the journey and resulting publications. The expedition studied the antiquities near their base in Smyrna, including the temple of Dionysus (Bacchus) at Teos, the city of Priene, and the temple of Apollo Didymaeus near Miletus. On their return journey to England they visited the Parthenon to perform some final measurements and drawings for the planned second volume of *Antiquities of Athens*, which the Dilettanti financed after Stuart's death in 1788. Additionally the group performed the first excavations of the temple of Zeus at Nemea. Pleased with the results, the Dilettanti published *Ionian Antiquities* in 1769. They also subsidized the companion volumes to *Ionian Antiquities*, Chandler's *Inscriptiones antiquae* (1774), *Travels in Asia Minor* (1775), and *Travels in Greece* (1776). Under the direction of Robert Ainslie, British ambassador to Constantinople from 1776 to 1792, the Dilettanti published the second volume of *Ionian Antiquities* in 1797.

The members of the Dilettanti could not have known the extent to which their patronage of these early expeditions to Greece would transform the society over the next century, but by the last decades of the eighteenth century the Society of Dilettanti had become the premier British institution for the study of classical antiquities. Consequently the focus of the society changed as new members, such as Sir William Hamilton, Richard Payne Knight, and Charles Townley, increasingly concentrated on archaeological interests. Hamilton's position as envoy to Naples, where many British and Irish travellers terminated their grand tour in the late eighteenth century, made him uniquely situated to recommend new members and new discoveries to the society. In fact one of his more interesting finds in the 1780s was a Neapolitan cult of the worship of Priapus. Before the Roman Catholic church ended the cult's practices in 1786 Hamilton described them in a letter to Sir Joseph Banks, secretary to the Society of Dilettanti. The Dilettanti published Hamilton's letter along with an essay by Knight in a volume entitled *An Account of the Worship of Priapus* (1787). Inspired by the analysis by Pierre-François Hugues, the self-styled Baron d'Hancarville of Hamilton's vase collection, *Antiquités étrusques, grecques et romaines* (Naples, 1767–76), Knight made fanciful conjectures about ancient sexual practices in religious rites. However, his thinly veiled critique of Christianity did not find a welcoming audience, and *Priapus* remains the Dilettanti's only foray into anthropology.

The early nineteenth century

As the Society of Dilettanti entered the nineteenth century the group—led by Knight, Townley, Philip Metcalfe (1733–1818), and Sir Henry Englefield—elected a new generation of members, including William Gell, John Bacon Sawrey Morritt, William Martin Leake, William Wilkins, Richard Colt Hoare, William Richard Hamilton, and George Hamilton-Gordon, fourth earl of Aberdeen. These men were as notable for their individual publications and collections as for their contributions to the

expeditions and printed works of the Society of Dilettanti. In 1808 the society published the first volume of *Specimens of Ancient Sculpture Aegyptian, Etruscan, Greek and Roman: selected from different collections in Great Britain*, which included a conjectural essay by Knight on the iconographical meanings of the sculptures. Influenced by the pioneering work of Winckelmann, Knight argued for the supremacy of Greek sculpture over Roman while employing Winckelmann's techniques of typological and chronological analysis. As with the Dilettanti's previous publications, the illustrations were studious representations of the original sculptures—far superior to Winckelmann's rudimentary images. All the sculptures came from the collections of Dilettanti, but the book was dominated by those of Townley and Knight, who soon thereafter bequeathed their antiquities to the British Museum. The Dilettanti published the long-awaited second volume in 1835, which included Knight's earlier essay, *An Inquiry into the Symbolical Language of Ancient Art and Mythology* (1818).

By 1812 the Society of Dilettanti decided to send a second expedition to Ionia and Attica to continue their earlier work. The second Ionian committee consisted of Aberdeen, Benjamin West, Sir Thomas Lawrence, Englefield, and Philip Yorke, third earl of Hardwicke. William Gell's topographical skills inspired the group to choose him as the expedition's leader. With him came the draughtsmen Francis Octavius Bedford (1784–1858) and John Peter Gandy [*see* Deering, John Peter], who were elected members on their return to London. Once again the group measured the antiquities at Priene and the temple of Apollo Didymaeus. This expedition also performed the first excavations of the sanctuary of Nemesis at Rhamnous and the temple of Demeter at Eleusis. The results from this second expedition were nearly left unpublished, and it was only through the prompting of Englefield's privately circulated *Report of the Committee of the Society of Dilettanti Appointed by the Society to Superintend the Expedition Lately Sent by them to Greece and Ionia* (1814) that enough funds were raised to produce the *Unedited Antiquities of Attica* (1817). In fact, under his prompting to follow the examples of the African Association and the Palestine Association by 'contributing essentially to the great cause of literature' (Cust and Colvin, 161), a second edition of *Ionian Antiquities* was published in 1821.

While the Dilettanti's minute books are silent on the matter, the 1808 and 1817 publications should be seen in light of the sale of the Parthenon marbles to the British Museum by Thomas Bruce, seventh earl of Elgin. For more than a decade Knight had used every resource at his disposal to discredit the Parthenon marbles as Roman copies of Phidias's originals, and it was probably under his influence that Elgin's 1803 overtures to the Dilettanti were not reciprocated. Englefield and Lord Aberdeen followed Knight's lead, while Morrith, Hamilton, and Benjamin West dissented. In effect, the call to publish the second Ionian expedition's findings took place in a period of friction among members, which may explain Englefield's plea for unified support of their publishing programme. In the end the British Museum purchased the Parthenon marbles, and the Dilettanti gave the museum the two pieces of the Parthenon frieze that it had acquired during the first Ionian expedition. Knight's reputation was much discredited, and after his death the Dilettanti offered

membership to Elgin, which he politely declined. Nevertheless, the Society of Dilettanti remained British leaders in the field of classical archaeology for some time.

The mid- and late nineteenth century

Under the leadership of Hamilton, who served as secretary from 1830 to 1859, the Dilettanti pursued an active agenda. The group subsidized the publication of Gell's *Topography of Rome and its Vicinity* (1834). In 1835 the aforementioned second edition of *Specimens* was published. During the same year the society organized the subscription for the British Museum's purchase of Peter Oluf Brönsted's so-called 'bronzes of Siris', a pair of reliefs from a fourth century BC cuirass. The following year the society published Brönsted's archaeological essay *The Bronzes of Siris* (1836). The third volume of *Antiquities of Ionia* found its way into print in 1840. And in 1846 the Dilettanti funded Francis Cranmer Penrose's expedition to measure the Parthenon. Penrose's research proved that James Pennethorne's theory about curvature in ancient architecture was empirically verifiable. Structures that appeared straight in the Parthenon, such as the stylobate, were in fact slightly curved. The Dilettanti initially published his findings as a privately circulated essay in 1847, producing the final work as *An Investigation of the Principles of Athenian Architecture* in 1851. In 1854 the Dilettanti appointed Charles Thomas Newton as correspondent to the Dilettanti, and from his position as British vice-consul at Mitylene he consistently updated the society on the latest excavations in the eastern Mediterranean. When Newton began the excavation of the mausoleum of Halicarnassus in 1857 Penrose, under instructions from the society, prepared to fund the appointment of Richard Popplewell Pullan as an assistant to Newton. However, the British government sent Pullan on its own accord, and no society funds were necessary.

During the second half of the century the British government began sponsoring archaeological excavations of ancient Greek sites. Thus the need for the Dilettanti's financial support of archaeological projects began to wane. Nevertheless, the society funded several publications and one more expedition to Ionia as its members proctored the transformation of archaeology into a professional discipline. The third Ionian expedition arose following the publication of Charles Robert Cockerell's *The Temples of Jupiter Panhellenius at Aegina and of Apollo Epicurius at Bassae* (1860), which the author dedicated to the society. The Dilettanti purchased seventy copies and soon thereafter the members decided to subsidize a third expedition to Ionia to finish the work that they had begun at Teos, Didyma, and Priene. The expedition was again managed by a committee, this time including John Cam Hobhouse, Baron Broughton; Thomas Baring; Anthony Panizzi; Cockerell; Penrose; and William Watkiss Lloyd. Between 1863 and 1869 the Dilettanti sponsored Richard Pullan's excavations of the temple of Bacchus at Teos and the temple of Apollo Smintheus and the temple and temenos of Athena Polias at Priene. In the 1870s, while the society raised enough money to publish the fourth volume of *Antiquities of Ionia*, the group did little more than hold its regular meetings. The exception to this was the 1870 donation of over two hundred excavated artefacts—inscriptions, statues, pottery, and tools—to the British Museum's department of Greek and Roman antiquities, which at the time was under the direction of C. T. Newton. In 1881 the Dilettanti finally

published the fourth volume of *Antiquities of Ionia*, with the assistance of John Ruskin's substantial gift of £200. When the society funded Penrose's revision of *The Principles of Athenian Architecture* in 1888 it was probably clear to most members that professional institutions would soon eclipse the Dilettanti in the financial sponsorship of archaeology. However, not surprisingly, several of the leaders in the foundation of the British schools at Rome and Athens, the Cambridge Museum of Classical Archaeology, and the Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies were already prominent members of the Dilettanti. Among them were W. R. Hamilton, F. C. Penrose, C. T. Newton, Sir Sidney Colvin, and George Macmillan (1855–1936).

The twentieth century and after

The twentieth century saw the Society of Dilettanti go through periods of active patronage of art and archaeology and lulls when the membership preferred individual patronage. The Dilettanti began the century by helping to fund the British School's excavations at Naucratis in Athens and Praesis in Greece as well as Sir Arthur Evans's research at Knossos. In the 1910s the society's reorganization of its collections led to the donation of its archival material to institutions such as the Royal Institute of British Architects and the Victoria and Albert Museum, as well as the destruction of other records and the sale of other items in the collection to individual members. While William Richard Lethaby was preparing for the RIBA an exhibition on the society's donation in 1912 he discovered sixty plates from Pullan's expedition that had been left unpublished. Under the guidance of Sir Cecil Harcourt-Smith and Sir Thomas Graham Jackson, the Dilettanti published the fifth volume of *Antiquities of Ionia* in 1915. To celebrate its bicentenary in 1932 the Dilettanti produced a history of the society as a supplement to its previous history written by Lionel Henry Cust and edited by Colvin (1898; 2nd edn, 1914). However, during the middle years of the century the Dilettanti remained inactive on the public stage. In fact even the position of painter to the society fell into abeyance between 1925 and 1953. Credit for reinvigorating the society must be given to Sir Brinsley Ford, who became joint secretary with Patrick Plunket, seventh Baron Plunket (1923–1975), in 1972. Ford was responsible for establishing the Society of Dilettanti Charitable Trust in November 1977, which returned the society to the public cultural stage through the funding of classical archaeology and the collecting of art.

The Society of Dilettanti has remained an all-male club, as it had been throughout its history, although its by-laws do not proscribe female membership. Since 1975, when it moved from the St James's Club (where it had met from 1922), it has held five meetings each year at Brooks's Club in London. Its numbers were limited to sixty, with six honorary members. The Society of Dilettanti has made regular donations through its charitable trust to the British schools at Rome, Athens, and Ankara, as well as special donations to a number of other museums and archives, and has revived an eighteenth-century tradition through the Normanby Fund, founded by Oswald Constantine John Phipps, fourth marquess of Normanby (1912–1994), in 1984, for 'those who ... would be most likely to benefit from visiting classical sites and museums in Greece, Italy, or the Eastern Mediterranean' (Society of Dilettanti Charitable Trust, *Annual Report*, 2003, 2).

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Archives LMA · priv. coll. · S. Antiquaries, Lond.

Likenesses C. A. Tomkins, mezzotint, mid 19th cent. (after Sir J. Reynolds), NPG [*see illus.*]

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