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**'MERE GOOD TASTE IS NOTHING ELSE BUT  
GENIUS WITHOUT THE POWER OF EXECUTION':  
ARTISTS AS ARBITERS OF TASTE, 1792-1836**

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## Abstract

During the transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, a sea change took place in the British art world that reflected a general shift in attitude towards the arts. Artists redefined their social status and fought for their criteria to be taken into account, acquiring a new, influential position within the artistic circles, in which the authority of theorists and connoisseurs, amateurs whose approach to the work of art was that of the collector and critic, never the creator, had been so far undisputed.

Influenced by new social theories and powerful contemporary cultural movements, and motivated by the success of artists like Hogarth and Reynolds and of the Royal Academy, artists felt encouraged to stand up for and secure their artistic authority. Thus, the increasingly widespread interest in art and aesthetics throughout the eighteenth century culminated in the realisation, on the artists' part, of their importance in such matters; subsequently, the long-debated issue of the dignity of the artist was brought to the forefront and became key in the artistic discourse of turn-of-the-century Britain.

We can trace the evolution of the discourse on the authority of artists from Reynolds's idea that a painter can be a gentleman despite being a painter, to Ruskin's humble acceptance, in the prologue to the first volume of *Modern Painters*, of the necessity to have a practical knowledge of art in order to understand it. It was a veritable revolution in art theory, a 'second renaissance' for the figure of the artist, who until then had been considered a mere craftsman. A whole tradition was being challenged, and the new language artists employed to advance their ideas was not that of theory, but practice.

# **'MERE GOOD TASTE IS NOTHING ELSE BUT GENIUS WITHOUT THE POWER OF EXECUTION': ARTISTS AS ARBITERS OF TASTE, 1792-1836**

"What is art?" and "What makes a work of art a masterpiece?" are among the most intriguing questions that art historians and writers on art have formulated throughout history. These are, and always have been, enormously problematic and hotly debated questions. The intention of this dissertation is to explore one place and time when two distinct sets of individuals – artists themselves, and those who saw themselves as experts on art – tried to give definitive answers to those questions: the English art world of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

Another important question that was being asked at the time was "Who has the authority to determine what is good art?" Artists, despite being obviously at the centre of artistic creation, had been secondary in the process of evaluation of a work of art or artistic movement. Alberti and Leonardo had tried to redress this state of affairs in the Renaissance, and though central to the practice of painting in France, the Académie did not hold undisputed sway when it came to theory. That part of the aesthetic experience has been traditionally ascribed to theorists, art historians and art critics. But in England at the turn of the nineteenth century, artists contested this traditional *status quo*, and fought for their authority in art to be recognised above that of amateurs and theoreticians, based on the premise that those who do not practise art cannot criticise it.

The quote on the title, by the doctor, poet and friend of painters John Armstrong, alludes to this idea; that practitioners of art are the most qualified to

make judgments on art, and that connoisseurs and critics, who discuss art without possessing first-hand knowledge of that practice, will be forever relegated to a secondary role of mediators between creators and the public, no longer the leading authorities in art and taste. This principal role was appropriated by artists.

But the reasons and arguments adduced by artists as theoretical background to their claims were plagued by contradictions, and lacked a sound base. Eventually artists lost their self-appointed leadership, so that today, two hundred years later, we still can ask ourselves the question: Who decides what is good art?, and be sure of only one thing: that, despite their increasing importance in the process, it is not artists alone who do.

That is the purpose of this thesis.

## Introduction

Between the foundation in 1768 of the Royal Academy of Art and the investigation by a Parliamentary Committee into the finances and very *raison d'être* of the Academy, in 1835-6, the English art world experienced a veritable revolution, no less astonishing and profound than the ones taking place in almost every other field of human activity - politics, society, culture - in Western Europe at the time.

Throughout the eighteenth century, Europe had moved towards a homogenization of its culture under Enlightened ideals, spreading a set of shared values and rules that allowed for emulation and polite competition between nations. Academies were born of this spirit of standardisation and regulation. The idea that interest in the arts could benefit the nation as a whole, not only the wealthy owners of particular works of art, permeated Enlightened culture and led to the establishment of what can only be termed "art worlds" in the major European capitals, with private as well as public institutions cooperating, in theory at least, for the promotion of art and the common good. As an instance, the institutionalisation of art in France - with the creation of the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture and the Salon - was generally received as a positive impulse that had helped refine the French people and given the country a decisive advantage over its European competitors. The character of the Académie would shift, but its importance would not be diminished, during the Revolution and the Napoleonic age, when its capacity to produce and promote art with political content was adapted to the new circumstances and exploited accordingly.

However, towards the end of the century, as new ideas on art as a vehicle for expression of individualism and personal emotions were spreading

throughout Europe, the role of Academies in general came under scrutiny: their notion that art should have a civically useful function, and the paradigms they shared, began to be seen as artificial and constricting.<sup>1</sup>

In Britain, the way that art was received and the structure of the art world itself were in a state of flux. Art was becoming increasingly popular; as John Brewer, David Solkin and others have shown, thanks to the new methods of dissemination the presence of art in society at the end of the eighteenth century was greater than ever before.<sup>2</sup> Previously luxury items, such as prints after famous paintings, became more affordable; this allowed a bigger percentage of the population to own reproductions of works of art for private viewing. At the same time, new display and exhibition spaces, such as, from the mid-eighteenth century, the Society of Artists, the Foundling Hospital and Vauxhall Gardens, as well as, later on in the century, commercial ventures like Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery, ensured that paintings were no longer confined to the private collections of the nobility, to which few had access, and became instead available for viewing by a wider cross-section

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<sup>1</sup> For the shifts and currents in the art world during the transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century in Europe in general, and in France in particular, see Matthew Craske, *Art in Europe 1700-1830: a history of the visual arts in an era of unprecedented urban economic growth* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Albert Boime, *Art in an age of Revolution 1750-1800, A Social History of Modern Art, I* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987); and *Art in an age of Bonapartism 1800-1815, A Social History of Modern Art, II* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990); and Thomas E. Crow, *Painters and public life in eighteenth-century Paris* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> John Brewer, 'Cultural production, consumption, and the place of the artist in nineteenth-century England', in *Towards a modern art world: studies in British art I*, ed. by Brian Allen (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), pp.7-25; and *The pleasures of the imagination. English culture in the eighteenth century* (London: HarperCollins, 1997). David Solkin, *Painting for money: the visual arts and the public sphere in eighteenth-century England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995). See also Iain Pears, *The discovery of painting: the growth of interest in the arts in England, 1680-1768* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 1988).

of the public. The Royal Academy would be the most successful of these exhibition venues, as we shall see in detail in chapter 1. As one anonymous author put it, 'It may be safely asserted... that even from the *first*, and that but a few years ago, down to the Present Exhibition, the Painting Art has been brought forward half a century, in comparison with its wonted crawling progress, before that animating Æra.'<sup>3</sup>

As we shall see below, attending the Academy's annual Exhibition was a fashionable and enormously popular pastime for anyone with a modicum of disposable income desiring to see, to be seen, and perhaps only marginally, to admire the paintings on display and to be educated by them. The increase in numbers of those who had wealth and leisure to devote to the arts is intimately connected with the expansion of the moneyed classes, itself consequent on commercial growth, imperial expansion and the development of new industries. The exhibition *Art on the Line* (Courtauld Institute of Art, October 2001 - January 2002) recreated the look of these exhibitions in the galleries used by the Royal Academy at Somerset House after 1780.<sup>4</sup> (fig. 1)

After a lull during which the Royal Academy and the Society of Artists were the only dedicated exhibition venues in London, the first decades of the nineteenth century saw a rapid increase in the number of such places. As we will see in more detail in chapter 1.1, the growth in physical size of the English art world followed parallel lines to the general interest in art experienced during this time. Smaller

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<sup>3</sup> Anon., *Le Pour et le Contre. Being a Poetical Display of the Merit and Demerit of the Capital Paintings Exhibited at Spring Gardens*, London, 1767, iv. Quoted in Solkin, *Painting for money*, p. 247.

<sup>4</sup> *Art on the line: the Royal Academy exhibitions at Somerset House, 1780-1836*, ed. by David H. Solkin (exh. cat.) (New Haven & London: Yale University Press for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and the Courtauld Institute Gallery, 2001).



societies that complemented the functions of the Academy, either in London or in provincial towns, and particularly the British Institution, to which chapter 3 is devoted, made art decidedly part of cultural life in its broadest sense.

Art, therefore, slowly evolved throughout the eighteenth century from a luxury for a minority to a product of mass consumption; something to which money and leisure time could be devoted to by a large percentage of the population. Along with this transformation of art into a product to be consumed, the public for the arts were also being redefined as consumers. Exhibitions were points of sale; the whole art world experienced a sea change in its character. This, as Oskar Bätschmann has pointed out, is the most important change to have taken place in the art world since the Renaissance.<sup>5</sup>

Crucially, with the advent of newspaper and periodical art criticism, which emerged very soon after the first exhibitions at the Society of Artists, the names, lives, and careers of artists became public knowledge. Suddenly they found themselves in the public eye, a situation that many had purposefully sought and that was subsequently exploited in their own favour. This was in part made possible by the relatively rudimentary state of press criticism at the time; unlike earlier writers on art, who had generally been connoisseurs, most reviewers at the turn of the century were not experts in art, and the figure of the professional, authoritative newspaper critic did not exist yet. As long as this situation lasted, artists were more or less unchallenged. Maura Barnett has researched extensively

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<sup>5</sup> Oskar Bätschmann, *The artist in the modern world: the conflict between market and self-expression* (DuMont and Yale, 1997), p. 9.

art reviews in the British press and the figure of the early art critic in the press during a period roughly corresponding with the one in this study.<sup>6</sup>

Artists took the wider exposure of art as an opportunity to improve the social status of their profession. Influenced by new social theories and powerful contemporary cultural movements which exalted artistic genius, and motivated by the success of the Royal Academy and of eighteenth-century artists as Hogarth and Reynolds, artists felt encouraged to strive for their recognition as arbiters of taste, and to defend their authority in art and art-critical matters; their power to dictate the rules of what constituted good art. As a consequence of the neoclassical disposition of the Academy, which regarded itself as the torch-bearer of the humanistic tradition, its members were encouraged to look up to Renaissance artists as role models, not only in their artistic practice, but also in their campaigning for recognition of the dignity of their profession. As we will see in chapter 1.3, in the past, artists such as Michelangelo or Raphael had established a precedent in their relations with their patrons, virtually creating the figure of the authoritative artist which academicians were eager to emulate.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the increasingly widespread interest in art and aesthetics throughout the eighteenth century culminated in the realisation, on the artists' part, of their own

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<sup>6</sup> Maura Barnett, 'The contemporary response to British art before Ruskin's *Modern Painters*: an examination of exhibition reviews published in the British periodical press and the journalist art critics who penned them: from the late eighteenth century to 1843' (PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Discussing the grand style, Reynolds said in 1772 that when 'artists and patrons of the arts' learn to cultivate and appreciate 'those higher excellencies', '[Michelangelo's] fame and credit will encrease with our encreasing knowledge. His name will then be held in the same veneration as it was in the enlightened age of Leo the tenth'. Reynolds, 'Discourse V', *Discourses on art*, ed. by Robert R. Wark (New Haven & London: Yale University Press for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 1997 (1<sup>st</sup> edn. 1959), pp. 82-83.

importance in such matters. Subsequently, the long-debated issue of the dignity of the artist was brought to the forefront and became key in the artistic discourse of turn-of-the-century Britain.<sup>8</sup>

The Royal Academy, which signalled the eruption of art into the mainstream English cultural arena, functioned as a key tool for painters to strengthen their position. Its status as a royally-sanctioned institution conferred on the Academicians an unprecedented distinction, and a much sought-after air of officialism that worked to their advantage in the fiercely competitive London art world. However, as only the Royal Academicians enjoyed this elevated status, other less fortunate artists, such as the members of smaller societies, and especially the practitioners of branches of the arts not considered exalted enough to be a part of the Academy, such as engravers, bitterly resented those privileges. The role of art institutions in the British art world has been explored at length by Peter Funnell in two essays, in which he presents a comprehensive view of the debates on art and about academies and artistic institutions in the first third of the nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> However, the earlier period, and the rise of artistic institutions, has not been studied in depth, and I aim to focus on that key moment in the history of British art.

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<sup>8</sup> For the issue of the image of the artist from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century, see Rudolf and Margot Wittkower, *Born under Saturn: the character and conduct of artists* (London: Weidenfeld, 1963); Gabriele Guercio, 'The identity of the artist: a reading of monographic studies devoted to the Old Masters in the nineteenth century' (PhD thesis, Yale University, 1995); and Carl Goldstein, 'The image of the artist reviewed', *Word & Image*, 9:1 (January-March 1993), pp. 9-18. Goldstein points out (p. 14) that this image is surprisingly coherent since the Renaissance.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Funnell, 'William Hazlitt, Prince Hoare, and the institutionalisation of the British art world', in *Towards a modern art world: studies in British Art I*, ed. by Brian Allen (New Haven and London: Yale University Press for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 1995), pp.145-156; and 'The London art world and its institutions', in *London - world city, 1800-1840*, ed. by Celina Fox (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 154-166.

This change in the way people looked at art, and particularly at artists, is inextricably connected with new aesthetic and philosophical ideas, themselves part of the contemporary social and political trend to question traditional authority and to elevate the private individual above the community of the public. The exaltation of artistic genius as a phenomenon above criticism and even common understanding was a defining characteristic of culture at the turn of the nineteenth century. The figure of the “genial” artist had been acknowledged in earlier artistic traditions; but its nature and, crucially, its perception by the new public and the new breed of art critic, evolved radically during the period covered by this dissertation. Kay Dian Kriz has investigated the nature of Genius, which, she argues, has more to do with social and political interests than with the mystical concept of the artist as sublime creator.<sup>10</sup>

Late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century art had strong links with nationalism, in itself another feature characteristic of the period, when Britain was immersed in the Napoleonic wars. All across the art world, from the exhibition at the Royal Academy of grand-style pieces that celebrated episodes of British history, to jingoistic caricatures such as Gillray’s, poems and periodical art reviews enthusing patriotic values in native painting, art served as a vehicle for the articulation and redefinition of Britishness.<sup>11</sup> This definition was implemented

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<sup>10</sup> Kay D. Kriz, *The idea of the English landscape painter: Genius as alibi in the early nineteenth century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 1997), p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> For an exceptional insight into the most notable political and social caricaturist of the time, see Richard T. Godfrey, *James Gillray: the art of caricature* (exhibition catalogue; London: Tate Gallery, 2001). For the manipulation of cultural forms to convey ideology, see R.E. Spencer, ‘J.M.W. Turner and the patriotic response in Britain to the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars c. 1790-1829’ (PhD thesis, University of London, Birkbeck College, 1992).

mainly by establishing a set of oppositions with the art of the Continent, particularly France, whose earlier Académie des Beaux-Arts had functioned in many senses as a model for the English Royal Academy. At the French Académie, thanks to the support received by the institution from the French crown since the seventeenth century, history painting had a place in the art world it lacked in Britain.<sup>12</sup> This prompted the Royal Academy to expect and demand official support for this branch of the art, which was regarded as the noblest, despite it not being the most marketable one, as will be seen later. The similarities the Academy shared with its French counterpart played an important part in the attacks it suffered during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic periods, as will be seen.

Despite the history of successes for the Academy and artists in general in the last decades of the eighteenth century, Reynolds's death in 1792 marks the beginning of a decline. Unable to maintain the standard achieved under its first President, at the turn of the century the Royal Academy seemed to start losing some of its popularity. Michael Rosenthal has suggested that Reynolds's death had the effect of lessening the pressures of stifling academicism on British art<sup>13</sup>. However, painters such as James Barry, Henry Fuseli, John Opie and Martin Archer Shee among others, tried to maintain the status of academic art through their practice and written work, especially lectures on painting delivered following the

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<sup>12</sup> For the Académie des Beaux-Arts and its Salon, see Crow, *Painters and public life in eighteenth-century Paris*; and *The French Academy: Classicism and its antagonists*, ed. by June Hargrove (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1990).

For the situation elsewhere in Europe and America, see Craske, *Art in Europe 1700-1830*; William Vaughan, *German romanticism and English art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979); and *Art in bourgeois society, 1790-1850*, ed. by Andrew Hemingway and William Vaughan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> Michael Rosenthal, 'Landscape as High Art', in *Glorious nature: British landscape painting 1750-1850*, ed. by Katharine Baetjer (London: Zwemmer, 1993), pp. 13-30, p. 26.

Reynoldsian model. It is true that Barry was a somewhat marginal figure, particularly after his expulsion from the Academy; but Shee was President from 1830, and Opie held the Professorship of Painting during the first decade of the nineteenth century, and both upheld some of the basic tenets of Reynolds's ideology from their position of power within the Academy and the English art world. For instance, Opie exhorted his students to follow the eclectic programme recommended by Reynolds in his *Discourses*, studying and copying 'Michelangelo for epic grandeur of conception, Giorgione and Titian for their colouring, Correggio and Rembrandt for chiaroscuro, and Rubens for composition'.<sup>14</sup>

Painters such as Turner, Lawrence or Edward Dayes took Reynolds's ideas well into the nineteenth century, as we will see below, so that by the 1830s, four decades after the death of its first President, the Academy as an institution was still holding on to Reynoldsian classicism.

Not all academicians agreed with the official line on academic art, though. Piqued by his difficulties at becoming an Academician, and especially at the preference shown to Etty, who was regarded as a more elevated type of painter, Constable wrote to his friend Leslie 'I have heard so much of the higher walks of the art, that I am quite sick', and later on, 'Happy would it be for society and for the Academy if the "*Highminded highly honourable*"-clack of Mr [erased] could be still'.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> John Opie, *Lectures on painting delivered at the Royal Academy of Arts* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees & Orme, 1809), pp. 78-9.

<sup>15</sup> Letter to C.R. Leslie, January 1828, and 8 February 1828. *The letters of John Constable RA to C.R. Leslie RA 1826-1837* (London: Constable & Co., 1931), p. 5.

Outside the ranks of the Academy, but very close to it, Sir George Beaumont was a well-known connoisseur whose acquaintance with Reynolds strengthened his claims to authority. As Farington mentioned often in his *Diary*, Beaumont was a guest at many Academy dinners; he was very close to many Academicians, particularly Farington, and even was proposed as President once.<sup>16</sup> Beaumont regarded himself as the champion of Reynoldsian aesthetics; this was one basis of his controversy with Turner, as Van Akin Burd showed, although there were social and cultural issues implicit in their antagonism, as will be explored further in Part II.<sup>17</sup>

But if Reynolds's arguments were starting to lose currency during his lifetime, as the shifts of focal point in his *Discourses* show, at the turn of the century they were jarringly out of pace with more recent developments in art theory and practice. The Royal Academy was beginning to lose touch with the forefront of artistic innovation, and to remain solely as the guardian of past artistic tradition.

Another reason that needs to be taken into account for the loss of ascendancy of the Academy was the fact that it was strewn with internal feuds and strife. These reveal the heterogeneity of an institution made up of very different individuals, and the conflicts between theoretical and practical arguments, as Andrew Hemingway has shown.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the different political stances of its members were another

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<sup>16</sup> Beaumont was suggested as a successor to his friend Benjamin West. See part 4.1.

<sup>17</sup> Van Akin Burd, 'Background to *Modern Painters*: the tradition and the Turner controversy', in *PMLA*, v.74 (June 1959), pp. 254-67.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Hemingway, 'Academic theory vs Association Aesthetics: the ideological forms of a conflict of interests in the early nineteenth century', in *Ideas and Production*, 5 (1986), pp.18-42.

source of tensions. Many of the intrigues and scandals about internal academic politics reflected the party allegiances and conflicts of the academicians.

As we will see in Chapter 1.3, following the traditional hierarchy of genres, the Academy strongly favoured history painting. It is therefore not a coincidence that the second President of the Royal Academy was Benjamin West, an orthodox history painter. A great part of the status of painters was based on their ability to produce grand style pieces, which were regarded as the noblest class of painting, because of their moral and pedagogical connotations. However, most of the income of artists came from portraits and similar commissions. Despite their popularity with the public (for instance, the engraving done by William Woollett of West's *Death of Wolfe* was one of the most commercially successful prints ever published, and the income from it was the cornerstone of the fortune made by Alderman Boydell as a print publisher<sup>19</sup>), history paintings did not make much financial sense; private patrons generally did not buy historical pieces, and – as artists did not tire of remarking – the state did not fund adequately this eminently public form of art. History painting, traditionally associated with disinterested ideals of public good, was by its own nature (large-scale pictures dealing with serious topics that took artists a long time to produce) difficult to sell to the most usual type of patron in eighteenth-century England: private owners. Besides, as Louise Lippincott has expounded, investing in history painting was tainted with commercial associations; English history painting would only become a noble pursuit worthy of public funding by the mid-nineteenth century. In the late eighteenth century, though, new types of morally edifying art were in the ascendancy; they covered non-orthodox

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<sup>19</sup> Helmut Von Erffa and Allen Staley, *The paintings of Benjamin West* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 213.



subjects, such as British history, literary topics and even current affairs. One of the most notable practitioners of this new type of history painting was Joseph Wright of Derby.<sup>20</sup>

However, notwithstanding the evident popularity of styles theoretically considered as inferior, such as portraiture, or, increasingly, landscape and genre, the Academy did not budge in its ideological programme. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, the Professor of Painting would still regard history painting as the highest category of the art, and insist that general ideas were the 'true and genuine object of the highest style of painting'.<sup>21</sup> Benjamin Robert Haydon, who was an avowed and very vocal enemy of the Academy and yet shared with it most of his artistic ideology, strove throughout his life for history painting to be acknowledged as the most elevated category of art. On the occasion of his exhibiting two of his large historical works, *The resurrection of Lazarus* and *Christ's agony in the Garden*, in 1821, he prayed thus:

O God Almighty... grant they shew the nation the value, the beauty, the morality of the highest species of Painting, and rouse the Patrons and the Public to a clear and just sense of its defective support, and to a determination to devise and compleat some plan for its national encouragement.<sup>22</sup>

The Royal Academy (and by extension artists who, like Haydon, adhered to its artistic dogmas), by refusing to evolve and adapt to new theories on art, more

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<sup>20</sup> Louise Lippincott, 'Expanding on portraiture: the market, the public, and the hierarchy of genres in eighteenth-century Britain', in *The consumption of culture 1600-1800: Image, object, text*, ed. by Ann Bermingham and John Brewer (London and New York: Routledge, 1995 (1997 edn.), pp. 75-88.

<sup>21</sup> Opie, 'Lecture I', p.16 (16 February 1807).

<sup>22</sup> *The diary of Benjamin Robert Haydon*, ed. by Willard Bissell Pope (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), vol.I, p. 426 (20 April 1815).

appropriate to the social and economic conditions of the age, gradually lost contact with the world outside its academic halls. At the same time that it had expanded, the English art world had also fragmented into more specialised groups and societies, as will be explored in Part I.

Shortly after the turn of the century, the connoisseurs, those non-creative elements of the art world sneered at by the new generation of painters, reasserted their position with an idea that would act as a fetter to the artists' pretensions to power, and an effective competitor to the Royal Academy: the British Institution. Founded in 1805, although its purported aim was to help and complement the Academy, the effect the Institution had was perceived as devastating by most painters of the time: its Board of Directors, composed of prominent connoisseurs like George Beaumont or Richard Payne Knight, assumed the role of authorities and attempted to dictate rules to define "good" art. Part II will delve deeper into the foundation of the British Institution and the methods it used to acquire and strengthen its authority; this was achieved, mainly, by means of its exhibitions of Old Masters. Through them, the Institution usurped the Academy's self-imposed role of guardian of tradition, and at the same time endangered the Academicians' position at the *avant-garde*, because the takings from the Institution's exhibitions seemed to indicate that the public preferred Old Masters over modern art, making artists grumble about the didactic stance of the connoisseurs behind the scheme.

Once more, connoisseurs were directing the tides of taste: the relative peace that had existed between artists and connoisseurs since Reynolds's time was broken and a new, vicious war took place between the two factions, as acrimonious as the one waged by Hogarth half a century before. Beaumont, in particular, led a virulent

campaign from the early nineteenth century until his death in 1827 against J.M.W. Turner and his followers, particularly A.W. Callcott, whom he termed 'White Painters', in obvious reference to the brighter palette and white grounds that modern painters were employing in opposition to the mellow tones of the Old Masters he preferred. Beaumont regarded with suspicion the new style of painting, which abandoned classical practices, and termed it 'an influenza' and 'meretricious'; in his opinion, painters were making a mistake in abandoning the grand tradition of the past, letting themselves be lured by showy effects and inappropriate techniques: 'that harmony and modesty which distinguishes great masters is not seen, but crudeness and bravura are substituted'.<sup>23</sup> We will see more about Beaumont and his war with the White Painters in Parts II and III.

From his position as one of the leading connoisseurs of the time, Richard Payne Knight also fought against the pretensions of artists. As will be explored at length in chapter 4.2, Knight published anonymously two articles in the *Edinburgh Review*, ostensibly reviews of books on James Barry and Sir Joshua Reynolds, in which he undermined the traditional hierarchy of genres, attacking history painting - that is, attacking the very base of the artists' claims to authority: 'for,' he wrote, 'as to conveying religious, moral, or political instruction in pictures, it is the most absurd of all absurd notions'.<sup>24</sup> He also dismissed calls for state patronage, and generally regarded artists as craftsmen who ought to devote their time to painting, not to thinking or writing theory:

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<sup>23</sup> *The Diary of Joseph Farington*, ed. by Kenneth Garlick, Angus D. MacIntyre and Kathryn Cave (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978-98), 3 May 1803.

<sup>24</sup> [Richard Payne Knight], review of 'The works of James Barry, Historical Painter', *Edinburgh Review*, vol. XVI, no. 32 (August 1810), p.320.

The acquisition of theoretical science is naturally flattering and pleasing to an active, inquisitive mind; but it differs entirely from executive skill and ability; and, if allowed to absorb too much time and attention, will effectually prevent the obtaining it.<sup>25</sup>

Several authors have investigated the life and works of these two prestigious connoisseurs: Felicity Owen and David Brown's *Collector of Genius* is an excellent biographical study of Sir George Beaumont and of his relationship with artists, while Richard Payne Knight has been the subject of books by Michael Clarke and Nicholas Penny, Frank Messmann, and a thesis by Peter Funnell.<sup>26</sup>

Artists, infuriated, answered back at the connoisseurs' attacks, most notoriously with the publication in 1815 of the anonymous *Catalogue Raisonné* [sic] of *the Pictures now Exhibiting at the British Institution*. Under the pretence of reviewing that year's exhibition of Dutch and Flemish masters at the Institution, and of supporting the proclaimed disinterested aims of the Directors, the anonymous author of the *Catalogue* waxed satirical against the noxious preference of amateurs for 'Black Masters' over contemporary British painting, and their attempt to establish themselves – wrongly, in the artists' view – as the leading arbiters of taste. As a consequence, the atmosphere in these first decades of the nineteenth century was one of open warfare between some of the artists and certain (albeit the most publicly prominent) connoisseurs, and the arena where most of it was fought

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<sup>25</sup> [Knight], 'Works and life of Barry', p.316.

<sup>26</sup> Felicity Owen and David B. Brown, *Collector of Genius: a Life of Sir George Beaumont* (New Haven & London: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 198). *The arrogant connoisseur: Richard Payne Knight 1751-1824. Essays on Richard Payne Knight together with a catalogue of works exhibited at the Whitworth Art Gallery, 1982*, ed. by Michael Clarke and Nicholas Penny (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982). Frank Messmann, *Richard Payne Knight: the twilight of virtuosity*. The Hague: Mouton, 1974. Peter Funnell, 'Richard Payne Knight: aspects of aesthetics and art criticism in late eighteenth-nineteenth century England' (DPhil thesis, Oxford University, 1985).

was the periodical press and the publication of tendentious pamphlets. The artists' main argument was that connoisseurs, who did not practice art, could not understand it nor properly judge it. The narrow-minded, petty amateurs described by Haydon, among others (which are reminiscent of Hogarth's satirical descriptions of *cognoscenti* or *dilettanti*) soon became a commonplace, and as such appeared in caricatures. (figs. 2, 3)

A man of rank came up to me & said, 'Do you know, Mr Haydon, I think Titian's grounds were so and so.' As long as I listened he appeared pleased, but this was putting a poker into a powder barrel. I exploded, & poured forth all I had obtained from experience & reading. He looked grave, – hummed, – talked of the weather, & took off his hat with a 'Good morning'!

Haydon was not the most stable of individuals, but artists in general had little patience for connoisseurs. Reynolds had been notable for his ability to move in all social circles and for his manners; Haydon finished his anecdote with an exasperated 'I can't think how Reynolds managed those things'.<sup>27</sup>

The rivalry between the Royal Academy and the British Institution is fundamental for my narrative, because the Academy was a body governed by artists and aimed to forming future artists, whereas the Directors of the British Institution were specifically chosen among non-artists. In this sense, the Academy and the Institution act as symbols of their factions, respectively artists and connoisseurs, although in reality things were not as clearly cut: for instance, artists exploited the British Institution for their own aims, exhibiting there paintings that had not sold at the Academy. What these conflicts reveal is the existence of non-artistic arguments at stake, and the true economic and social reasons behind heated

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<sup>27</sup> *Neglected genius: the diaries of Benjamin Robert Haydon 1808-1846*, ed. by John Jolliffe (London: Hutchinson, 1990), p. 101 (13 August 1825).

but supposedly purely theoretical discussions. This state of affairs was quite new: until Reynolds's death, artists and connoisseurs had coexisted quite peacefully, probably because, according to the President's ideology, artists were trying to support their claims by imitating gentlemen. Reynolds's political radicalism, which permitted artists, as members of the intelligentsia, to climb through social rank, surely played a part in the artists' insurgence.<sup>28</sup>

The British Institution experienced a huge popularity, particularly its exhibitions of Old Masters, which together with the Institution's pedagogical attitude were the bone of contention with artists. As Thomas Lawrence complained to Farington, the Directors of the Institution were becoming '*Preceptors of Artists, & thereby acting in direct rivalry or opposition to the Royal Academy as a Seminary*'.<sup>29</sup> The crucial role played by the Institution in the creation of the National Gallery has been analysed by Jordana Pomeroy, while the Institution's success has been described by Andrew Hemingway and Peter Fullerton.<sup>30</sup> The success of the connoisseurs' enterprise alienated artists, and ultimately illustrated one important point: that by having adhered to traditional conceptions of art to defend their interests, they had removed themselves from the public they pretended to

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<sup>28</sup> John Barrell and Michael Rosenthal have studied the political implications of Reynolds's ideas: John Barrell, *The political theory of painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt: 'the body of the public'* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), pp.76-162; and Michael Rosenthal, *The art of Thomas Gainsborough: 'a little business for the Eye'* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 1999), p. 284.

<sup>29</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 10 November 1816.

<sup>30</sup> Jordana Pomeroy, 'Creating a national collection: the National Gallery's origins in the British Institution', *Apollo*, 148:438 (August 1998), pp. 41-49; and 'Collecting the past to create a future: the Old Masters, artists and patrons in early nineteenth century England' (PhD thesis, Columbia University, 1996); Peter Fullerton, 'Patronage and pedagogy: the British Institution in the early nineteenth century', *Art History*, 5:1 (March 1982), pp.59-72; Andrew Hemingway, 'Art exhibitions as leisure: class rituals in early nineteenth-century London', in *Towards a modern art world*, pp.95-108.

represent, especially those middle classes that had little to do with the classical concept of public advocated by the Academy. John Brewer has shown how culture developed and was redefined alongside commerce in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; the anxieties provoked by these changes are at the root of the artists' efforts to legitimate their authority. Brewer argues that, by employing theoretical arguments that distance art from commerce while at the same time benefiting from the higher demand for their work in the marketplace, painters 'embodied the contradictions inherent in the eighteenth century marketplace'.<sup>31</sup> It is these contradictions that undermined the strength of the artists' stance, eventually drawing the blueprint for the rift between academic and non-academic (avant-garde) art that characterised most of the nineteenth century.

How far removed artists had become from the public was made painfully evident in the mid-1830s, with the investigation by a Parliamentary Committee into the aims and achievements of the Royal Academy. This amounted to voicing in a formal environment the doubts that had been so long in everybody's minds regarding the usefulness of a state-funded academy of art. Haydon, a painter himself, became the spokesman for the anti-academic faction, which claimed that institutions such as the Academy acted as fetters and were in general negative for the progress of the arts.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> John Brewer, 'Cultural production, consumption, and the place of the artist in nineteenth-century England', in *Towards a modern art world*, p. 18.

<sup>32</sup> Quentin Bell, 'Haydon versus Shee', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. XXII (1959), pp. 347-58; and Thomas Gretton, "'Art is cheaper and goes lower in France": the language of the Parliamentary Select Committee on the Arts and Principles of Design of 1835-36', in *Art in bourgeois society, 1790-1850*, pp. 84-100.

Although this thesis is articulated around the dialectics between the artists' and the connoisseurs' discourses, the situation was far from being clearly bipolar. There were loose elements who did not hold entirely consistent views, such as Benjamin Robert Haydon, the anti-Academy but intensely pro-High Art painter; William Hazlitt, the anti-academic critic; and Richard Payne Knight, the connoisseur who, despite being a Director of the British Institution (which awarded premiums to artists), denied in his writings the need for institutional arts patronage. It was, in his opinion, 'well-meant but ill-directed benevolence', and amounted to no more than 'rewards to negligence, and premiums for failure'; 'the best charity to artists and their families, is timely and liberal employment to those who have capacity and industry for liberal art.'<sup>33</sup>

The positions of artists and connoisseurs intermingled, as was the case with Sir George Beaumont, who besides being a well-known connoisseur and patron, practiced landscape painting as an amateur. As for Haydon, a Wordsworth Trust exhibition devoted in 1996 to his life and work explored the volatile personality of this combative and quixotic painter and his conflictive relationships with his patrons, especially Beaumont. Their relationship has also been studied by Felicity Owen and David Brown in their biography of Beaumont.<sup>34</sup> The diaries written by Haydon between 1808 and 1846, recently re-edited by John Jolliffe, reveal his

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<sup>33</sup> [Knight], review of Northcote's 'The Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds'. *Edinburgh Review*, no. XLVI (Sept. 1814), pp.274-5.

<sup>34</sup> David B. Brown, "'Fire and Clay": Benjamin Robert Haydon, historical painter', in *Benjamin Robert Haydon, 1786-1846: Painter and writer, friend of Wordsworth and Keats*, ed. by David B. Brown, Robert Woof and Stephen Hebron (Grasmere: the Wordsworth Trust, 1996), pp. 1-24. For Felicity Owen and David Brown, see n.21 above.



consuming obsession with genius and greatness, as well as his contradictory stance on academic art and the Academy as an institution.<sup>35</sup>

These cases – Beaumont and Haydon – are treated, rather than as exceptions which confirm the rule, as examples of the rich and variegated amalgam of individuals which constituted the English art world of the time. Homogeneity was not the norm, not even within that seat of proposed artistic orthodoxy, the Royal Academy.

In exploring this complex situation and analysing the artists' emerging influence as opinion-makers and arbiters of taste, it will be maintained that painting technique played a role as important – if not more so – as the theory some of them wrote and taught. John Barrell has coined the expression 'political theory of painting', referring to the writings of late eighteenth-century artists like Reynolds, Barry or Fuseli, and to the frame of reference in which Prince Hoare, Martin Archer Shee and Haydon's thought can be placed: that in which moral art still had a *raison d'être*. Accordingly, I believe that we can speak of a political practice of painting: a way of deliberately using painterly technique to convey meaning, and to advance the cause of the artists in their conflict with connoisseurs. This use of technique is not alien to the later nineteenth century, but arguably started gaining momentum at just this point in time, more precisely in the practice of J.M.W. Turner and his followers. It was a style of painting which, in opposition to the classical style of painters such as Poussin or Claude, or those who followed the same principles, did not conceal the effort put into it, but rather revelled in its materiality. And it was

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<sup>35</sup> *Neglected genius: the diaries of Benjamin Robert Haydon, 1808-46*, ed. by John Jolliffe (London: Hutchinson, 1990).

this highly idiosyncratic manner that incensed Beaumont, and that bewildered critics, who, from around 1825 onwards, began to deprecate what they had previously praised. Sam Smiles has considered the relation between painterly manner and morals in the attacks on broadly-handled landscape painting written in the first third of the nineteenth century, and how the language of art criticism was permeated by decorum. Quoting Barrell, Smiles argues that this hostile reaction reveals worries due to the increasing blurring of boundaries between ethics and aesthetics.<sup>36</sup>

There is growing evidence, in writings on art of the period, of a preoccupation with what had been previously dismissed as purely mechanical issues. Barry and Haydon insisted on practice as the only possible means of attaining excellence in painting, an opinion that both Hazlitt and Knight shared; for them, theory alone could not make a great painter.<sup>37</sup> The opening of the Royal Academy Schools is proof of this newly institutionalized interest in technique, for previously painters had trained following the traditional workshop master-apprentice method. Still, the syllabus taught at the Schools was not comprehensive enough and by early nineteenth century technical training was haphazard and experimental, which

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<sup>36</sup> Sam Smiles, "'Splashers", "Scrawlers" and "Plasterers": British landscape painting and the language of criticism, 1800-1840', *Turner Studies*, vol. X, no. 1, (Summer 1990), pp. 5-11.

<sup>37</sup> James Barry, *Lectures*, in *Lectures on painting by the Royal Academicians*, ed. by Ralph Wornum (London, 1848), pp. 56-234; B.R. Haydon, *Lectures on painting and design* (London, 1844), pp. 2-3; Hazlitt, 'Fine Arts. Whether they are promoted by academies and public institutions' *Complete works of William Hazlitt*, 21 vols., ed. by P.P. Howe (London & Toronto: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1930-34), vol. XVIII, pp. 37-51 (originally published in *The Champion*, on 28 August, 11 September and 2 October 1814); [Knight], 'Works and life of Barry', pp. 293-326.

resulted in a rich variety of painting methods and idioms, but also, unfortunately, in diverse states of conservation for posterity.<sup>38</sup>

The preoccupation with painting technique was revealed in one of the inconsistencies of the Academy: its obsession with Venetian painting and colour. Despite Reynolds's public disparagement of the Venetians and their 'decorative manner' in his *Discourses*, he was highly ambivalent about their importance in art, for instance excluding Titian from the Venetian School, and modelling his painting technique partly in that of Titian.<sup>39</sup> As we will see, by the early nineteenth century there was general consensus that the British School, led by Reynolds, was a colouristic one. Linked with this equivocal attitude towards painting technique (and more specifically Venetian painting), one instance of the way that Academicians regarded technique was the infamous "Venetian Secret" episode of 1797, in which a great majority of members of the Academy were involved. Besides the scandalous connotations it had, which will be treated in Part III, the episode fundamentally illustrated the Academy's belief in art as an activity that can be reduced to formulas and taught, in contradiction with the current ideas on individual genius; and therefore demonstrated yet another inconsistency between Academic theory and practice.

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<sup>38</sup> Rica Jones, 'The artist's training and techniques', in *Manners and morals: Hogarth and British painting 1700-1760*, ed. by Elizabeth Einberg (London: Tate Gallery, 1987), pp. 19-28; and *Paint and purpose: A study of technique in British art* (London: Tate Gallery, 1999), introduction, pp. 9-16.

<sup>39</sup> 'When I speak of the Venetian painters, I wish to be understood to mean Paulo Veronese and Tintoret, to the exclusion of Titian; for though his style is not so pure as that of many other of the Italian schools, yet there is a sort of senatorial dignity about him, which, however awkward in his imitators, seems to become him exceedingly'. Reynolds, 'Discourse IV', *Discourses on art*, p. 67.

In the last chapter of this dissertation I intend to demonstrate that making technique evident in painting was deliberately opted for, as a way of asserting artistic authority: after having tried to construct a rhetoric that would justify their claims in the eyes of theorists, artists decided to let pictures “speak for themselves”. This in itself shows the unprecedented confidence they had in their status, for previous artists had tried to assert their authority by adopting the techniques of their opponents – namely, writing theory. Reynolds had tried to prove that artists could be gentlemen despite being painters, and did this by showing how an artist could think and write as well as a gentlemen amateur. But when in 1819, in his lengthy riposte to threats supposedly by Haydon, William Paulet Carey exclaimed ‘The proper language of a Painter is that of his pencil’<sup>40</sup>, it was evident that artists no longer needed to base their defence on written treatises. The authority that artists had striven to gain was no longer defended with words; the battlefield was the canvas, and artists used their brushes as weapons, no longer their pens.

The correspondence between painting technique and the politics of the art world has not been fully explored so far. The remarkably virulent conflicts of the late Neoclassical and Romantic periods between artists and non-artists, and the struggle for the recognition of the artists’ power in matters of aesthetics and taste, as we have seen, have been studied by several authors, such as Andrew Hemingway, Peter Funnell, Jordana Pomeroy, Kay Dian Kriz, Peter Fullerton and Ann Pullan. The links between new ideas in art and the general uprising against established authority are a well-known and studied phenomenon of the transition between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, the interactions between artists and

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<sup>40</sup> William Paulet Carey, *Desultory exposition of an anti-British system of incendiary publication...*, (London, 1819), p. 100.

connoisseurs during this period (once positions became entrenched, the conflicts between the factions turned into an all-out war) have been relatively ill studied, with most art historians focusing either on the so-called 'Golden Age' of British painting – the latter half of the eighteenth century – or on later figures, such as Constable or Turner. Moreover, the issue of painting technique as the material component of art (paint handling, brushwork, choice of methods aimed at accomplishing determined effects, and so on) and its intimate relationship to the sea changes taking place in the art world at large has not been sufficiently addressed.

Art historians often neglect the rich mine of meaning and information conveyed by painting technique in favour of theory under the guise of either philosophical and aesthetic ideas, or historical facts. However, the study of technique is central to a full understanding of the work of art as a phenomenon that exists in several planes; and the study of its theoretical dimension must go hand in hand with an appreciation of its material dimension. As a notable example, which will inform the third and last part of this study, the oeuvre of J.M.W. Turner (with reason famous for his unconventional techniques) cannot be properly understood without a thorough analysis of his practice. Turner's materials and techniques have been studied by conservators, notably Joyce Townsend of the Tate Conservation Department<sup>41</sup>, and have been treated by John Gage, among a handful of other

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<sup>41</sup> Joyce Townsend, *Turner's painting techniques* (London: Tate Publishing, 1993); *Turner's painting techniques in context*, ed. by Joyce Townsend and others (London: UKIC, 1995); and a number of articles in specialized journals (see Bibliography for a full list). Other studies of British painting technique are: Leslie Carlyle and Anna Southall, "No short mechanic road to fame": the implications of certain artists' materials for the durability of British painting 1770-1840', in Robin Hamlyn, *Robert Vernon's gift: British art for the nation 1847* (London: Tate Publishing, 1993), pp.21-6; Sarah Cove, 'Constable's oil painting materials and techniques', in *Constable* (exh. cat.) (London: Tate Gallery, 1991), pp.493-529; and Rica Jones, 'The artist's training and techniques', in *Manners and morals. Hogarth and British painting 1700-1760*. (London: Tate Gallery, 1987), pp. 19-28.

authors.<sup>42</sup> However, I am not aware that the connections between Turner's idiosyncratic methods and his position in the art world conflicts of his time have been fully explored. I hope that this thesis goes some way to help underline the close links between those fundamental aspects of the artistic experience: theory and practice.

### Thesis structure

The period analysed by this dissertation is bracketed between 1792 and 1837 because those key dates pinpoint, respectively, the beginning and end of a progressive decline in the Royal Academy's fortunes. Reynolds's death occurred at a time when the Academy's prestige within the English art world had reached its peak; 1836-7, the years of the Parliamentary Enquiry during which its usefulness and the very reason for its existence were questioned, mark the lowest point in the Academy's fall from public appreciation. 1836 was also the year when a young John Ruskin reacted angrily against the continued abuse in the periodical press of J.M.W. Turner, one of the most important English painters of the previous three decades. Those two circumstances seem to suggest that the advances gained in the late eighteenth century by artists in their recognition as liberal professionals had suffered a reversal, as critics and connoisseurs encroached on the artists' hard-won authority.

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<sup>42</sup> John Gage, 'Magilphs and mysteries', *Apollo*, v. LXXX (July 1964), pp.38-41; *Colour in Turner: poetry and truth*. (London: Studio Vista, 1969); and *Colour and meaning: art, science and symbolism*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999). A classic study of Turner's technique is to be found in C.F. Bell, *A list of the works contributed to public exhibitions by JMW Turner, RA*, (1901);

Part I will be devoted to a description of the situation at the Royal Academy after the death of its first President, Sir Joshua Reynolds. After three decades of success and plaudits, internal turmoil and external criticism only served to highlight its essential contradictions. The corpus of thought known as Academic Theory, in the form adopted by the Royal Academy, and its relationship with economic and social realities, will be expounded here, as well as the ideological positions of artists inside and outside the Academy. This highlights the inadequacy of academic ideology to deal with the new situations it was confronted with. The account of the different crises the Academy underwent will show that, under a façade of disinterestedness, most Academicians were no more than businessmen defending their interests.

This will be followed, in Part II, by an analysis of the artists' antagonists in the art world: the connoisseurs. Chapter 3 will be devoted to the British Institution, a body of connoisseurs set up in the early nineteenth century by influential connoisseurs with a view to aid artists and complement the functions of the Royal Academy, but which effectively functioned as the Academy's rival. The following chapter will deal with the two most important connoisseurs that attempted to snatch artistic authority out of the hands of painters, and were therefore regarded by artists as the enemy: Richard Payne Knight and Sir George Beaumont.

Beaumont serves as a link to the third and last part, for it was he who coined the expression 'White Painters' with which he pejoratively referred to Turner and his young followers. Here, apart from looking in more detail at the relationship

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however, modern analysis of painting techniques and materials, enabled by recent technological advances, have rendered the above obsolete in places..

between Beaumont and Turner, I will deal with technical matters, surveying Turner's techniques and comparing them to those of the Old Masters he aimed to emulate. Finally, the role of painting technique as a dialectical tool will be discussed, and an argument put forward about its use as a weapon by Turner and his contemporaries in their struggles with the connoisseurs.



## PART I

### AMBITION AND AMBIGUITY: THE ROYAL ACADEMY OF ARTS

The Royal Academy, if not the first institution devoted to the training of artists in England, was nevertheless the most successful to date, and as such attracted both lavish praise and intense criticism. During the first three decades of its existence, the Academy was the focus of the London art world, in its double role of educational institution for young artists and of exhibition venue of contemporary British art.

As the latter, it functioned both as an efficient marketplace for the artists who exhibited there, and as a cultural centre aimed at educating the public. There was an inherent contradiction in this stance, though, because the art that the Academy, personified by its President Sir Joshua Reynolds, tried to cultivate and encourage above more popular genres was history painting, regarded as essentially disinterested in its promotion of civic, ethical values and the common good. At the same time, the exhibition system was part of a market economy where artists had to make prospective investments and attract buyers in order to earn a living. This was a move that allowed artists to distance themselves from aristocratic patrons, who generally commissioned works, usually with very specific requirements. In this sense, artists seemed to be taking advantage of the new economic order, while championing traditional values in art and aesthetics.

This uneasy dual nature of the Academy – a place where artists acquired a humanistic education and professional prestige, and at the same time a marketplace – was there from the start. The difficult balance between the ideological

premises it was built upon and the realities of the outside world would be one of the causes for the Academy's eventual fall, later in the nineteenth century, from its prominent position at the vanguard of English art.

## Chapter 1

### "Honours, Privileges and Emoluments"<sup>1</sup>

From the remains of the works of the antients the modern arts are revived, and it is by their means that they must be restored a second time.<sup>2</sup>

The Royal Academy of Arts, as is the case with all cultural artefacts, was born out of the ideas of its time. The late eighteenth century witnessed changes in the social, political and cultural spheres which altered irrevocably the modern world; and yet, the English artists under Reynolds aligned themselves with an ideological system that had its origins in Enlightened ideas and Academic theory inherited from French Academicism and Renaissance Humanism. This ideology propounded an art that would reflect and advance high-minded moral and civic values, and transmit it to future generations.

Nevertheless, the English Academy did not simply transplant the French and Italian Academic ideals into British soil: it attempted to revise the theories they had been raised on, and to adapt them for the benefit of English artists. The Academy claimed for itself the part of leading authority in art, and stated that artists were fully able to define a canon; that is, to dictate the rules that decreed what could be regarded as good art. By doing this, following the example of their predecessors Leonardo and Le Brun, among others, artists, not connoisseurs, were to be in charge

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<sup>1</sup> Those were the benefits an Academician could expect from his membership, according to the text in their Diplomas. Quoted by Sidney C. Hutchison, *The history of the Royal Academy 1768-1968* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1968), p.53.

<sup>1</sup> Sir Joshua Reynolds, 'Discourse VI', *Discourses on art*, ed. by Robert R. Wark (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997 (1st edn. 1959)), p. 106.

of the process of codifying and conveying the great art of the Ancients to future generations.

In a way, the Academy succeeded, as we will see below. But in order to remain in the position it had placed itself, the Academy needed to transmit something more than ideas on art and aesthetics: an entire vision and understanding of the world, the *weltanschauung* that was the motivation and the grounds for the creation of an Academy of Art, had to be preserved. The opinions and ideas that the Academy attempted to perpetuate were declining in force at the same time that Reynolds was writing and delivering his *Discourses*, and contemporaries were aware of this. The justification for the existence of the Academy, therefore, was becoming increasingly questionable. The Royal Academy had tried to systematize and transmit an ideological system for the regulation of the future art world, but in the end it only became a recapitulation of the ideology and traditions of the past, on which the foundations of the Academy had been built, before the eventual victory of the Moderns over the Ancients.<sup>3</sup>

### **1.1 The Academy's background**

The political, economic, and social circumstances of England in the eighteenth century had a determining effect on the way the art world was structured at the time. After the political turmoil of the previous century, all fields of culture

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<sup>3</sup> As Robert Wark said in the Introduction to his 1959 edition of Reynolds's *Discourses*, the latter have been regarded by posterity 'as a sort of coda in which the principal themes of the movement are given a final statement before another ... subject is developed' (1997 edn., p. xxi).

experienced a general trend for order and stability, which, coupled with the scientific discoveries of the time and the stress on reason of Enlightened philosophy, resulted in a widespread organisation and taxonomical division of the sciences and the arts, as well as the segregation of the arts into their own discrete sphere.<sup>4</sup>

Politically, the relative weakness of the English monarchy, which meant that power no longer resided in a royal court, along with the lack of important institutional religious patronage, resulted in an art that did not have the propagandistic nature it had in Catholic countries such as France, with a strong, centralised monarchy, a court and a powerful religious hierarchy. Deprived of the traditionally leading promoters of painting, the Crown and the Church, English artists turned to private collectors as their main, if not only, source of patronage. Many writers on art - among them artists such as James Barry, Benjamin Robert Haydon or John Opie - pointed in their writings at this lack of state and church patronage as one of the main causes for the neglect of British art.<sup>5</sup>

As Haydon, forever preoccupied by the issue of patronage and the lack thereof, would say later in his *Lectures*:

In the arts, patronage is either public or private: if private, it leads to the production of such works as will suit the convenience of the individual; but if public, the works produced have been characteristic of the qualities of a

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<sup>4</sup> John Brewer, *The pleasures of the imagination. English culture in the eighteenth century* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), p. xvi.

<sup>5</sup> Likewise, there were calls for the relaxation of Protestant strictures against church decorations in order to promote English art; for instance William Hogarth's 'Autobiographical notes' in *The analysis of beauty*, ed. by J. Burke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), pp. 203, 209; Barry, *Works*, vol. II, p. 210; Reynolds, 'A journey to Flanders and Holland', in *The works of Sir Joshua Reynolds, Knight*, ed. by E. Malone (London, 1798), 2:339-342; and John Opie, 'Lecture III', *Lectures on painting*, ed. by Wornum (London, 1809), p.93.

nation ... When individuals are alone the patrons of art, it is considered little more than a mere matter of furniture! And owing to the destruction at our Reformation of all public works, art in England has hitherto been considered fit for nothing else, and continues to be thought so up to the present hour.<sup>6</sup>

Before the foundation of the Royal Academy, the situation of artists in the English art world can be described as secondary, and in some cases rather bleak. Although art was appreciated as a luxury item, artists did not share the prestige that their work enjoyed, and played only the minor role of purveyors of artistic products, on the same level as other artisans, such as cabinet-makers or coach-painters. As craftsmen, they were often given precise instructions by their patrons as to what themes they were to depict, and in what way. A notable instance of this can be found in the relationship between Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Shaftesbury, and the painter Paolo de Matteis. Shaftesbury dictated de Matteis his own iconographical and compositional programme for an allegorical picture whose subject was the Judgement of Hercules. As David Solkin has argued, he probably did the same when John Closterman painted his double portrait with his brother Maurice.<sup>7</sup>

The lack of a sound teaching system was in part blamed for this situation; as the brothers Samuel and Richard Redgrave put it, writing in the 1860s about the situation one century earlier:

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<sup>6</sup> Haydon, 'Lecture X', *Lectures on painting and design* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1846), vol. II, p.94.

<sup>7</sup> David H. Solkin, 'ReWrighting Shaftesbury', in *Painting and the politics of culture: new essays on British art, 1700-1850*, ed. by John Barrell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992 (1st edn. 1986)), pp. 81-2, n21; and the introduction to *Painting for money. The visual arts and the public sphere in eighteenth-century England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992). See also J.E. Sweetman, 'Shaftesbury's last commission', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. XIX (1956), pp. 110-116; and Edgar Wind, 'Shaftesbury as a patron of art', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. II (1938-9), pp. 187-8.

Our native artists were few and unknown – they were not supposed capable of competing with foreigners – they had only just begun to stir themselves to provide some established means of study, and some link of professional union: and in this effort they were joined by many whose art was chiefly developed in the meaner wants of manufacture.<sup>8</sup>

Painters were, therefore, at worst no more than skilled labourers who were paid to do a mechanical job. Gentlemen amateurs, collectors and connoisseurs, on the other hand, enjoyed the privileged status of arbiters of taste who carried out the mental, and, in humanistic nomenclature, “liberal” facet of art. The reason for this distinction was the deeply ingrained notion of the evils of commerce, which only allowed those with financial independence to possess and exercise taste. Monetary disinterestedness was seen as an essential requisite to be able to appreciate art properly; the opposite would compromise the integrity of one’s taste. Writers such as Shaftesbury, George Turnbull, and the artists Jonathan Richardson and Daniel Webb, subscribed to this ideology:

Wealth in a State is a Nuisance [sic], a poisonous Source of Vileness & Wickedness, if it is not employed by Publick Spirit and good Taste in promoting Virtue, Ingenuity, Industry and all the Sciences, & Arts, which employ Men’s noblest Powers and Faculties.<sup>9</sup>

Later on, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the same arguments could still be found: John Robert Scott wrote about how among the Greeks the arts were not considered a lucrative trade that gave artists fame and wealth, but ‘the ennobling occupations of the best-deserving citizens’, thereby justifying that in a

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<sup>8</sup> Samuel and Richard Redgrave, *A century of British painters* (London: Phaidon Press, 1947 (1st edn. 1866)), p.31.

<sup>9</sup> George Turnbull, *A treatise of ancient painting, containing observations...* (London, 1740), p. 124. Quoted by Stephen Copley, ‘The fine arts in eighteenth-century polite culture’, in *Painting and the politics of culture*, ed. by John Barrell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992 (1st edn. 1986)), p. 18.

society that aspired to Classical Greek values, leisured amateurs would be the most respected artists.<sup>10</sup> Artists, obviously, not only made a profit out of their art but actually made a living out of it. This automatically disqualified them from the ranks of gentlemen.

Paradoxically, though, art was a significant part of the education of gentlemen. It had been since the Renaissance and, as long as humanistic conventions were acknowledged, it would continue to be. Shaftesbury declared:

I am persuaded that to be a virtuoso (so far as it befits a gentleman) is a higher step to becoming a man of virtue and good sense than the being what in this age we call a scholar.<sup>11</sup>

Good taste, the ability to appreciate art properly, was a distinguishing feature of the upper echelons of society. To a certain extent it was regarded as an innate characteristic that was reinforced by education. A momentous element in the schooling of the youth of the nobility, which later on extended down the social scale to the upper middle classes, was the Grand Tour: an expedition to Continental Europe, with an emphasis on France, Switzerland, and above all Italy, which usually lasted between one and three years. The Grand Tour was aimed at familiarising the young aristocrats with the best examples of the art of the Old Masters in their original settings, with views to educating their taste. Although the young Tourists were regularly chaperoned by elder companions, whose function was to guard them as much as to serve as cicerones and tutors, the fact that the

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<sup>10</sup> John Robert Scott, 'A dissertation...', *Dissertations* (Los Angeles, 1954 (1st edn. 1804)), p. 176.

<sup>11</sup> Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks*, vol. 1, 1758, p. 96. Quoted in *The eighteenth century: art, design and society, 1689-1789*, ed. by Bernard Denvir. A Documentary History of Taste in Britain (London: Longman, 1983) p. 123.



Grand Tour usually disguised a spell of licentiousness and debauchery far from the vigilance of the family did not diminish its prestige as a decisive instrument for the shaping of the future ruling classes.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the pedagogical importance attached to works of art, and the prestige gained by gentlemen who were connoisseurs, generally artists themselves had no standing whatsoever in the art world beyond their banal, lacklustre role of producers. They were expected to produce at most only technical treatises, which were regarded as little more than recipe books in the same vein as Cennino Cennini's *Trattato della pittura*, and saw how their attempts to venture beyond that were discouraged.<sup>13</sup> The mixed reactions to Hogarth's *Analysis of Beauty*, which attempted to be a scientific treatise on form, are an example of how unusual it was for artists to write theory. Hogarth's defenders pretended that the connoisseurs were attacking him because he had dared to encroach upon their preserve; on 15 December 1754, a note appeared in *Gray's Inn Journal*, reporting how *The Analysis of Beauty* had been heatedly discussed by the denizens of Bedford Coffee House, and including a few lines that apparently had been penned by one of the witness of such debates:

Hogarth, thy fate is fix'd; the Critic Crew,  
The Connoisseurs and Dabblers in *Vertù*,

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<sup>12</sup> For the Grand Tour see: *Grand Tour: the lure of Italy in the eighteenth century*, ed. by Ilaria Bignamini and Andrew Wilton (London: Tate Gallery, 1996); Edward Chaney, *The evolution of the Grand Tour: Anglo-Italian cultural relations since the Renaissance* (London: Frank Cass, 1998); and *The impact of Italy: the Grand Tour and beyond*, ed. by Clare Hornsby (London: the British School at Rome, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Lipking explains how seventeenth-century art treatises tended to mix (with little success) philosophical views of art with technical instructions, an outstanding example of which would be Sir William Sanderson's *Graphice. The use of the pen and pencil; or, the most excellent art of painting* of 1658. Lawrence Lipking, *The ordering of the arts in eighteenth-century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), pp. 110-12.

Club their united Wit, in ev'ry Look  
Hint, shrug, and whisper, they condemn thy Book:  
Their guiltless minds will ne'er forgive the Deed;  
What Devil prompted thee to write and read?<sup>14</sup>

Hogarth was instrumental in the transformation of this state of affairs. Through the creation of the St. Martin's Lane Academy, and the introduction of contemporary art into public spaces of display such as Vauxhall and the Foundling Hospital, he was laying the foundations for further developments in the English art world that would result eventually in the recognition of the artists' authority.

However, before plans for a professional association of artists were even discussed, art as a remunerated occupation was seen as the province of labourers; and artists were tainted with the mechanicity and meretriciousness of those who had to work to earn their daily bread. On the other hand, connoisseurs exercised their taste from a purely disinterested position. Art received its stamp of approval from the discerning audience; in other words, the ones with authority on art were those who received it, rather than those who produced it. Artists, therefore, were faced with this apparent contradiction: art helped to define what a gentleman was, but they, as practitioners, could not be gentlemen.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted by Ronald Paulson, *Hogarth* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), Appendix G, 'The critical reception of the Analysis of Beauty', pp. 495-6. See also Joseph Burke, *Hogarth and Reynolds: a contrast in English art theory*, The William Henry Charlton Memorial Lecture (Oxford: Oxford University Press, and London: Humphrey Milford, 1943).

<sup>15</sup> Some artists were quite content with this status quo. Gainsborough wrote in a letter to his friend William Jackson: 'Ever since I have been quite clear in your being a real Genius, so long have I been of opinion that you are dayly [sic] throwing your gift away upon *Gentlemen* & only studying how you shall become the *Gentleman* too - now damn *Gentlemen*, there is not such a set of Enemies to a real artist in the world as they are, if not kept at a proper distance'. Letter from Gainsborough to Jackson, September 2, 1767. Quoted in *The letters of Thomas Gainsborough*, ed. by John Hayes (New Haven & London: Yale University Press for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2001), p. 42.

During the Renaissance there had been a number of defences of the dignity of the artist, aimed at releasing artists from their characterisation as ordinary artisans; defences mainly based on the argument that art was primordially a mental activity, not only a physical one. As Michelangelo had said, 'a man paints with his brains and not with his hands'.<sup>16</sup> Artists took this assertion, and others in the same vein, as their strongest argument for the respectability and authority of their profession. This could be achieved with a certain confidence in success, because the relevance of classical art and its theoretical foundations was not overturned for centuries, despite such subsequent challenges as the debates between the supporters of Modern and Classical art at the French Académie.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, this honouring of Renaissance theory had an important drawback for the artists. The generally accepted notion of the decline of the arts, derived from Vasari's idea that the arts followed a biological cycle of rise, maturity and decay, could well account for the concept of the dignity of artists being relegated to oblivion; for it followed that, if the artists posterior to the great triad

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<sup>16</sup> Michelangelo Buonarroti, letter to an unknown prelate, 1542. Quoted in *Artists on art. From the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century*, ed. by Robert Goldwater and Marco Treves (London: John Murray, 1976), p. 63. For the importance of art in the education of gentlemen and the culture of politeness, and the division between liberal and mechanic arts in the eighteenth century, see *The changing status of the artist*, ed. by Barker, Webb, and Woods (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1999); Barrell, *The political theory of painting*, Introduction; Stephen Copley, 'The fine arts in eighteenth-century polite culture', in *Painting and the politics of culture*, ed. by Barrell, pp. 13-37; Lawrence Klein, 'Shaftesbury and the progress of politeness', *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 18, no. 2 (1984-85), pp. 186-214, and 'Liberty, manners and politeness in early eighteenth-century England', *The Historical Journal*, 32, no. 3 (1989), pp. 583-605; and Solkin, *Painting for money*, Introduction.

<sup>17</sup> For the debate between Rubensistes and Poussinistes, the Moderns versus the Ancients, see Norman Bryson, *Word and image: French painting of the ancien régime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); June Hargrove, *The French Academy: classicism and its antagonists* (1990); N. Mirzoeff, 'Pictorial sign and social order: L'Académie Royale de Peinture et Sculpture c. 1640-1740' (PhD dissertation, Warwick, 1990); and Thomas Puttfarcken, *Roger de Piles's theory of art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985).

constituted by Leonardo, Raphael and Michelangelo were inferior to them, their claims to dignity were equally less founded.<sup>18</sup>

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the existing English art market was dominated by foreigners. Walpole gave an account of those who had become the teachers of native artists, and Hogarth also blamed the nobility's preference for foreign productions for the wretched state of English art.<sup>19</sup> Native artists had to fight against the interests of dealers like Arthur Pond, who imported from the Continent Old Master paintings, or works that passed as such, for imitations and counterfeits abounded. Art dealers made a bigger profit from this traffic than they would have made from selling contemporary English art, against which there was a deeply ingrained prejudice; therefore, they exercised their authority in taste by encouraging a fashion for the Ancients.<sup>20</sup> In the words of Jean André Rouquet, of the French Académie:

The English painters have to contend against the interests of a set of men whose business is to sell pictures, and who, unable to make dealing in works of living artists (particularly those of their own countrymen) answer their

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<sup>18</sup> Reynolds mentioned the notion of art in decline since Michelangelo's age: 'Discourse XV', p. 280.

<sup>19</sup> Redgrave, pp. 2, 11. Barry had also denounced the preference of Old Masters over modern English art in his *Lectures*, p. 172. See also Paul Langford, *A polite and commercial people: England 1727-1783* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 305.

<sup>20</sup> However, Pond was attempting to make a living as an artist; dealing was not an uncommon sideline for artists, especially during their travels abroad. See Louise Lippincott, *Selling art in Georgian London: the rise of Arthur Pond* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983); and 'Expanding on portraiture: the market, the public, and the hierarchy of genres in eighteenth-century Britain', in *The consumption of culture 1600-1800. Image, object, text*, ed. by Ann Bermingham and John Brewer (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 75-88.

purpose, make a point of depreciating them, and of cherishing in amateurs the absurd notion that the age of a picture regulates its claim to esteem.<sup>21</sup>

Artists were understandably not happy about this situation, and paladins of modern art, the most vocal of which was Hogarth, satirised about the penchant for dark, hoary old paintings in caricatures such as *The battle of the pictures* or *Time smoking a picture* (figs. 4, 5). However, Hogarth's war was not with the Old Masters themselves but with the connoisseurs who preferred them.<sup>22</sup>

The preference for Italian and French works from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, generally religious or historical, was explained away by collectors because, they argued, British art was coarse and lacked the necessary refinement to tackle elevated subjects; British painters were good only for works of inferior quality, of a decorative or plainly descriptive character, such as portraits or topographical landscapes, rather than moral or intellectually enriching. This argument proved remarkably long-lived. One of the artists who suffered most for his devotion to high art, James Barry, had railed thus against the authors who supported this theory:

When I was at Rome, abbé Winckelmann, the Pope's antiquary, published a history of the art, which gave great offence to many of our people, as it contained very severe reflections upon the character of the English, charging them with the want of capacity and genius to succeed in the superior exertions of the art of painting etc., and that their practice demonstrated that they were fitted for nothing greater than portraits and other low matters, from whence no honour could be derived, either to the artist or the country. Abbé

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<sup>21</sup> Jean André Rouquet, *L'état des arts en Angleterre* (Paris 1755), quoted in Pye, *Patronage of British art* (London 1845), p. 31, n20. Rouquet was a friend of Hogarth's; Paulson, *Hogarth*, vol. II, p. 265.

<sup>22</sup> 'The connoisseurs and I are at war you know, and because I hate *them* they think I hate *Titian* – and let them!' Letter from Hogarth to Mrs. Piozzi. Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Anecdotes of the late Samuel Johnson* (1876), p. 136. Quoted by Burke, *Hogarth and Reynolds: A contrast in English Art Theory*, p. 6.

Winckelmann having in this matter only gleaned after Abbé Dubos and the President Montesquieu these injurious opinions which become the common creed of the greatest part of the dilettanti.<sup>23</sup>

Barry attacked the views of Winckelmann and those who believed that genius was determined by climate and race in *Inquiry into the real and imaginary obstructions to the acquisition of the arts in England* and in his *Account of a series of pictures in the Great Room of the Society of Arts* (in which he described the cycle of historical paintings he had created for that institution), of 1774 and 1783 respectively.<sup>24</sup>

As the Redgraves summarised the situation, 'the truth seems to be that the English painters, for the better part of a century, struggled against an old prejudice – namely, that art is neither congenial to our soil nor to our nature, and cannot flourish among us'.<sup>25</sup> A quick glance at the sort of pictures produced in the early eighteenth century shows that this rationale, if partial, was not completely devoid of truth; the works produced before the arrival of Hogarth, Ramsay, and subsequently the generation of Reynolds and Gainsborough, compare very unfavourably with those painted during what we have come to know as the "golden age" of British painting. As Northcote said – probably not without irony –

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<sup>23</sup> James Barry, *An account of a series of pictures in the Great Room of the Society of Arts*, introduction (1783). Quoted in *The eighteenth century*, ed. by Denvir, pp. 124-5.

<sup>24</sup> For the reactions to Winckelmann and Dubos's ideas see Morris Eaves, *The counter-arts conspiracy: art and industry in the age of Blake* (Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 4-7. Some, like Barry, argued that climate had no influence on genius; on the other hand, authors such as Gilpin insisted that there was a link between climate and artistic genius, but one that favoured British landscape painters. Gilpin, *Observations relative chiefly to picturesque beauty*, 2 vols. (London 1786), vol. I, p. 10. Joseph Pott argued that English landscape painters ought to stop attempting to imitate Continental landscapes and concentrate instead on depicting the archetypal British landscape. Pott, *An essay on landscape painting* (London, 1782), p. 57. Quoted by Kay Dian Kriz, *The idea of the English landscape painter: Genius as alibi in the early nineteenth century* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 1997), p. 102.

<sup>25</sup> Redgrave, *A century of British painters*, p. 2.

'You would not surely have me hang up a modern English painting in my house, unless it was a portrait?'.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, between 1720 to 1760, developments in art would be extremely rapid.

By mid-century this prejudice led to a circular argument from which modern artists found it very difficult to extricate themselves: as the only commissions they received were for decorative or low-genre pieces, they did not have the opportunity to cultivate more exalted, but relatively unmarketable, genres. Even if painters wanted to elevate the status of their art, they surely would not be willing to starve for it. Barry, who saw himself in precisely that situation – starving for the cause of High Art – complained in his *Lectures at the Academy of the connoisseurs'* predilection for Old Master paintings:

If modern art is sometimes unjustly and ignorantly underrated by some mere antiquaries and others, who affect to confine their whole admiration and attention to the labours of past ages, this invidious business may be regretted, but cannot be helped ... it is a nuisance which has existed even in the very best ages ... and it arises more out of jealousy to the abilities and fame of our contemporaries, than from any sincere conviction of the superiority of past times.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> James Northcote, *The life of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, 2 vols. (London, 1818), vol.I, p. 143.

<sup>27</sup> Barry, 'Lecture IV', *Lectures on painting by the Royal Academicians*, ed. by Ralph Wornum (London, 1848), p. 172.

The point of view of artists was, logically, that patrons should encourage and promote native art by changing their mindset and commissioning grand-style works from living English painters, rather than purchasing them abroad; this would have, eventually, beneficial effects on the British school. But they had to fight against firmly rooted prejudices and the influence of art dealers, who would impress on their clients the superiority of Continental Old Masters over contemporary English paintings in order to continue with their profitable trade.

The efforts in the second half of the eighteenth century to give birth to an English art world, as we shall see below, with the creation of exhibition spaces and the foundation of artistic societies, can be read as effective attempts to reverse the trend against modern English art. Still, several authors, Barry among them, deplored that the fashion for foreign art had had as one of its most pernicious consequences a shortage of resources to fund a national school of art; the money that should have rightfully belonged to English painters had been misspent by patrons and collectors in importing (often spurious) Old Masters from abroad. Despite the evidence offered by the advances gained by the British School in the eighteenth century, this argument would continue to be made later on. As Martin Archer Shee would maintain early in the 1800s, 'Many circumstances have co-operated to deprive the artist even of those inadequate resources', placing the blame on the 'almost incredible prices paid here for some celebrated collections', almost certainly making reference to the sale in 1793 of the Orléans collection. The high prices paid at that famous sale lured dealers from all over Europe to attempt selling in Britain: 'thus, has the nation been glutted with pictures of every description and quality ... until all the wealth of individuals disposable for the objects of virtu has



been diverted into channels from which our native arts can derive no advantage'.<sup>28</sup>

Also early in the nineteenth century, John Opie thought that the money available for art which should have been spent on contemporary English art (other than portraits), had been squandered on dubious foreign paintings. He also took the opportunity to jab at connoisseurs and dealers for their false taste:

One cause ... of the discouragement of English art I will mention ... certainly contributes very considerably to the weight of the evil; that is, the vast and continued influx of old pictures into every part of the kingdom, more than nine tenths of which, to the eye of the true taste, offer nothing but a battered mediocrity, or worse, bad originals and bad copies of bad originals, smoked, varnished, and puffed into celebrity by interested dealers and ignorant connoisseurs.<sup>29</sup>

Opie was probably making reference to the influx of works of art into the English market in the late eighteenth century, after the upheavals in France; but his argument, and even his vocabulary, is remarkably similar to that used half a century earlier.

The solution to this situation was seen by many to be the creation of an academy of art, as we will see below.

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<sup>28</sup> Martin Archer Shee, *Rhymes on art; or, the remonstrance of a painter* (London: Ebers, 1805), pp. xv,-xvi, 28-29, 31. See also Barry, *Works*, vol. II, p. 214; and Opie, *Lectures*, pp. 94-95. For the Orléans sale see Jordana Pomeroy, 'Collecting the past to create a future: the Old Masters, artists and patrons in early nineteenth-century England' (PhD thesis, Columbia University, 1996), p.27.

<sup>29</sup> Opie, *Lectures*, pp. 94-95.

## 1.2 The foundation of the Academy

The reasons adduced for the creation of an Academy of art in the second half of the eighteenth century were varied, but the main aim remained a materialistic one: to assist artists in their careers and ameliorate their position within the English art world by providing renown and increased selling opportunities. This idea jarred with the prevalent notion of the evils of commerce, which came from the landed upper classes, who maintained that their disinterested position was the only valid one when emitting judgements on art. However, throughout the century, the delicate balance of the arts, poised between their ideally disinterested character and the harsh realities of the market would shift and evolve when new economic, political and social theories and practices came into being. With the growing realisation, in an increasingly market-oriented world, that commerce was a necessary evil, the attitude towards earning a profit and exercising a profession began to change, albeit slowly. Artists, who carried the stigma of being mere mechanics due to the manual nature of their work, realised early on their need for an institution that would bestow status on their profession and separate it from the guild-regulated crafts. However, they would still stress the liberal character of their art.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> See for instance: Peter Langford, *A polite and commercial people: England 1727-1783* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); and Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J.H. Plumb, *The birth of a consumer society: the commercialization of eighteenth-century England* (London: Hutchison, 1983).

From the early eighteenth century onwards, London had seen a number of plans for art academies being proposed by artists and certain groups of connoisseurs, some of them coming into being, some not. Among those which did were St. Luke Academy, founded by Godfrey Kneller in 1711, the first academy to have drawing lessons from the live model; Hogarth's democratic St. Martin's Lane Academy, which descended from an academy founded previously by James Thornhill in Covent Garden, and which flourished until the 1760s; the Society of Arts; and the Society of Artists, primarily focused on exhibiting, founded in 1761 in Spring Gardens, near Charing Cross. The Royal Academy was an offshoot of the latter.<sup>31</sup>

With the exception of the Society of Artists, none of those early attempts was as driven or organized as the Royal Academy, and neither would prove as successful. Most were short-lived. However, they all shared one characteristic: they were plagued by internal conflict, petty bickering, power struggles and financial crises. This is also a characteristic that the Academy inherited from its predecessors.

Edward Edwards wrote about the 1760 exhibition of the Society of Arts:

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<sup>31</sup> For accounts of the Royal Academy, see: Hutchison, *The history of the Royal Academy 1768-1968*; Walter R. M. Lamb, *The Royal Academy: a short history of its foundation and development* (London: Bell, 1951); and William Sandby, *The history of the Royal Academy of Arts*, 2 vols (London, 1862). The lack of a recent history of the Academy will surely be addressed with the forthcoming publication of Holger Hoock's *The King's artists: the Royal Academy of Arts and the politics of British culture 1760-1840* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

For an overview of all other institutions, see: Ilaria Bignamini, 'The academy of art in Britain before the foundation of the Royal Academy in 1768', in Anton Boschloo et al (eds.), *Academies of art between the Renaissance and Romanticism* (The Hague: SDU Uitgeverij, 1989), pp. 434-50; Rica Jones, 'The artist's training and techniques', in *Manners and morals. Hogarth and British painting 1700-1760* (Tate Gallery, 1987), pp. 19-22; Paulson, *Hogarth*, especially Vol. III, 'Art and politics, 1750-1764', chapter 7, 'The politics of art, 1754-1758'; Nikolaus Pevsner, *Academies of art past and present* (New York: Da Capo, 1940); and the introduction to Ralph N. Wornum, *Lectures on Painting by the Royal Academicians* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1848). The

The society ... had offered premiums for the best painting of history, and landscape; and it was one of the conditions, that the pictures produced by the candidates should remain in their great room for a certain time; consequently they were blended with the rest, and formed part of the exhibition. As it was soon known which performances had obtained the premiums, it was naturally supposed, by such persons who were deficient in judgment, that those pictures were the best in the room, and consequently deserved the chief attention. This partial, though unmerited selection, gave displeasure to the artists in general.

They were not pleased either with the mode of admission, which made the company attending the exhibition 'far from select'; Edwards believed this, and the interference of the society in the exhibition, to be the main reasons for a group of artists to withdraw from the Society the following year.<sup>32</sup>

The London art world of the 1750s-60s saw a number of discussions taking place on the need for the creation of a more ambitious institution than previous schemes, one that would not only serve to train artists, but that would contribute decisively to the development of English art, allowing it to take pride of place alongside that of other European nations. In 1768, a number of artists seceded from the Incorporated Society of Artists of Great Britain, allegedly because the directors of the latter institution 'were wanting in practical knowledge of art, *or a real desire to advance the interest of its professors*' <sup>33</sup> [my emphasis], and set out to establish the Royal Academy.

From the very beginning, the fledgling academicians sought royal endorsement, conscious of its importance. In their search for independence from

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Society of Artists is being dealt with by Matthew Hargraves in his dissertation, "'Candidates for Fame": the Society of Artists of Great Britain c.1760-1791', at the Courtauld Institute.

<sup>32</sup> Edwards Edwards, *Anecdotes of painters* (London, 1808), pp. xxv-xxvi. Quoted by Hutchison, *The history of the Royal Academy*, pp. 36-7.

aristocratic patrons, artists would need to turn to the crown for direct support. Certainly, the Academy was not the first group of artists to seek royal favour: the Society of Artists, for instance, had been granted a Royal Charter. Hogarth craved a royal commission, and eventually managed to be appointed Serjeant-Painter to the King. It was a relatively lucrative post, but more important for the sense of security it gave Hogarth, who nevertheless took it with his usual dose of cynicism.<sup>34</sup>

The other main reason for placing the monarch at the helm of the Academy was its configuration, closely modelled on the French Académie des Beaux-Arts, which was under direct control of the Crown.<sup>35</sup> The whole concept of an Academy where art would be defined and taught was seen as eminently Continental, and particularly French. The ideas espoused and transmitted by academies of art belonged to a Europe-wide tradition of Classicism that had its roots in the Renaissance, as will be seen below.

During the debates about the necessity of an Academy for England, Hogarth had led the faction of those who opposed it on the grounds that it was a foreign and unnecessary invention. Michael Kitson argued that Hogarth's *Analysis of Beauty* was

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<sup>33</sup> Sandby, *The history of the Royal Academy of Arts*, p. 43.

<sup>34</sup> Paulson, *Hogarth*, vol. III, 'Art and politics, 1750-1764', pp. 212-215.

<sup>35</sup> For the Académie see: A. Boime, *The Academy and French painting in the nineteenth century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1971); P. Conisbee, *Painting in eighteenth-century France* (Yale University Press, 1981), especially chapter 1; Thomas E. Crow, *Painters and public life in eighteenth century Paris* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985); Carl Goldstein, *Teaching art: academies and schools from Vasari to Albers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); June Hargrove, *The French academy: classicism and its antagonists* (Newark & London, University of Delaware Press, 1990); James A. Leith, *The idea of art as propaganda in France 1750-1799* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965); N. Pevsner, *Academies of art past and present*; and H.C. White and C.A. White, *Canvases and careers: institutional change in the French painting world* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

the first sustained anti-academic treatise in the history of aesthetics; in it, the painter attacked everything the French Academy stood for, such as, notably, the theory of Ideal Beauty, as when he wrote: 'Who but a bigot, even to the antiques, will say that he has not seen faces and necks, hands and arms in living women, that even the Grecian Venus doth but coarsely imitate?'.<sup>36</sup>

In *The Taste of the Town*, Hogarth had ridiculed the admiration for these rarefied, oligarchic institutions, where dusty old paintings and statues were preferred to living models (fig. 6); for him, a royal academy only could have negative connotations. Hogarth believed that the arts could not be artificially promoted 'by such institutions as royal academies'.<sup>37</sup> He proudly stated that the St. Martin's Lane Academy, based on a democratic model where all the members had equal rights, was 'for every useful purpose equal to that in France or any other'.<sup>38</sup>

However, appealing to the King for support, and adopting the title "Royal", was seen by the artists in search of enfranchisement as their best recourse. Due to his proximity to the King, William Chambers, the architect, who had been George III's tutor in architecture before his accession to the throne, was designated to submit the proposal for the creation of a Royal Academy. The plan was approved

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<sup>36</sup> William Hogarth, *The analysis of beauty*, ed. by Joseph Burke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. iv, n4. In his introduction, Burke makes a parallel between Hogarth's idea that nature was superior to art and Constable's ideas on the subject, as when he wrote that 'nature... constantly presents us with compositions of her own, far more beautiful than the happiest arranged by human skill' (quoted by C. R. Leslie, *Life of Constable* (1845), p. 355). See also Michael Kitson, 'Hogarth's Apology for painters', *The Walpole Society*, 41 (1966-68), pp. 94-95, p. 65; and Paulson, *Hogarth*, vol. III, p. 133.

<sup>37</sup> Ireland, *Hogarth illustrated* (London 1851), supplementary volume, pp. 76-79. Quoted in *The eighteenth century: art, design and society*, ed. by Denvir (London: Longman, 1983), p. 183. For Hogarth's anti-academic stance see his *Apology for painters*, written in the early 1760s, shortly before his death. Kitson, 'Hogarth's Apology for painters', pp. 94-95.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted by Hutchison, *The history of the Royal Academy*, p. 10.

and signed by the King on the 10<sup>th</sup> of December; the first General Assembly was held on 14<sup>th</sup> December, during which the twenty-eight first Academicians elected their governing officials; and in 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1769, Reynolds opened his First Discourse with the following words:

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.<sup>39</sup>

The Royal Academy had finally come into existence.

The artists who signed the petition to the King, and who would become the first Academicians, were: Joshua Reynolds, Benjamin West, Thomas Sandby, Francis Cotes, John Baker, Mason Chamberlain, John Gwynn, Thomas Gainsborough, J. Baptist Cipriani, Jeremiah Meyer, Francis Milner Newton, Paul Sandby, Francesco Bartolozzi, Charles Catton, Nathaniel Hone, William Tyler, Nathaniel Dance, Richard Wilson, George Michael Moser, Samuel Wale, Peter Toms, Angelica Kauffman, Richard Yeo, Mary Moser, William Chambers, Joseph Wilton, George Barret, Edward Penny, Agostino Carlini, Francis Hayman, Dominic Serres, John Richards, Francesco Zuccarelli, George Dance, William Hoare and Johann Zoffany. The figure of forty (the desired number of Academicians, as established in the Instrument of foundation) was not reached until 1772, with the inclusion of Edward Burch, Richard Cosway, Joseph Nollekens and James Barry.<sup>40</sup> All in all, they formed a selection of the best, or better known, artists working in England at the time, although there were a few significant exceptions such as

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<sup>39</sup> Reynolds, 'Discourse I', p. 13.

<sup>40</sup> Wornum, *Lectures on Painting by the Royal Academicians* (London, 1848), p. 24.

George Stubbs, George Romney and Joseph Wright of Derby. Although it was *vox populi* that Reynolds had been the driving force behind the secession from the Society of Artists, and so it would be expressly stated during the 1836 Parliamentary enquiry, Northcote, in his *Life of Reynolds*, explained that 'the four persons who first planned the institution were Sir William Chambers, Mr. West, Mr. Cotes, and Mr. Moser'.<sup>41</sup> However, as its first President, author of the annual *Discourses on Art* in which the ideas and practice of the Academy were set out, and one of the most prestigious English painters of the time, Reynolds was considered the leader and spokesman of the institution. As Robert Wark has said, the *Discourses* were regarded as synonymous with a statement of the Academy's policy.<sup>42</sup>

The participation of the King in the foundation of the Academy established the precedent and the basis for the relationship between the institution, proud of its royal title, and the Crown. By denominating itself royal, the Academy implied that, because of its dependence on the Crown, it relied less on private patrons. A self-elected élite, the RA acquired an aristocratic value of its own; like the nobility, its immediate superior was the King and, as it was argued in many occasions when the Academy came under attack, it answered to no one else but the monarch. The close ties with the crown displayed by the Academy were but one symptom of the allegiance of the institution to traditional values. Radical critics saw it as a remainder of 'old world' social hierarchy, in a nation that had prospered under a constitutional monarchy. This "special relationship" of the Academy with the monarch would become subsequently the origin of a long string of complaints by

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<sup>41</sup> Wornum, *Lectures on Painting by the Royal Academicians*, pp.20-21.

<sup>42</sup> R. Wark, Introduction to Reynolds's *Discourses*, p. xiv.



non-members about the unfair privileges enjoyed by the Royal Academy. The Academy was also criticised for its elitist stance regarding practitioners of branches of the art regarded as inferior, such as engravers.

But the Academy regarded itself above such matters. Based on traditional humanist principles drawn from the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, its main aim was, in theory, 'to be the establishment of well regulated schools of design, where students in the arts may find that instruction, which hath so long been wanted, and so long wished for in this country'<sup>43</sup>. Another of the proclaimed ends of the Academy was to promote British art, which was generally found to be wanting when compared to that of the Continent. In order to achieve that lofty goal, the prestigious Great Style of classical painting had to be placed above all other genres, and English artists would have to prove that they were capable of accomplishing it. The Academy had no time for engravers, watercolour or flower painters, and the marginal place it gave to these branches of the art in its annual Exhibitions indicates the condescension with which it regarded them.

In practice, the Academy's aim was not only to educate artists but also the public for the arts; the former through the schools, the latter through the annual exhibitions. Its exclusivism was clear from the beginning, as stated in the Instrument of foundation, because, unlike the Society of Artists, which admitted all who paid a membership fee, only painters, sculptors or architects 'of fair moral characters, of high reputation in their several professions' were to be elected

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<sup>43</sup> Anon., 'An account of the institution of a Royal Academy of Arts under his Majesty's patronage', *The Gentleman's Magazine*, suppl. to vol. XXXVIII (Dec. 1768), p. 603.

Academicians.<sup>44</sup> The Royal Academy ensured it became de facto an artistic oligarchy; its members were the best artists in the country.

The designation of the right public for art was effected by means of an entry fee to the exhibitions, among other measures. This was devised to keep the impecunious and uncultured masses away and to allow entrance only to people of certain means, who were supposed to have a pre-existent interest in art. As the preface to the first Exhibition catalogue candidly declared:

The Academicians ... have not been able to suggest any other Means than that of receiving Money for Admittance to prevent the Room from being filled by improper Persons, to the entire exclusion of those for whom the Exhibition is apparently intended.<sup>45</sup>

That was the public that the Academicians were eager to address and shape to their advantage: the only kind of public they believed that mattered, because it shared to a degree the academic belief in a superior class of art that was addressed to the mind rather than to the senses. The vulgar, on the other hand, only cared for the unsophisticated lower branches of art, those addressed to the senses; or, in other words, paintings that accurately portrayed the minutiae of reality, instead of grand generalised truths. As a liberal art, painting must enjoy the proper kind of spectatorship, capable of recognising it as such; this ideal spectatorship must exclude all those who cannot admire the grand style as the most elevated category of art and prefer instead inferior genres. With such an improper public, art would be at risk of responding to its base tastes, therefore compromising the liberal ideal it

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<sup>44</sup> *Instrument*, December 10, 1768, art. I. Quoted by Sandby, *The history of the Royal Academy of Arts*, p. 49.

<sup>45</sup> 'Advertisement' in the 1769 Royal Academy Exhibition catalogue. Quoted by Hutchison, *The history of the Royal Academy*, p. 55.

was founded upon. As John Williams, alias Anthony Pasquin the notorious pamphleteer, put it:

The mightiest evil to be regretted is, that the VULGAR, who have no knowledge of propriety, should, from their numbers, their riches, and consequently their power, have the national patronage within their dominion; and yet these bipedal reptiles must be uniformly soothed and solicited ... as THE PUBLIC.<sup>46</sup>

Reynolds had stated clearly in his *Discourses* that 'the great end of the art is to strike the imagination'<sup>47</sup>; and that 'these Arts, in their highest province, are not addressed to the gross senses, but to the desires of the mind, to that spark of divinity which we have within.'<sup>48</sup> There was a danger in exhibitions; namely, the temptation to cater for that uneducated public, because along with the new commercial society there came into being the figure of the *nouveau riche*, who possessed money but not a refined taste. Young painters might be lured into creating lower, sensual art for these unsuitable patrons. Reynolds warned artists not to be 'tempted out of the right path by any allurements of popularity, which always accompanies the lower styles of painting.

I mention this, because our Exhibitions, while they produce such admirable effects by nourishing emulation and calling out genius, have also a mischievous tendency, by seducing the Painter to an ambition of pleasing indiscriminately the mixed multitude of people who resort to them.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> 'Anthony Pasquin', *Memoirs of the Royal Academicians; being an attempt to improve the national taste*, 1796, p. 148. Quoted by John Barrell, *The political theory of painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt*, p. 65. I have found the chapter that Barrell devotes to Reynolds, in which he discusses in depth his ideas as expressed or implied in the *Discourses*, extremely useful.

<sup>47</sup> Reynolds, 'Discourse IV'. *Discourses on art*, ed. by Wark, p. 59, line 82.

<sup>48</sup> Reynolds, 'Discourse XIII'. *Discourses on art*, ed. by Wark, p. 244, lines 479-89.

<sup>49</sup> Reynolds, 'Discourse V'. *Discourses on art*, ed. by Wark, p. 90, lines 416-23.

This was a clear acknowledgement of the economic forces at work behind an art that was supposed to be moral and disinterested. Artists were expected to ignore these siren calls and devote themselves to the higher walks of art. Unsurprisingly, very few actually complied with this dictum.

The entrance fee to the Exhibition, one shilling, was nominally the price of the catalogue, which then gave admission to the exhibition; but everybody realised that it was a measure 'inevitably and solely adapted to prevent the intrusions of improper company'.<sup>50</sup> However, the Academy was not the only institution to do so; the Royal Incorporated Society of Artists and the Free Society of Artists also demanded one shilling at the door of their exhibitions. Later schemes, such as the National Gallery, were, on the other hand, rather more catholic in their inclusion of all social classes as desired audience, and in that way continued the process of diffusion of art to nearly all levels of society. The political winds of liberal radicalism that blew in the earlier half of the nineteenth century would allow for further democratization of the arts; but the Royal Academy was founded on a traditional *weltanschauung* in which society was rigidly stratified, with royalty and aristocracy at the top of the social pyramid. In this division of society, only the upper echelons had easy, first-hand access to works of art (although the imagery itself was more widely available through prints). The arts themselves were an integral part of aristocratic education and helped define what a gentleman was. The Academy, although in a way revolutionary because of its championing of the authority of artists, still acknowledged the power of the higher classes and tried to harness it for itself by arguing that the practice of art was a liberal rather than

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<sup>50</sup> Letter to the *Morning Chronicle*, 2 May 1776. William Whitley, *Notes on artists* (The 'Whitley Papers'), RA volume, British Museum Print Room.

mechanical activity, fit for gentlemen, and therefore, that artists could be gentlemen.

The Royal Academy used its popularity to fulfil its real agenda, which was to empower artists, to provide them with an institution that would strengthen their claims for social prestige and authority. In the traditional ideological system that the Academy ascribed itself to, the highest position a citizen could aspire to was to be a gentleman; and knowledge of, and even amateur practice of art, was one of the requisites of the gentleman. Artists aspired to share this prestige and turn it to their benefit: for if art did define a gentleman, would artists, practitioners of art *par excellence*, not fall in the same category? This is what Reynolds set out to prove; and even further, that artists could be gentlemen not *despite* being artists, but precisely *because* they were artists.

On a more pragmatic level, in order to acquire power, artists needed independence from their previous patrons, who claimed most of the merits of the work of art. Prior to the rise of the English school, artists had been mere craftsmen, in the hands of patrons and picture dealers. But the academicians did not devise a different way to acquire the power they craved; they simply tried the same approach of gentlemen connoisseurs, adapting it for themselves. In other words, they tried to fight their opponents with the same weapons.

### 1.3 Origins of the academic discourse. High Art and the marketplace

I have pursued a plain and honest method; I have taken up the art simply as I found it exemplified in the practice of the most approved Painters. That approbation which the world has uniformly given, I have endeavoured to justify by such proofs as questions of this kind will admit ... And though in what has been done, no new discovery is pretended, I may still flatter myself, that from the discoveries which others have made ... I have succeeded in establishing the rules and principles of our Art on a more firm and lasting foundation than that on which they had formerly been placed.<sup>51</sup>

One of the more fundamental and intriguing characteristics of the Royal Academy during the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries is the way its ideology was both based on the orthodox theories on art of the time and, arguably, aimed at deposing them. The Academy made use of the conventions and vocabulary of the current discourses on art and aesthetics, and declared its main aspiration to be the promotion of art according to those ideas; but it understood them to conclude that artists were the main beneficiaries of the prestige accorded by art, rather than connoisseurs. By proclaiming themselves the main experts in both the practice and the theory of art, or at least proposing that they were able to do so, artists seized a unique chance to lead the art world. Let us see what those ideas were.

As has been alluded to above, the new, unprecedented flourishing of trade in the eighteenth century brought vast amounts of wealth into England, and although some of this wealth made its way into the middle ranks of society, in general it widened existing social differences. This new importance of commerce in the

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<sup>51</sup> Reynolds, 'Discourse XV'. *Discourses on art*, ed. by Wark, p. 269.

nation's economy opened a long and arduous debate on the ethics of representation of property and luxury.<sup>52</sup>

One of the solutions proposed for this debate, as Brewer has pointed out, was the discourse of politeness. Politeness, a comprehensive theory which described the behaviour of the true gentleman, and whose aim was to define the structure and workings of a society where every individual had their place, was propounded in order to make heterogeneous English society more coherent, in an attempt to explain and categorize it.<sup>53</sup> Politeness interests us because it placed the arts at the centre of its system. Although in its earliest manifestations politeness was regarded as an inherent characteristic of the aristocracy, during the eighteenth century the theory was reformulated so that it allowed for a certain amount of social climbing. The aspiration to the possession of politeness was the common denominator of the middle classes, which used the term 'gentleman' to disguise their tradesmen status.

Generally speaking, the role of art in the discourse of politeness was to make the ideas of virtue attractive and pleasurable. Theorists argued that man's nature tended to strong passions, which had to be kept under control. The arts played an important part in this, by providing men with a refined kind of pleasure that would restrain their natural tendency to seek lower recreations. Works of art, when proper and dignified, aroused elevated feelings in those who had received a gentleman's

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<sup>52</sup> Brewer, *The pleasures of the imagination*, Introduction. See also John Sekora, *Luxury: the concept in Western thought from Eden to Smollett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

<sup>53</sup> Brewer, *The pleasures of the imagination*, pp. 99; Copley, 'The fine arts in eighteenth-century polite culture', p. 16-17; Paul Langford, *A polite & commercial people: England 1727-1783* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 59; and McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb, *The birth of a consumer society: the commercialization of eighteenth-century England*.

education; the right kind of art was a medium to achieve moral behaviour, which resulted in the general welfare of the community. The function of taste was to endow the pleasure obtained from the contemplation of art with moral values, without which pleasure alone could become a dangerous activity. The identification of uneducated reactions to arts with sensuality, as well as the traditional association of works of art with luxury expenditure and leisure, contributed to make aesthetics and taste difficult, thorny issues for writers on art.<sup>54</sup>

The most influential formulation of politeness in the early eighteenth century was in the work of Joseph Addison and Richard Steele in the periodical *The Spectator*, in which they instructed their readers on how to look at and interpret art as part and parcel of polite behaviour. Addison and Steele were addressing a constituency of citizens that would benefit from interacting with culture:

A Man of Polite Imagination is let into a great many pleasures that the Vulgar are not capable of receiving. He can converse with a Picture, and find an agreeable companion in a statue... So that he looks upon the World, as it were, in another Light, and discovers in it a Multitude of Charms, that conceal themselves from the generality of Mankind.<sup>55</sup>

The connections between the arts and moral and ethical issues were highlighted by most writing on art of the period. The field of culture in eighteenth-century England, and the main discourse attempting to taxonomize it, have been described by John Barrell as respectively 'the republic of taste' and 'civic humanism'. This theory, although formulated in the first half of the century by

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<sup>54</sup> Copley, 'The fine arts in eighteenth-century polite culture', p.16. See also Lawrence E. Klein, *Shaftesbury and the culture of politeness: moral discourse and cultural politeness in early eighteenth-century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>55</sup> Brewer, *The pleasures of imagination*, p. 99.



authors such as Shaftesbury, Jonathan Richardson the Elder and George Turnbull, drew on ideas coming from Machiavelli in the Renaissance, and ultimately from Aristotle and Plato and their theories on ideal government and the division of the population between free citizens and mechanics.<sup>56</sup> The discourse of civic humanism put the onus on the common interest of the republic. The individual citizen, aware of his belonging to a political entity, exercised public virtues, and the degree to which he did, or was able to do, determined his position in the republic. The fine arts were, according to this philosophy, equated with the political republic as a 'republic of taste'. Art was meant to represent and promote public values, and therefore the different genres were ranked depending on the degree in which they achieved that aim. By the time of the foundation of the Royal Academy, though, civic humanism was not as relevant to British culture and society as it had been during the first half of the eighteenth century; and, in any case, it had been an ideal to tend to, rather than an adequate theoretical model depicting social and political realities.

Civic humanism posited at the top rank of its social hierarchy the citizen or free man, who embodied the ideal of public spirit through his devotion to the *res publica*. The defining characteristic of free citizens was their economic independence from the cares of earning a living, that might otherwise have tarnished their devotion to the commonwealth with preoccupation with private interests. Therefore, the only

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<sup>56</sup> For civic humanism and classical republicanism, see Barrell, *The political theory of painting*, p.1; Solkin, *Painting for money*, p.1; and Copley, 'The fine arts in eighteenth-century polite culture', pp. 13-14. The essential text on the subject is J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian moment: Florentine political thought and the Atlantic republican tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), esp. chapters 13-14. Some authors have criticised the use of the term 'civic humanism' and its applicability, for instance Andrew Hemingway in his review of Barrell's *The political theory of painting*: 'The political theory of painting without the politics', *Art History*, vol. X, no. 3 (Sept. 1987), pp. 381-395, p. 382.

disinterested, true citizens of the republic were the landed gentry and aristocracy, who, according to the traditional categorization, were engaged in liberal activities as opposed to mechanical ones. The equivalent artistic category to this class of enfranchised citizens was history painting, which was intended to espouse the same public values, and was in turn addressed to them as ideal public.

The logical conclusion was that art, which must strive for the representation of values useful to the common good, was regarded by the followers of this paradigm as hierarchical; the best art was that which was imbued with a moral teaching: history painting. The remaining genres, evaluated in proportion to their achieving the same end, were listed below it. Hence Jonathan Richardson's attempts to elevate portrait painting, his own *métier*, by stating that portraiture could function as a sort of history painting in so far as it served to record the appearance of worthy citizens.

The other consequence of the application of this political theory to art is the question of the composition of the public. The only spectators able to properly understand and value good art were the free men, the educated and financially independent elite whose view was not limited by private interests. On the other hand, those who had to work for sustenance, and were therefore tainted with the twin tar brushes of mechanicity and search for profit, had to content themselves with the lower genres of art: portraiture, which pandered to the vanity of the sitter (which elevated citizens were supposed to be free of); landscape, and still life, which recorded particular appearances rather than the general ideas which lowlier classes were not expected to appreciate. In practical terms, any genre that was geared to stimulate the senses rather than the intellect was considered inferior to the Grand Style, and its place in the scale assigned according to the degree in which it

appealed to the different faculties of the mind. Despite the dissociation of these ideas with the realities of the English art world, as we will see, the Academy's ideological programme relied on categorizations such as the above.

In the midst of this unfavourable climate to the arts, however, since the seventeenth century there had been no shortage of treatises on art written in England, some of which discussed the dignity of the artist. This was a pervading theme in Italian literature on art since Vasari had propounded his cyclical model of the evolution of art and in particular his account of the Renaissance, which culminated in the dual apex of Raphael and Michelangelo. Vasari's narration (which Lawrence Lipking calls 'fables at one remove') was so influential to posterity that later writers sought to trace the roots of the English artistic tradition back to the Italian Renaissance, hoping perhaps to emulate it and reach a similar display of brilliance, to 'capture the mysterious aura that surrounds the art of the past, and to project it into the future'.<sup>57</sup>

The social triumph of Van Dyck, who had acquired prestige through his association with the nobility, seemed to prove the possibility of the dignity of the artist. But he founded no great national school, his example was soon lost, and seen as perhaps no more than the exception which confirmed the rule. And after all, he had been born a foreigner, as had Holbein, another eminent painter of the English school.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, English art literature up to the mid-eighteenth century was little

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<sup>57</sup> Lipking, *The ordering of the arts in eighteenth-century England*, p. 11.

<sup>58</sup> For the influence of Van Dyck on Reynolds see David Mannings, 'Reynolds, Hogarth and Van Dyck', *Burlington Magazine*, vol. 126 (November 1984), pp. 689-690.

more than addenda to Continental art theory, exemplified by Reynolds's notes to the translation of Du Fresnoy's *Art of painting*.

Jonathan Richardson attempted to change this situation. His deep conviction that painting followed a certain set of rules, and that anyone with the right mind could acquire knowledge and appreciation of art, acted as a fulcrum for the advancement of the idea of the dignity of the artist.

Richardson was one of the first to advance the idea that artists might be proper judges of art, insofar as they were also gentlemen. As a painter himself, he was interested in raising the status of his profession, and in doing so he became a model to be followed by the next generation of artists. He believed in the importance of art for society at large ('If Gentlemen were Lovers of Painting, and Connoisseurs, this would help to Reform them, as their Example, and Influence would have the like Effect on the Common People'), and claimed that the painter could be as authoritative a critic as any gentleman amateur, implying that neither was superior to the other, as long as both were connoisseurs of the art: 'We painters are upon a level with Writers, as being Poets, Historians, Philosophers and Divines, we entertain and instruct equally with them'.<sup>59</sup> Nonetheless, on the whole Richardson accepted the conventions of the time regarding the greatness of Classical art, and believed that, in order to succeed, artists had to adapt to those notions rather than confront them. In this he acted as the opposite of the revolutionary Hogarth, who openly criticised blind obeisance to the principles of Classicism.

There is an element of class struggle in this. Despite the growing popularization of the Grand Tour among the middle ranks of society, during the eighteenth century travel to the Continent remained a mainly aristocratic practice, tinged with an air of privilege and exclusivity. Richardson himself never travelled to Italy, and Hogarth remarked on the absurdity that one could admire so much works of art that had never been seen but through the eyes of others. Hogarth was disgusted by the fact that people would accept the judgement of others rather than their own. Contrast to this the attitude of Reynolds, who learned to worship Raphael's paintings through Richardson's descriptions of them.<sup>60</sup>

The followers of Richardson's theories, much as they lamented the situation of contemporary English art and disagreed with the prejudices reinforced by generation after generation of Grand Tourists about the inadequacy of the native artistic production, were only too keen to travel to the Continent and study the highest examples of the art *in situ* in Italy. Thereby, they implicitly accepted the basic premise that English art was inferior to these examples and that they needed to learn from them something that could not be achieved at home. But this acceptance had a twist, and it was built around Richardson's insistence, based on Lockean methods, that connoisseurship was a science that anyone with a minimum of analytical capacity could acquire.<sup>61</sup> If this was the case, then through study and

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<sup>59</sup> Jonathan Richardson, 'Discourse II', p. 44; and 'Discourse I', p. 42. *Two Discourses* (London 1719). For Richardson's theories, see C. Gibson-Wood, 'Jonathan Richardson and the rationalization of connoisseurship', in *Art History*, March 1984, pp. 38-56; L. Lipking, *The ordering of the arts in eighteenth-century England* (Princeton, 1970); and G.W. Snelgrove, *The work and theories of Jonathan Richardson* (unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 1936).

<sup>60</sup> Northcote, *Life of Reynolds*, vol. I, p. 8. Paulson, *Hogarth*, vol. II, p. 70.

<sup>61</sup> Snelgrove, *Work and theories of Jonathan Richardson*, p. 286. See also C. Gibson-Wood.

cultivation artists could master not only the mechanical and empirical, but also the theoretical elements of the art, and become connoisseurs themselves. Richardson and his followers embraced the culture of the connoisseur for their own cause, and in doing so they won the first battle in the war between artists and connoisseurs. Hogarth had tried to fight the latter, in his acid, polemic manner, but the art world was not ready for his methods of open warfare yet.

Sir Joshua Reynolds was one of those followers: as we have seen, he knew and admired Richardson's works, having read his *Essay on the Theory of Painting* very young, which shaped his future career, for he followed Richardson's model of a 'gentleman painter'.<sup>62</sup> Reynolds set out to prove that painters could acquire authority by means of becoming gentlemen. In order to do this, he needed to demonstrate that painting was a liberal (as opposed to mechanical) art, which he did, at length, in his *Discourses*.

Our art, like all arts which address the imagination, is applied to somewhat a lower faculty of the mind, which approaches nearer to sensuality; but through sense and fancy it must make its way to reason; ... and without carrying our art out of its natural and true character, the more we purify it from every thing that is gross in sense, in that proportion we advance its use and dignity; and in proportion as we lower it to mere sensuality, we pervert its nature, and degrade it from the rank of a liberal art.<sup>63</sup>

The main idea that Reynolds had inherited from Richardson was that art could be studied, comprehended and taught as a whole; that connoisseurship was a rational science, as demonstrated in Richardson's *Argument in behalf of the science of a*

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<sup>62</sup> As Johnson wrote, 'Sir Joshua Reynolds, the great Painter of the present age, had the first fondness for his art excited by the perusal of Richardson's treatise.' S. Johnson, *Lives of the English poets*, ed. G.B. Hill (Oxford, 1905), vol. I, p. 2.

<sup>63</sup> Reynolds, 'Discourse IX', pp. 170-171.

*connoisseur* of 1715.<sup>64</sup> Hence it follows that, if knowledge of art could be attained through study, and it was no longer the sole domain of the wealthy upper classes, virtually anyone with access to the appropriate education could lay claim to the title of connoisseur. Artists, too, could obtain a rank parallel to that of gentlemen connoisseurs through learning. This “democratization” of taste is an indication of Reynolds’s political leanings; but in artistic terms it meant that artists had to conform to the criteria of connoisseurs, since artists had to adopt the traits of socially superior amateurs in order to claim authority in their profession.<sup>65</sup>

It is hard to ignore the evidence that, however sincerely Reynolds believed in the importance of High Art for the moral wellbeing of the nation, he was at the same time aware of the divergence between the ideal and the dog-eat-dog reality of the art world of his time. He surely was conscious of his own talent and influence. Reynolds was an ambitious and competitive painter, striving to rise above his status as a successful portrait painter. When confronted with an opportunity to affirm the authority of artists, Reynolds and his fellow academicians could have chosen several different paths of action. One of such options would have been to follow the ideas of artists such as Hogarth, who in the middle of the eighteenth century had promoted modern art – his own new genre of ‘modern moral subjects’ – as the most appropriate means of addressing contemporary issues. In his writings on art, Hogarth endorsed a view of art governed by its own rules, not subjected to literary or philosophical canons, and had tried to endow modern art with a dignity based in

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<sup>64</sup> In *Two Discourses*, 1719.

<sup>65</sup> Prince Hoare would say later in the nineteenth century: ‘The connoisseurs however soon shut the door on their Introducer [Richardson], turned the key, took possession of the premises, and leisurely began to ransack and expose the treasures of painting’. *The Artist*, vol. I, no. 1 (14 March 1807), pp. 8-10.

the respectability *per se* of their own profession.<sup>66</sup> Instead, Reynolds advocated an adherence to the theories that had dominated European thought since the Renaissance, submitting art to the traditional *Ut Pictura Poesis* analogy, and resisting more modern ideas in his defence of classical art. In doing so, he was unwittingly writing the epitaph of the Grand tradition, and at the same time anchoring Academic ideology in a past that was already beginning to disappear. In an increasingly privatised age, in which the ideology of the middle classes was rapidly taking over aristocratic principles, the loyalty of Reynolds and his followers to tradition, coupled with the enormous ascendancy of the first President's ideas on later generations of Academicians, resulted in the growing dissociation of the Academy with the new artistic paradigms emerging in the late eighteenth century.

Ironically enough, by the turn of the century, in a renovated contest between the Modern and the Ancients, Hogarth's convictions would eventually prevail, and his defeat by Reynoldsian classicism would prove only temporary. In the discussions concerning authority in art that are the focus of this study, arguments upholding the autonomy of the visual arts would be raised to the forefront at the turn of the century, and later on, when artists adopted a Hogarthian position in their defence of the dignity of their profession.<sup>67</sup>

By the late eighteenth century, the flourishing commercial sector of the British economy, which according to traditional theories ought to be contemplated with suspicion, began to be regarded as a positive thing; new ideological paradigms

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<sup>66</sup> Frederick Antal, *Hogarth and his place in European art* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), esp. chapter 10, 'Hogarth's impact on English art', pp. 175-195; and Burke, *Hogarth and Reynolds: a contrast in English art theory*.

<sup>67</sup> Paulson, *Hogarth*, vol. III, p. 70.



were being created to accommodate attitudes towards commerce, wealth and luxury.

As we have seen, the discourse of civic humanism, or classical republicanism, which had been prevalent earlier in the eighteenth century, received a renovated impetus from the Academy, by figures such as Prince Hoare, and arguably from outsiders like Benjamin Robert Haydon. The theory of painting propounded by the Academy – which Barrell has termed ‘political’ in relation to its links with civic humanism – was directed towards achieving recognition for painting as a liberal art, and the consequent advancement of the status of the painter as an essential figure in an ideal republic.<sup>68</sup>

But contemporary to these developments, new ideas on the division of labour by political economists and philosophers such as Adam Smith and David Hume elicited a re-evaluation of the character of human activity, according to which work could possess a dignity of its own. In 1783, the Scottish writer James Beattie reflected the late eighteenth-century view of labour as valuable in political economy, and adapted it to aesthetic judgement; for the first time, it was acknowledged that artists possessed a dexterity that put them above consumers:

None but a painter is a competent judge of painting. In every art, certain materials and instruments are employed; and they only, who have handled them, are entitled to decide upon the dexterity of the artist.

Beattie also put amateurs in their place, stating that they could derive pleasure from a practice of the arts, but not go beyond that: ‘Yet, without having been a

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<sup>68</sup> Barrell, *The political theory of painting*, pp. 1-3, 76-77.

practitioner, one may acquire such taste in the fine arts, as shall yield a high degree, and a great variety, of entertainment'.<sup>69</sup>

Parallel to, and closely related with those ideas, British society was changing, from a stratified structure to a more flexible one, where commerce and wealth were the motor of social change.<sup>70</sup> The arts were no strangers to these shifts; evidence for them could be found everywhere. Artists needed to change their practices in order to adapt to the new circumstances. Throughout the eighteenth century, as Solkin and others have demonstrated, art embraced the uses of the marketplace, exhibitions and production and sale of prints being two of the most obvious examples. However, in the theoretical plane, artists, more specifically the members of the Royal Academy, abode by the disinterested ideals of the humanist tradition. By trying to elevate the practice of art through professionalisation, the Academy slowed the progress of commercial art; but, as Ann Bermingham has pointed out, it was only partially successful at doing so, since at the same time it acted as a site where art was effectively sold and bought.<sup>71</sup>

By investing the profession of painter with authority, artists gained a certain independence from their former usual patrons: the aristocracy, which, as we have

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<sup>69</sup> James Beattie, *Dissertations moral and critical* (London, 1783), p. 189.

<sup>70</sup> For the rise of a commercial society see: *Consumption and the world of goods*, ed. by John Brewer and Roy Porter (London & New York, 1993); Colin Campbell, *The Romantic ethic and the spirit of modern consumerism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), especially the introduction and chapter 2, 'Accounting for the consumer revolution in eighteenth-century England'; Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J.H. Plumb, *The birth of a consumer society: the commercialization of eighteenth-century England* (London: Hutchinson, 1983), esp. McKendrick, 'The consumer revolution of eighteenth-century England' and Plumb, 'The commercialization of leisure'; and Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer behaviour and material culture in Britain 1660-1760* (London & New York, 1988).

<sup>71</sup> Ann Bermingham, 'The consumption of culture: image, object, text', in *The consumption of culture*, ed. by Bermingham and Brewer (1997 ed.), p. 5.

seen, as a rule commissioned portraits, either of their properties or of themselves and their families. The aspiration of painters to occupy themselves with more elevated subjects, and, above all, the search for state patronage and for the monarch's support, indicated a desire to separate themselves from their habitual employers. The kind of prestige that artists sought could certainly not be gained by occupying themselves with the lowlier genres of art under the strict orders of noble patrons; they set out to prove that they had a proper education and could put it to good use.

Another way to gain independence from the aristocratic patrons was to seek the custom of the emerging middle classes: bourgeois patrons, less educated in art than the nobility, would be more likely to submit to the criteria of artists and buy already made pictures rather than commission specific paintings. Artists seized hungrily this chance to educate the public according to their own notions of what should be good art. As Brewer puts it, British painters gradually realised that, in order to escape the commercial control of the dealer and the interpretative power of the commissioning patron, they had to create their own public. Brewer argues that the answer to the artists' problems – how to reach the public, and how to assert their own authority – was the Royal Academy.<sup>72</sup>

That is what the Exhibition was for: like a market, it displayed goods for sale. The rows about the 'hang' – the distribution of paintings in the scarce wall space of the Great Exhibition Room at the Academy – show the importance attached to this display, and evidence the economic arguments underlying this most commercial facet of the Academy. A painter whose work was hung in a darkened corner or too

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<sup>72</sup> Brewer, *The pleasures of the imagination*, p. 218.

high up could not expect to improve his sales as well as one who had obtained, through more or less questionable methods, a better position.<sup>73</sup>

One of the deepest misgivings about the Exhibition was the worry that public exposure, and particularly to a less than ideal public, would influence artists into lowering their standards and adapting them to the vulgar tastes of the audience, rather than attempting to educate and refine the latter. Reynolds had already warned about this in 1772: 'our Exhibitions, while they produce such admirable effects by nourishing emulation and calling out genius, have also a mischievous tendency, by seducing the Painter to an ambition of pleasing indiscriminately the mixed multitude of people who resort to them.'<sup>74</sup> However, the fact that Reynolds published his *Discourses* (that is, made them available to the public beyond the confines of the Academy), as well as his revolutionary ideas about making comprehensive artistic education available to anyone who could read, seem to point out that he was attempting to accommodate classical academic theory to the circumstances.

Sixty years later, the tendency to pander to the majority was still seen as alarming and deplorable by the Tory periodical *Fraser's Magazine*, although this time it was seen as the fault of the public, not of the artists:

Now-a-days every thing must be for 'the people' - the million. Considered in itself, this might seem rather a matter for congratulation than the contrary; but, unfortunately, instead of educating themselves up to the level of

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<sup>73</sup> See *Art on the line: the Royal Academy exhibitions at Somerset House, 1780-1836*, ed. by Solkin.

<sup>74</sup> Reynolds, 'Discourse V', p. 90.

literature and art, the people demand that both sink down to the level of their taste and comprehension.<sup>75</sup>

Democratization of the arts surely was not one of the aims of the conservative factions of the art world.

All evidence points out to the fact that the art world of the late eighteenth was definitely dominated by the laws of the market. Seen with historical hindsight, it looks as if any attempts to preserve the civic ideals of disinterestedness and public art in the face of swift changes and an increasingly privatised and commercial world were ultimately doomed to fail; nevertheless, attempts were made. It can be argued, as Kay Dian Kriz has done, that the emerging archetype of the Genius, the Romantic ideal of artist who possesses almost supernatural powers of creativity and produces masterpieces (works of art that are above criticism) was one of such attempts.<sup>76</sup>

Between the latter part of the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth, what it meant to be an artist, for himself and for society in general, underwent a process of redefinition. In England, artistic identity was reconstructed, contrived artificially, through a dialectic process in which English artists were defined as such by a series of juxtapositions. One of the main ones, for political reasons, positioned English art as the polar opposite of French art; but artists were also defined in relation to amateurs. The delicate position of artists, ideologically playing a balancing act between the demands of a commercial society and the strictures of elevated academic and civic ideals, with their insistence on the

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<sup>75</sup> 'Our Royal-Academical lounge', *Fraser's Magazine*, July 1832.

<sup>76</sup> Kriz, *The idea of the English landscape painter*, pp. 139-41.

“liberal” status of painting, only could be solved, it seems, by the *deus ex machina* of the Genius, who could easily encompass both seemingly incompatible worlds without contradictions. Reynolds, himself in the cusp between the traditional concept of Genius as exceptional talent and the later definition of the term a quasi-mystical character, had listed the characteristics of the Genius with a hint of the latter, as ‘a power of producing excellencies, which are out of the reach of the rules of art; a power which no precepts can teach, and which no industry can acquire ... What we now call Genius, begins... where known vulgar and trite rules have no longer any place.’<sup>77</sup>

However, although he did acknowledge the power of genius, for Reynolds it was not above rules, nor was it an innate characteristic, as it would be regarded later by the Romantics. Speaking of genius and taste, he wrote that

both, in the popular opinion, pretend to an entire exemption from the restraint of rules. It is supposed that their powers are intuitive, that under the name of genius great work are produced... without our knowing why, and without our being under the least obligation to reason, precept, or experience ... One can scarce state these opinions without exposing their absurdity.<sup>78</sup>

The definition of what constituted a Genius changed during the period covered by this study in such a way that it came to have an implicit meaning that it did not have at the time Reynolds wrote his *Discourses*. However, if the character of the term changed, the importance of the archetype only grew, until it acquired almost magical properties.

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<sup>77</sup> Reynolds, ‘Discourse VI’, pp. 96-97.

<sup>78</sup> Reynolds, ‘Discourse VII’, pp. 120-121.

Although around the turn of the century there had been some voices calling for a more personal, “expressionistic” kind of art in preference to accurate imitation according to strict classical rules (particularly from the very idiosyncratic Fuseli, who had written ‘Expression alone can invest beauty with supreme and lasting command over the eye’<sup>79</sup>), Association Aesthetics was the first theory to consistently support and appreciate a more visible presence of the artist’s personality in the work of art. Andrew Hemingway has analysed the relationship between association aesthetics, its precursor, philosophical criticism, academic theory, and the interests behind these ideologies. Artists generally attempted to maintain the social order and values, whereas the British landed oligarchy (to which belonged most patrons, theorists and connoisseurs), in search of an ideological paradigm that would legitimise their power and cultural influence, turned towards philosophical criticism. As Hemingway writes, the main difference between these two sets of ideas is that academic theory was concerned with the practice of production, as it was addressed to artists, the producers of art; whereas philosophical criticism and association aesthetics, on the other hand, were concerned with the receiver’s response to art.<sup>80</sup>

Archibald Alison, one of the most influential contemporary writers on aesthetics, and proponent of the theory of association aesthetics, regarded imagination as the primary mental faculty. An artist who possessed extraordinary

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<sup>79</sup> Henry Fuseli, ‘Aphorism 99 and Corollary’. Quoted in *The mind of Henry Fuseli*, ed. by Eudo C. Mason (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951), p. 301.

<sup>80</sup> Andrew Hemingway, ‘Academic theory versus association aesthetics: the ideological forms of a conflict of interests in the early nineteenth century’, pp. 18-42.

powers of imagination and who could rouse strong emotional responses in the viewer could be acclaimed as a Genius. Alison said of the Genius:

It is not the art, but the genius of the Painter, which now gives value to his compositions: and the language he employs is found not only to speak to the eye, but to affect the imagination and the heart. It is not now a simple copy we see, nor is our Emotion limited to the cold pleasure which arises from the perception of accurate Imitation. It is a creation of Fancy with which the artist presents us, in which only the greater expressions of Nature are retained.<sup>81</sup>

Kriz has identified that written tributes to the genius of painters at that time, when there was an ongoing debate about the identity and social function of artists, represented an interested opinion. Artists saw the obvious advantages of such a figure, and encouraged it.<sup>82</sup> But within Academic theory, the Genius was a dangerous element if not controlled; if such a force existed, it must be properly harnessed and regulated, so that it fuelled the artist but did not take over more important considerations. The balance between academic traditional adherence to the 'noble simplicity and calm grandeur'<sup>83</sup> of Classicism and Romantic ideas of individual, innate Genius was another dilemma that the Academy faced at the turn of the century.

The increasing disparity between academic dogma and the outside world provoked a certain anxiety among the Academicians. This was probably behind some of the internal conflicts that we shall examine in the next chapter, but the most

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<sup>81</sup> Archibald Alison, *Essays on the nature and principles of taste* (Edinburgh, 1812, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (1<sup>st</sup> ed. London, 1790)), pp. 128-129. Quoted by Kriz, *The idea of the English landscape painter*, p. 86.

<sup>82</sup> Kriz, *The idea of the English landscape painter*.

<sup>83</sup> That was the main characteristic of Greek sculpture, according to Johann Joachim Winckelmann, one of the most influential theorists of Neoclassicism, of which the sentence above is an often quoted paradigm. J.J. Winckelmann, *Reflections on the painting and sculpture of the Greeks* (transl. Henry Fuseli, 1765; facsimile ed., London: Scholar Press, 1972), p.30.



noticeable sign of the Academy's bending to the evidence of a need for change was the rise of alternative forms of high art that were better adapted to contemporary circumstances. As evidenced in the *Discourses* and in the Lectures by the Professors of Painting, the Academy prized history painting above all other genres. This was in accordance with the academic notion of the hierarchy of the genres, which had been inherited from the French Académie.<sup>84</sup> The staunch affiliation of the English Academy to classical ideology involved more than mere reverence for the past. Educating the nascent middle-class public in order for it to appreciate art of an elevated moral character was essential to support the artists' claims for authority. Those claims were based, as we have seen, on the supposed benefits for the nation at large of history painting; artists gained a position of power through the practice of an art that would raise and enrich the nation's morals and manner by commemorating and inspiring heroic deeds – an art that would function as *exemplum virtutis*, meaning 'the work of art whose intention is to teach a lesson in virtue'.<sup>85</sup>

The problem came when success needed to be redefined, as financial success was a term alien to the system of beliefs that placed history painting at the top of the scale. The artists' recently acquired position of prestige in the artistic hierarchy was perceived to be in danger, if they pandered to the debased taste of the new

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<sup>84</sup> A comprehensive introduction to the Académie Royale de Peinture et Sculpture is provided in Gill Perry and Colin Cunningham (eds.), *Academies, Museums, and Canons of Art* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press in association with the Open University, 1999), esp. Linda Walsh, 'Charles Le Brun, "art dictator of France"', pp. 68-123; and Gill Perry, "'Mere face painters"? Hogarth, Reynolds and ideas of academic art in eighteenth-century Britain', pp. 124-168.

<sup>85</sup> Robert Rosenblum, *Transformations in late eighteenth-century art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 56.

public, rather than attempt to shape and improve it. Hence the pervasive warnings against the temptation of lowering standards in order to please the audience. However, history painting was not as financially viable as inferior genres; as Gainsborough had said, 'Sir Joshua either forgets, or does not chuse see [sic] that his instruction is all adapted to form the History Painter, which he must know there is no call for in this country'.<sup>86</sup> Although there was a taste for history painting, the market for it was limited; the artists' dilemma often amounted to choosing between practising High Art and monetary success.

This situation highlighted the problems of strictly following classical ideals; it seemed clear that the English public at large did not have a taste for elevated history painting, since it felt neither addressed nor represented by it. In 1830 Fuseli argued that the 'private' age didn't have causes for celebrating with great works: the lack of glorious history to paint was the problem, not the fact that history painting was wrongly placed at the top of the scale. Ferguson and Adam Smith shared this idea with Fuseli.<sup>87</sup>

Our age, when compared with former ages, has but little occasion for great works, and that is the reason why so few are produced: - the ambition, activity, and spirit of public life is shrunk to the minute detail of domestic arrangements - every thing that surrounds us tends to show us in private, is become snug, less, narrow, pretty, insignificant ... from such selfish trifling to expect a system of Art built on grandeur, without a total revolution, would only be less presumptuous than insane.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Letter from Gainsborough to Hoare, undated. *The letters of Thomas Gainsborough*, p. 112.

<sup>87</sup> John Barrell, *Art in a commercial society*, pp. 119-125.

<sup>88</sup> Henry Fuseli, 'Lecture 12', *Lectures on painting* (London, 1830), p. 129.

Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery, one of the most successful commercial ventures built around the popularisation of history painting in England, owed a large part of its profits to the sale of prints after the paintings displayed. When it closed down in 1804, its failure precipitated the collapse of the print industry, and a definitive blow to the commercial viability of history paintings, which depended heavily on sales of prints. The fact that the Napoleonic wars (and the economic austerity that came with them) were the ultimate cause for Boydell's bankruptcy is in itself a sign of how inextricably linked art was to economics and politics.<sup>89</sup>

By the early nineteenth century it had become quite evident that society was no longer abiding by the rules prescribed by traditional humanism. Even the president of the Royal Academy from 1830, Martin Archer Shee, despite the traditional frame of his ideas, in line with academic tradition, accepted that self-interest was a key force in society:

Interest, self-interest, is the firm supporting pivot on which the whole enginery [of society] rests and turns; want, passion, ambition, are the main springs of its operation; wealth, power, pleasure, glory, luxury, the principal wheels, which ... at length set forward the golden hands of genius and taste.<sup>90</sup>

The reaction to this situation was not adapting to it, but rather trying to change society in order to make it conform to the ideal models, to what it should be. Clearly this was beyond the reach of even the most zealous academician.

Once that it was seen that traditional history painting had failed to promote moral values and at the same time represent Englishness, an alternative had to be

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<sup>89</sup> Laurie Kane Lew, 'Figuring a tradition: Romantic poetics and the writing of English painting, 1769-1860' (PhD thesis, University of Chicago, 1994), p. 38.

<sup>90</sup> Martin Archer Shee, *Rhymes on Art; or, the remonstrance of a painter*. London, 1805, pp. 51-52.

found. Throughout the eighteenth century there had been several attempts to create a new form of art that embodied elevated values, from Hogarth's modern moral subjects (works such as *Marriage a la mode* or *The harlot's progress*) to Wright of Derby's scenes of scientific and intellectual activity (*An experiment with a bird on the air pump*). Solkin argued that Wright's paintings were a new type of moral art, more in the tradition of Hogarth and certainly more English – empirical and with an original character of their own – than the art officially endorsed at the Royal Academy with its Continental bias.<sup>91</sup>

As pan-European ideologies gave way to a rise of nationalism, the need for a uniquely British, and more precisely English, mode of representation became more pressing. Landscape painting, despite its humble beginnings as a lower art form according to the academic hierarchy of genres, would soon acquire the trappings of a noble form of art, able to evoke lofty ideals, and what was becoming increasingly more important, to embody a notion of Englishness.<sup>92</sup> By mid-century, John Ruskin acknowledged that landscape, particularly Turner's, satisfied the need for images of moral grandeur; the established distinction between high and low art, he wrote, had been recently called into question, and the advocates and practitioners of High Art were beginning to be looked upon with doubt, and 'even a certain degree of ridicule'.<sup>93</sup> Since the natural landscape reflected the work of God, its depiction could

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<sup>91</sup> Solkin, *Painting for Money*; and 'ReWrighting Shaftesbury', in *Painting and the politics of culture*, pp. 73-99.

<sup>92</sup> For English landscape painting see: Kriz, *The idea of the English landscape painter*; Rosenthal, 'Landscape as high art', in *Glorious nature: British landscape painting 1750-1850*, pp. 13-30; and *Prospects for the nation: recent essays in British landscape*, ed. by Michael Rosenthal, Christiana Payne and Scott Wilcox (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), esp. Pullan, 'For publicity and profit', pp. 261-284.

<sup>93</sup> John Ruskin, *Modern Painters* (Sunnyside: George Allen, 1888), vol. III, Part IV, chapter I, p.3.

contain a moral purpose: making us aware of God and His work. Turner was, for Ruskin, 'the first poet who has ... understood the grounds of noble emotion which exist in landscape'.<sup>94</sup>

#### 1.4 Reactions to the Royal Academy, 1768-1792: commendations and condemnation

As David Solkin has argued, by the second half of the eighteenth century England had acquired the elements of what can be rightly called a modern art world.<sup>95</sup> The public for the arts had grown accustomed during the century to a growing presence of art in their everyday lives. From decorations in leisure gardens like Vauxhall to schemes such as the Foundling Hospital (which mixed a charitable purpose with the fashionable new custom of viewing exhibitions of works of art), as well as the existence of art in the domestic sphere in the shape of decorated housewares, prints and so forth, art was more accessible than ever.<sup>96</sup>

In this milieu, annual exhibitions of contemporary painting at venues such as the Royal Academy were a welcome novelty. Although some collectors had previously opened their private galleries to a restricted public, the ambitious scheme devised by the Academy was largely unheard of. Contemporary reports

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<sup>94</sup> Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol. III, Part IV, chapter XVII, p. 314.

<sup>95</sup> Solkin, *Painting for money*, p. 2.

<sup>96</sup> For the growing presence of art in everyday life in the eighteenth century, see also: Brewer, *The pleasures of the imagination*, esp. the Introduction; Lawrence Lipking, *The ordering of the arts in eighteenth-century England*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970; and Iain Pears, *The discovery of painting: the growth of interest in the arts in England, 1680-1768* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art), 1988.

speak of their popularity, which grew so much that, after the initial enthusiasm had begun to dissipate, several voices were raised warning about the dangers of exhibitions becoming little more than fashionable lounges. A 1771 political satire was preceded by this description of London attacked by artistic fever: 'As at present the whole town is running helter-skelter after EXHIBITIONS; and as they are staring *all day* at PAINTINGS, SCULPTURES, and DRAWINGS; it is not surprizing that they should *dream* of them *all night*.'<sup>97</sup> Art became so powerful, so dangerous, that the most impressionable elements of the public suffered a sort of *avant-la-lettre* Stendhal Syndrome:

A young Lady, a Foreigner, was so affected with the sight of one of the Pieces [at the RA Exhibition] , that she was obliged to leave the Room with great agitation of spirits. A similar circumstance happened last year, and shows the Power which the Divine Art of Painting has over the Human Mind.<sup>98</sup>

The speed with which art criticism in the press in the form of exhibition reviews spread since the 1760s, with the first exhibition at the Society of Artists and later on the Royal Academy, is worth mentioning as yet another essential element

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<sup>97</sup> Reference in RA volume of press cuttings (no more data available).

<sup>98</sup> 'The Exhibition', *Public Advertiser*, 10 May 1782.

""Stendhal syndrome" has become a commonly used expression to refer to a ... psychological disturbance triggered by a work of art. The term derives from the title of a 1989 book by the Florentine psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, Graziella Magherini. During her many years as chief psychiatrist of the Mental Health Service at Florence's Santa Maria Nuova Hospital, professor Magherini had occasion to observe foreign tourists in the grip of psychiatric crises which were typical of sudden onset, brief and usually benign ... Clinical probing of individual cases enabled Magherini to establish that the impact of artistic masterpieces can touch and bring to the surface repressed emotional experiences. Magherini applied Stendhal's name to the cluster of symptoms she observed and studied, because in 1817 the French writer described a severe malaise he suffered while visiting and viewing the marvels of the church of Santa Croce in Florence.' Quoted in <http://www.auxologia.com/psicoanalisi/pageb.htm>. Magherini's book, *La Sindrome di Stendhal*, has not been translated into English.

of a modern art world being created: the figure of the newspaper art critic, distinct from the connoisseur, was beginning to emerge.

When Sir Joshua Reynolds died in 1792, he left behind him the ultimate monument to his lifelong struggle for recognition of the liberal status of art and the professional authority of artists: the Royal Academy. As has been detailed above, throughout the eighteenth century, English artists had striven for the implementation of an institution that would give weight to their claims that the fine arts were central to the life of the nation; that knowledge of the arts invested one with the attributes of a gentleman, and therefore an important member of society; and that artists, as professional practitioners of the arts, were therefore the ones best entitled to judge and direct the nation in matters of taste. The Academy seemed to accomplish those goals: many contemporary sources – newspaper notices, pamphlets, letters, and so forth – testify to its enormous success during its first three decades of existence. Poems were penned celebrating it in optimistic and even bombastic overtones, such as Benjamin Franklin's eulogy of the creation of the Academy as token of 'a new Augustan Age' when

England's tasteful youth no more,  
shall wander to Italia's classic shore;  
no more to foreign climes shall roam,  
in search of models better found at home.

The King had seen fit to encourage native talent and 'to call the latent seeds of genius forth', by allowing the foundation of the Academy, which would produce England's own Titians and Raphaels, and become a sort of temple where 'Art may join with Nature and with sense – splendour with grace, with taste

magnificence'.<sup>99</sup> The foundation of the Royal Academy was generally regarded as the culmination of the growing prowess and prestige of the nascent British School, the most evident indication of which were the annual exhibitions.

It cannot but yield a noble Satisfaction to every Man of Taste to see the Art of Painting carried to such sublime Heights as it unquestionably is by the Artists of the present Age. This Year's Exhibitions are perhaps the grandest that England ever produced. The Spirit of antient Italy is at length revived, and Raphael, Angelo and Titian seem to live over again in some of our illustrious Countrymen.<sup>100</sup>

The academicians were seen as the torch-bearers of British art, its most representative figures:

The Exhibition of the Royal Academy for 1774 opened ... with more than usual Eclat; the Academicians and Associates having exerted themselves in order to produce that progressive Excellence which can only preserve their own Reputation, and secure the Glory of the British Arts.<sup>101</sup>

Reviewers underlined the popularity of exhibitions with the fashionable London public, which, no doubt, seized this opportunity to display their taste and knowledge of art with glee (fig. 7):

Yesterday the Exhibition of the Artists of the Royal Academy was opened in the new buildings, Somerset House, where a noble suite of rooms ... is adapted for that purpose ... The *tout ensemble* of the present exhibition is allowed, on all hands, to do infinite honour to the British arts; and certainly contains many pictures that will prove lasting monuments of the real genius of the several artists.

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<sup>99</sup> Quoted in *The eighteenth century: art, design and society, 1689-1789*, ed. by Denvir, pp. 190-2. Franklin wrote the poem in commemoration of the first exhibition of the Academy on 26 April 1769. Another poetical effort, 'The Exhibition of Painting - a poem', was advertised in the *London Review*, April 1775. Cutting in the 'Whitley Papers', RA volume.

<sup>100</sup> Anon., *Public Advertiser*, May 1769. Royal Academy Library, press cuttings collection.

<sup>101</sup> "Guido", *Public Advertiser*, 1774. Royal Academy Library, press cuttings collection.



The same review pointed at another of the most noticeable characteristics of the Academy exhibition, its modishness:

The concourse of people of fashion who attended the opening of the Royal Academy exhibition yesterday was incredible: the carriages filled the whole wide space from the New Church to Exeter Change. It is computed that the door-keepers did not take less than £500 yesterday for the admission of the numerous visitants of all ranks.<sup>102</sup>

The Exhibition continued to be regarded as a fashionable place to attend for a long time, even when there were doubts about the mental or moral improvements derived from viewing art:

The late fine weather has caused the Society's Rooms at Somerset-House to be crowded every morning with the *elite* of the fashionable world; so that, independently of the intellectual treat displayed upon the walls, the visitants themselves have afforded an exhibition of no common interest.<sup>103</sup>

The positive vision of the Academy was, obviously, shared by the Academicians themselves, who recorded in their writings their opinion that the arts in England had been saved by the timely institution of the Academy: Reynolds's *Discourses*, and the lectures of the Professors of Painting, reiterate this conviction. Images are equally eloquent. Zoffany's collective portrait, painted in 1771-72, of the founder members of the Royal Academy presented them as polite gentlemen engaged in the scholarly study of anatomy – not a messy palette or dishevelled studio apparel in sight (although the absence of Gainsborough and Dance hints at the implicit differences and ruptures among Academicians). This emphasis on the intellectual, rather than manual nature of the profession is very important, as we

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<sup>102</sup> *Morning Post*, 2 May 1780. 'Whitley Papers', RA volume.

will see later (fig. 8). Two decades later, Henry Singleton's painting of 1795 *The Royal Academicians assembled in their Council Chamber to adjudge the medals to the successful students in Painting, Sculpture, Architecture and Drawing* shows the academicians with an air of confidence which demonstrates how established the institution was by that date. By then, the image suggests, artists did not even need to defend their status by a display of erudite activity; painting had acquired a prestige of its own (fig. 9).

The new stature of the arts was largely regarded as a consequence of the influence of the Academy. As the academician Prince Hoare put it early in the nineteenth century, 'from the rapid progress which the Arts have made since the first academic incorporation in this country, it will hardly be questioned, that such an establishment has greatly contributed to their advancement.'<sup>104</sup> The opening of commercial galleries (Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery, Macklin's Poets' Gallery, and Fuseli's Milton Gallery, all of which displayed paintings and sold prints after them that illustrated great works of English literature) can be read as evidence of the success of the Royal Academy and the other public exhibitions, and their influence in the wider cultural and commercial arena.

The enthusiastic estimation of the Academy as the acme of English art was not restricted to those who witnessed its triumphal beginnings. In the 1830s, the pamphleteer William Paulet Carey sung the Academy's praises, putting it within a

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<sup>103</sup> 'Royal Academy', *The Observer*, 25 May 1828. The reference to a "Society" is probably a mistake – or a way of referring to the Royal Academy, since the review was certainly about the Academy exhibition.

<sup>104</sup> Prince Hoare, *Extracts from a correspondence with the Academies of Vienna and St. Petersburg, on the cultivation of the arts of painting, sculpture and architecture, in the Austrian and Russian dominions* (London, 1802), p. viii.

wider, international context: 'Since the Academy was founded the Arts have made a wonderful advance, and the British Artists are now the first in Europe in every department in which they have received a share of patronage.'<sup>105</sup> Characteristically, Carey noted that the arts had progressed only when they had received patronage; a great part of this author's abundant output was devoted to this cause, which was a controversial point of debate at the turn of the century.

In the middle years of the nineteenth century, even after the Academy's prestige and influence had already suffered a considerable battering, Richard and Samuel Redgrave looked back and described the role it had played during its first years of life, not only in the art world but in the nation at large, in no uncertain eulogistic terms:

The new Academy came into existence at the very happiest possible time for the art of this country, and rapidly gained a high place in public favour; its exhibitions were visited by all classes, and all the most eminent painters of the day were included in its ranks.<sup>106</sup>

In 1862, almost a century after its foundation, William Sandby, in the prologue of the first book devoted to tracing the history of the Academy, could write that the institution had been 'the means of affording so much gratification to the lovers of the arts', and had conferred 'many important advantages upon the professional artists of this country' However, he stated that one of the main reasons that had

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<sup>105</sup> William P. Carey, *Brief remarks on the anti-British effect of inconsiderate criticism on modern art and the exhibitions of the living British artists* (London, 1831), p. 19.

<sup>106</sup> Richard and Samuel Redgrave, *A century of British painters*, p. 35.

impelled him to write were the criticism and attacks the Academy received, a constant occurrence throughout the history of its 100 years.<sup>107</sup>

The fame enjoyed by the Academy overseas was fundamental in its self-perception; placing the artistic output of England on a par with that of its Continental cousins had been one of the main aims of the Academy from the very beginning, and the nurturing role of the Academy in the creation of a British School was paramount in Reynolds's mind. As Ellis K. Waterhouse has argued, the fundamental notion implicit in Reynolds's *Discourses* – which summarised the ideal training that a painter would obtain at the Academy – is that a painter trained at the Academy would be able to prove his talent against the same standards which ruled all of Western art.<sup>108</sup>

The notion that English art was put into perspective when compared – favourably or unfavourably – with other European schools pervaded all writing on art of the period. Martin Archer Shee, an academician at the time who would become President of the Institution years later, referred to the difficult conditions faced by English art before the foundation of the Academy as a stimulus for improvement; those obstacles, he said, did not exist in any other European country.

Under disadvantages of national neglect, and public apathy, which were never before surmounted in any country, the English school has grown and ripened within the reign of his present Majesty to a degree of strength and maturity, which may fairly challenge comparison with the past state of art in this country, and the present state of art in every other country of Europe.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Sandby, *The history of the Royal Academy of Arts*, p. viii.

<sup>108</sup> Ellis K. Waterhouse, *Reynolds* (London: Phaidon Press, 1973), pp. 21-22.

<sup>109</sup> Martin A. Shee, *Rhymes on art* (London, 1805), p. 10.

Eventually, the success of the Academy, together with the emergence of a steady national school of art, would assure its supporters that the two events were inextricably connected.

The Institution of the Royal Academy, in spite of the insinuations against it, has greatly contributed to give a polish to the fine arts through Europe. – What was before accidental is now become systematic; – and so much is France left behind, that at this moment ten young Frenchmen, are students at Somerset House.<sup>110</sup>

The above quote alludes to one of the fundamental tenets of the Academy: that through it England would acquire and develop a native school of art that would contribute to the history of European art and place the nation among her peers. The comparison of England with the sites of classical antiquity was a usual one to denote the heights the native school of art was reaching:

Behold! the Arts around us bloom,  
And this Muse-devoted Dome  
Rivals the works of Athens, and of Rome!<sup>111</sup>

And yet, in the previous quote there is a hint of proud nationalism that rejected the notion of a pan-European tradition to which British art ought to aspire to belong. Young French painters, we are told, are studying at the Royal Academy of London, because the arts are found to be lacking in their country when compared to Britain. The comparisons with French art would become increasingly aggressive as the political situation between the two countries deteriorated, and nationalistic ideas developed.

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<sup>110</sup> *Morning Herald*, 11 August 1787. 'Whitley Papers', RA volume.

<sup>111</sup> *Ode for the opening of the new Exhibition Room of the Royal Incorporated Society of Artists of Great Britain* (London 1772).

However, the Academy did not receive just plaudits. During its first decades of existence, it attracted criticism from several quarters and for different reasons. The association of the Academy with the Crown – the adjective “Royal” – rubbed certain critics the wrong way. In 1769, roughly half a year after the foundation of the Academy, the radical polemicist “Fresnoy” published a tirade denouncing the scandalous conduct of the Academicians, who, ‘urged by the pride and malevolence of their hearts to the destruction of their brethren’, had betrayed the institution that had harboured them by quitting the Society of Artists to create an institution that suited their interest better. Moreover, they had solicited the King’s support for their villainous conduct, and the monarch had assented to their petition, ‘*without farther enquiry*’. “Fresnoy” did not hide his own preference for the Society of Artists, as well as his disapproval of the subversive practice of making an artist a knight:

And though private remonstrances have been made against the cruelty and illegality of this proceeding, and the villainy of the petitioners, instead of palliating the offences committed against the chartered body (who are a set of men possessing no qualities to recommend them but honour, honesty, sense and genius) every mark of disapprobation has been shewn *them*, and every mark of affection bestowed on the *others*; such as making their president a *knight*, and many of them *esquires*, &c. &c. ... If this is not preferring *falsehood* to *truth*, and *new* customs before *old* laws, then I give up the cause.<sup>112</sup> [stressed in the original]

Solkin has identified Fresnoy’s attacks with radical rhetoric, not unusual in the period; it was his targeting of an artistic institution what made him remarkable.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> ‘Fresnoy’, *Middlesex Journal*, 17 August 1769.

<sup>113</sup> Solkin, *Painting for money*, p. 264.

In October of the same year, he resumed his assault on the Academicians with a letter to Reynolds, where he reflected on the deleterious effect their conduct had had on the whole of the art world:

His Majesty's approbation, protection, and patronage of the rebel fellows of the Society of Artists of Great Britain, whom he erected into knights, esquires, &c. &c. alienated many others; which completely divided this respectable body of men, and set the two parts in opposition to each other, and then the rebel Academicians declared open war in the public papers.<sup>114</sup>

And in 1770, the same fierce critic addressed a letter to the King, pointing out the unjust favouritism he showed to the group of artists led by Reynolds, particularly the difference in the titles held by the rival institutions:

The attention of the *virtu, sir*, is at present fixed on the two exhibitions of Spring Garden and Pall Mall; the first, Sir, you gave leave in your CHARTER to call themselves THE SOCIETY OF ARTISTS OF GREAT BRITAIN; the last, you yourself graced and entitled THE ROYAL ACADEMY in your DIPLOMA. Charter and Diploma! Why the difference? You disdain, then, sir, to mingle your royal favour with the vulgar, ardent, honest wishes of the people, in support of the society of artists of Great Britain; and therefore instituted the royal academy, that the plumes of prerogative might nod in triumph over the cap of liberty.<sup>115</sup>

But not everybody shared Fresnoy's contempt towards the royal involvement in the Academy's business. The supporters of the King also made sure that their views could help buttress arguments over the art world. A certain "Dilettante", who was also a staunch defender of Reynolds, viewed it as a guarantee that Britain could be as renowned in the arts as in the battle field:

It has been observed, that for some Years part the Arts have advanced in this Country not by *Steps*, but by *Strides*. – This is, no doubt, in a great measure owing to the *Royal PATRONAGE* and *PROTECTION*: his Majesty is both a Judge

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<sup>114</sup> 'Fresnoy', *Middlesex Journal*, 14-17 October 1769.

<sup>115</sup> "Fresnoy", 'To the K+++', *Middlesex Journal*, 3-5 May 1770. Quoted by Solkin, *Painting for money*, p. 264.

and a Lover of the Arts. The Establishment of the ROYAL ACADEMY at Somerset House does Honour to the present Reign. In short, there is now such a Spirit of *Encouragement* among the Great and Opulent, and so much *Emulation* excited amongst the Artists, that we may hope to see this Country in the Days of George the Third as renowned for ARTS as for ARMS.<sup>116</sup>

The unfair privileges enjoyed by the Academy because of its Royal status were only one of the reasons for the attacks it had to endure. In 1775, the printmaker Robert Strange published a pamphlet denouncing the Royal Academy for its exclusionist policy of not admitting engravers as full members.<sup>117</sup> According to strict academic hierarchy, which conceded them a lower status than sculptors or painters in watercolours, printmakers could only aspire to the post of Associate Engraver.<sup>118</sup> Prints were regarded only as a means of diffusion of paintings, not as works of art on their own right. However, by relegating printmakers to a secondary role, the Academy was giving proof of its short-sighted stance in certain practical matters because the growth in the market for prints meant that art, even if in the form of cheap and often crude reproductions, could reach a larger public. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, societies for the exhibition of prints and works in watercolours were created in an attempt to fill a niche left void by the Academy.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> "Dilettante", *Public Advertiser*, April 1774.

<sup>117</sup> Robert Strange, *An inquiry into the establishment of the Royal Academy of Arts to which is prefixed a letter to the Earl of Bute* (London, 1775).

<sup>118</sup> The class of Associate Engravers was created only three months after the foundation of the Academy. Sandby, *The history of the Royal Academy of Arts*, p. 128.

<sup>119</sup> For printmaking and its relationship with painting, see: David Alexander and Richard T. Godfrey, *Painters and engraving. The reproductive print from Hogarth to Wilkie* (exh. cat.) (New Haven & London: Yale Center for British Art, 1980); and Anthony Dyson, *Pictures to print: the nineteenth-century engraving trade* (London: Farrand Press, 1984).

For watercolours and the societies created to cater for painters in this media, see: Jane Bayard, *Works of splendor and imagination: the exhibition watercolour 1770-1870* (exh. cat.) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); Adrian Bury, "The Royal Society of Painters in Water-



Oliver Goldsmith, who was present at the first Academy dinner (so it can be presumed that he had first-hand knowledge of the Academicians' ideas), had a pragmatic view of the Academy and the role it played in the English art world:

Academies cannot create genius ... but they may assist in the wise development of such original powers, they may guide and regulate their prudent and successful application; and *above all, they may and do strengthen the painter's claims to consideration and esteem* ... This was the main wise drift of Reynolds and his fellow-labourers.<sup>120</sup> [my stress]

And later on, James Northcote, Reynolds's pupil, would assert that being a member of the Royal Academy, among other advantages, 'ensured a man good places for his works in the annual exhibition'.<sup>121</sup>

To a certain extent, the Academy succeeded in its endeavour. In 1832, in his address to the students after the distribution of medals, the then President, Martin Archer Shee, reminded them 'that their advantages were not surpassed in any existing school of art'.<sup>122</sup> Despite the partisan attacks, and the professional jealousies of other artists, by the final decade of the eighteenth century the Royal Academy was the focus of the English art world. However, this state of things was soon to change.

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Colours', in *The Connoisseur* (March 1946), pp. 18-24; Michael Clarke, *The tempting prospect: a social history of English watercolours*, (London: British Museum Publications, 1981); John L. Roget, *A history of the 'Old Water-Colour' Society*. 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1891); and Andrew Wilton and A. Lyles, *The great age of British watercolours, 1750-1880* (exh. cat.) (London & Munich: Royal Academy of Arts, 1993).

<sup>120</sup> John Forster, *Life and times of Oliver Goldsmith*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (1877), vol. II, pp. 245-6.

<sup>121</sup> Northcote, *Conversations of James Northcote with James Ward*, p. 161.

<sup>122</sup> W. Sandby, *The history of the Royal Academy of Arts*, p. 77.

## Chapter 2

### The Royal Academy after Reynolds's death

Alas! Poor Sir Joshua! How many melancholy consequences have taken place since your removal!<sup>123</sup>

Reynolds was the driving force of the Academy, in many senses. His prestige as one of the most successful British painters of all time rubbed off in the institution, and his ideology, expounded in the *Discourses* delivered annually at the Academy as well as published, permeated the teachings of the Professors of Painting for many years. The identification between the painter and the institution was so deep that a long time after his death he was still being referred to as *the* President. After his demise in 1792, however, the Academy, his creation, seemed to start losing some of its steam and lustre.

#### 2.1 Conflict and decadence

This sense of decline, identified by many with the death of the Academy's first President, can be gleaned from the press, in the reviews of the annual Exhibitions:

On the whole, we think the Exhibitions of the Royal Academy, since the death of Sir Joshua Reynolds, have been declining: and we consider this a symptom of, we hope, only a temporary declension of the fine arts.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Barry, Appendix to *A letter to the Dilettanti Society* (1799), p. 61.

<sup>124</sup> 'Remarks on the exhibition of paintings, drawings, etc. at the Royal Academy, Somerset-Place', 1794. In a volume of press cuttings at the Royal Academy, 1794-1818.

And the following year, the critic for the *Morning Chronicle* lamented much the same thing:

When in some of the succeeding Exhibitions we saw the walls of these rooms beaming with the brilliant Portraits of Sir Joshua Reynolds, whose Imitation assumed the energy of Life ... - When we saw, in the little simple stories of Mr. Gainsborough, Nature displayed, as in a mirror, - When we saw these, without enumerating the works of many other highly respectable Artists who are now no more, we thought there was some reason to hope that the President's wish would be in a degree realised; but we are sorry to say, that, from all the Exhibitions which we have seen at the Royal Academy for several years, there does not seem the least prospect of the *dignity of the dying art* being revived under the reign of George III.<sup>125</sup>

The last sentence paraphrases of the end of Reynolds's 'First Discourse'; this would not have been lost on most readers, since the *Discourses* enjoyed a wide popularity beyond the Academy.

Another reviewer lamented the dearth of erudite artists who could hold their own with the connoisseurs, as Reynolds had done:

On the whole, this exhibition possesses many and various effects of real talents; but the general and marked character of those talents is want of learning and of the habit in the artists of associating and conversing with learned men. Since the death of Sir Joshua Reynolds we see artists crouching to men of rank and wealth, and to the proprietors of ornamented books whatever their character and views.<sup>126</sup>

On the occasion of the 35<sup>th</sup> Exhibition at the Royal Academy, in 1803, the critic of the *Monthly Magazine* assumed that there was a general decline of the art since the times of Reynolds, Gainsborough and Barry. Adding to this slightly tarnished image, he proceeded to tell the story of West's *Hagar and Ishmael*, one of the most notorious conflicts at the Academy that year. Another periodical reviewing the

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<sup>125</sup> 'Royal Academy', *Morning Chronicle*, 8 May 1795.

exhibition remarked that 'since the death of the late President, no English artist possesses genius, to command success in this line'.<sup>127</sup>

What gave this impression of decadence? The Academy had enjoyed many years of prosperity and popularity, and although the complaint that the exhibits were each year worse than the previous one was a common refrain in the press, the positive reviews extolling the advance of the art evidenced by the works on display were equally recurrent. In 1794, for instance, Anthony Pasquin wrote: 'This exhibition, on the whole, is such as indicates a rapid decay of that species of merit, which constitutes an able artist'; whilst the critic for the *Morning Advertiser* said of the same exhibition that it was 'more creditable to the country than that of last year, and proves the encreasing [sic] fame of our artists'.<sup>128</sup>

Besides, the Academy still counted among its members some of the best painters of the time: artists such as Lawrence, Opie, Beechey, Hoppner, Turner and Shee. However, since Reynolds's death and Romney's retirement, a few years after, it was felt that no contemporary artist, either in or outside the Academy, could be compared favourably with their immediate antecedents. The English School, established at last by painters of the calibre of Hogarth, Gainsborough or Reynolds, was perceived at the turn of the century to be languishing a little after the disappearance of those luminaries.

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<sup>126</sup> *St. James's Chronicle*, 1797. 'Whitley Papers'.

<sup>127</sup> 'Monthly retrospect of the fine arts', *The Monthly Magazine* (June 1803), p. 437. 'Royal Academy: remarks on the exhibition of its productions of the present year'. In a volume of press cuttings at the Royal Academy, 1794-1818 (1803).

<sup>128</sup> Anthony Pasquin, *A liberal critique on the present exhibition of the Royal Academy: being an attempt to correct the national taste, to ascertain the state of the polite arts of this period; and to rescue merit from oppression* (London, 1794); 'Royal Academy', *Morning Advertiser*, April 1794.

The fact that most of the renowned Academicians at the time were portrait or landscape painters – a point that no observer of the arts could fail to miss – certainly must have rankled. Shortly after Reynolds's death, the *Morning Post* attacked portraiture as a 'servile province of the arts, so pernicious to science, and dishonourable to the institution [of the Academy]'. The exhibition that year, 1797, 'like the others of this vain Nation in preceding years, is more filled with Human Portraits than the greater and more sublime instances of Art.'<sup>129</sup> In 1803, the same periodical reported that there was no history painting of importance at the Academy Exhibition; this was, the reviewer reasoned, because 'neither private munificence, nor the public establishments of the country, afford any adequate encouragement to this high department of the art.'<sup>130</sup> A few years later, in 1810, the *Monthly Magazine* reviewed the Exhibition of that year, summarising it by concluding that the British School was good in portrait and landscape, improving in colour and drawing, and poor in history.<sup>131</sup>

However, the insistence on history painting by the Academy was increasingly in opposition with the current political situation. Being immersed in war with France impacted negatively on the spirit and the economics of the art world; the appropriation of classical themes by French Revolutionary artists such as David precluded their use by English painters, who had to turn to other subjects.

Benjamin West, the successor to Reynolds in the Presidency, was a rare figure: a successful history painter, albeit one whose success was mainly due to his being

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<sup>129</sup> *The Morning Post*, 2 May 1797.

<sup>130</sup> 'Royal Academy', *The Morning Post*, 3 May 1803.

<sup>131</sup> 'Monthly retrospect of the fine arts', *Monthly Magazine*, July 1810, p. 577.

patronised directly by the Crown.<sup>132</sup> As we have seen, history painting usually did not generate much profit, as the case of poor James Barry and his financially disastrous commitment to the genre demonstrated. Under the Presidency of West, British art managed to gain in scope and ambition. Its beginnings had been so auspicious, and there was such a widespread belief that nurturing native talent with increased funding would only produce more, that when West became President there were great expectations for the English School – and he declared as much in his inaugural address. But at the same time English art lost some of its unity of purpose and distinctive character.<sup>133</sup>

West's successor, Thomas Lawrence, was a portrait painter; and despite his technical virtuosity and his enormous success, which reached well beyond Britain, he must have felt less confident in himself and his position than his predecessors. Lawrence inherited an Academy for which things were beginning to look worse; its internal conflicts and scandals, such as the Provis affair, also known as the Venetian secret scandal (which will be dealt with in detail in chapter 5.1) were aired in the press and via tendentious pamphlets, like the one that appeared in 1815 with a self-explanatory – and not devoid of sarcasm – title, *The rejected pictures, &c. with descriptive sketches of the several compositions by some ci-devant and other cognoscenti (being a supplement to the Royal Academy Catalogue of 1815) to which are added a few of the secret reasons for their rejection, by a distinguished member of the Hanging Committee*. All of the above added to the already mentioned widespread sense of decadence of the arts in general and of the Academy in particular. In the decade between 1820

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<sup>132</sup> Funnell, 'The London art world', p. 156.

<sup>133</sup> Hodgson & Eaton, *The Royal Academy and its members 1768-1830*, p. 169.

and 1830, which coincided with Lawrence's presidency, the Academy was systematically criticised as an aristocratic monopoly and a corrupt body by reformists, whose views were represented by periodicals such as *The Examiner*, edited by Leigh Hunt (who was related to West).<sup>134</sup>

On a personal level, Lawrence's presidency of an institution firmly attached to academic theory put him in an awkward position, because he, like Reynolds before him, owed his prestige to the – according to the hierarchy of genres – lower practice of portraiture. But Lawrence was no Reynolds. His self-portrait, painted only at the insistence of George IV, shows him in everyday clothes as opposed to the full ceremonial regalia sported by both Reynolds and West in their respective self-portraits, and which the King had suggested him to adopt.<sup>135</sup> One can speculate as to how this more modest representation of himself could reflect Lawrence's view of his position as less sure than that of his illustrious predecessors. (figs. 10, 11, 12)

Reynolds had told Lawrence: 'In you, Sir, the world will expect to see accomplished what I have failed to achieve'.<sup>136</sup> Reynolds believed in the Vasarian notion of progress of the arts that underpinned his *Discourses*, and he would fully expect the tradition that he had upheld to be transmitted by a line of followers. However, as we shall see, the true heir to Reynolds's heritage was not Lawrence, but Turner. The first President would have been surprised, to say the least, that his

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<sup>134</sup> Andrew Hemingway, 'Academic theory vs. association aesthetics', p. 29. See also Colin Trodd, 'The authority of art: cultural criticism and the idea of the Royal Academy in mid-Victorian Britain', *Art History*, 20:1 (1997), pp. 3-22.

<sup>135</sup> *From Reynolds to Lawrence. The first 60 years of the Royal Academy of Arts and its collections* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1991), p. 26.

<sup>136</sup> William T. Whitley, *Artists and their friends in England, 1700-1799* (London, 1928), vol. II, p. 129.

precepts had been realised in the field of landscape rather than history painting, although his remark to Lawrence seems to indicate that he was aware, if reluctantly, that historical art would eventually lose its pre-eminent position.

The first decades of the nineteenth century saw a proliferation of calls for state patronage and encouragement for public art, mainly by academicians such as Hoare (*Epochs of the arts, including hints on the use and progress of painting and sculpture in Great Britain*, 1813) or Shee (*Rhymes on art; or, the remonstrance of a painter*, 1805, and *A letter to the President and Directors of the British Institution; containing the outline of a plan for the national encouragement of historical painting in the United Kingdom*, 1809), but not exclusively (John Robert Scott's *A dissertation on the progress of the fine arts* of 1804, and William P. Carey's *Observations on the primary object of the British Institution*, of 1829, are two examples). The market-like nature of the English art world meant that most of the wealth invested in it emanated from private individuals. Academic ideology, with its stress on the concept of 'public good', pressed for funding to come directly from the state; it was assumed that it was one of the responsibilities of the government to provide support for the arts, which in turn would function as efficient indicators of the wellbeing of the nation.

Artists who believed in and advocated Academic Theory would certainly feel more comfortable with a situation in which works of art were financed by the munificence of the nation at large, rather than the outright materialism of a patron-painter relationship based on a simple commercial transaction. If patrons were mere customers, then artists were reduced to producers of commodities. Attitudes were certainly changing, but within the rarefied ideological atmosphere of the Royal Academy, this state of affairs would cause a good amount of disquiet that added to



the feeling of uneasiness between its members.

As will have become apparent, one of the most notable and vociferous advocates of Academic Theory was the Irish-born painter James Barry, who carried his convictions to extremes the rest of his contemporaries were not quite ready to embrace. Elected Academician in 1773, he refused to work in any of the 'lesser' genres, and devoted his career and his life to the advancement of history painting in England:

History painting and sculpture should be the main views of every people desirous of gaining honour by the arts. These are tests by which the national character will be tried in after ages, and by which it has been, and is now, tried by the natives of other countries.<sup>137</sup>

Barry's first book, *An inquiry into the real and imaginary obstructions to the acquisition of the arts in England* (1775) was a vehement plea for the furthering of history painting. His unwavering support of civic republican ideals made him suspicious of modern commercial society, but even so, he firmly believed that high art could address and hopefully help to correct such a society (his radical political ideas did not help, nor did the fact that painting of historic subjects with an exemplary purpose was embraced by revolutionary France). In 1777, putting his ideas into practice, he undertook free of charge the decoration of the Great Room of the Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce at the Adelphi with a complex programme of mural paintings that illustrated the parallel advancement of art and

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<sup>137</sup> J. Barry, 'An inquiry into the real and imaginary obstructions to the acquisition of the arts in England', in *Works*, vol. II, p. 248. See also William L. Pressly, *The life and art of James Barry* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 1981), and the exhibition catalogue *James Barry: the artist as hero* (London: Tate Gallery, 1983); and John Barrell, *The political theory of painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt*, pp. 163-221.

society (fig. 13). This monumental work, which took him seven years and practically ruined him, was critically acclaimed, but the lack of financial support for the genre, despite all his efforts, discouraged Barry greatly. Neither his belief in history painting and his own ability, nor his willingness to endure sacrifices for the sake of his art, safeguarded him from the disillusionment caused by seeing elevated art ignored in favour of inferior genres.

Barry was elected Professor of Painting in 1782, but his paranoid behaviour soon got him into trouble. He quarrelled with Reynolds, and insulted him in his lectures, although later they would be reconciled and Barry delivered a eulogy after the death of the President. Early in 1797, during one of his lectures, his paranoia became evident when he made reference to having been the victim of a burglary which 'He did not impute to thieves but to *Cotemporaries* who desired to interrupt all his laudable views'; soon afterwards, Barry and his eccentricities were on everybody's lips, with Smirke mentioning to Farington that he regarded his lectures as containing very little information, and Nollekens relating an anecdote about how he and Barry had exchanged hats in Rome for the latter's fear of being assassinated.<sup>138</sup> The criticisms on the Academy continued:

Northcote was at Barry's Lecture last night, - who slightly ran over that part which related to painting, eager to commence his abuse of the Academy. He told the Students that the Academy possessed £16,000 which ought to be laid out for their benefit in pictures, - said He had had a conversation with a person (meaning West) who as usual was mysterious, and wished to postpone purchasing as probably the Spanish pictures will be brought from the Escorial &c. but that, said Barry, is like waiting for the Sky to fall to catch Larks, - better to set traps & gins &c. now. - At different periods the Students clapped, & Barry bowed. Only Wilton & Northcote, of Academicians, present.

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<sup>138</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 29 January, 1 and 3 February 1797.

Northcote said He sunk his head into his great Coat that He might not be known.<sup>139</sup>

Things had reached an unbearable point in 1798, when Barry published the incendiary *Letter to the Dilettanti Society respecting the obtention of certain matters essentially necessary for the improvement of public taste, and for accomplishing the original views of the Royal Academy of Great Britain*, in which, besides reflecting on the role of artists in society, he accused the Academy of mispending funds, of robbing him, and more generally, of not attaining the aims for which it had been founded. Understandably, the book raised a massive outcry within the ranks of the institution. Farington managed the affair together with Northcote, Wilton, West and Smirke among others privately at first, before submitting the matter to the consideration of the Council.<sup>140</sup> Fuseli and Opie were against violent measures, but the case was considered to require them, and on 16 March a Committee was appointed 'to investigate the charges brought against the Professor of Painting'. On 23 April, St. George's Day, the King was shown the following letter, which he approved of:

To Mr. Barry,

Sir, the General Assembly having recd. the report of the Committee appointed to investigate your Academical conduct, decided that you be removed from the Office of Professor of Painting, and, by a Second vote, that you be expelled from the Royal Academy.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 13 February 1799.

<sup>140</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 28 February and 3 March 1799.

<sup>141</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 23 April 1799.

Barry's name was struck out from the roll of Academicians 'as signed by himself', and he was formally expelled, the only Royal Academician in the history of the institution to have brought upon himself such punishment.

His notoriety aside, Barry was not alone in demanding official patronage for history painting and the arts in general. As mentioned, his fellow academicians Prince Hoare and Martin Archer Shee both published works where they argued the need for such measures, resorting to grand arguments if need be:

It is the policy of a great nation to be liberal and magnificent; to be free of her rewards, splendid in her establishments, and gorgeous in her public works ... [those] produce large returns of respect and consideration from our neighbours and competitors ... elevate us above the animal and the machine, and make us triumph in the powers and attributes of man.<sup>142</sup>

Outside the Academy, the historical painter Benjamin Robert Haydon also campaigned for public funding for the arts, particularly history painting, throughout his career. In entries in his *Diary* dated 1812, after complaining about private patrons who did not commission large pieces due to the size of their houses (paintings of large size were a constant preoccupation for Haydon, who was even caricatured about it), he concluded that the state should be in charge of encouraging the arts, because 'individual effort, without support, can go but to a certain extent.'

All the Historical attempts of the Country have been for nothing; Hogarth & the rest adorned the Foundling for nothing, Barry painted the Adelphi for nothing, Reynolds & West &c offered to grace St. Paul's without remuneration, and latterly Fuzeli ... made a gigantic effort in his Theatre Gallery without support, without Patronage ... While the Painters have been making such praeternatural effort without one smile, without one finger stretched forward to save them from destruction, the Portrait painter & the Sculptor have been nursed & pampered with splendid prices and every comfort & luxury. While great Nobles have thrown with a profuse hand to

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<sup>142</sup> Shee, *Rhymes on art*, p. xxii.

them, not only have the Painters in the higher walk of Art been neglected, but Patrons & Critics have taken the pains to prove that great Pictures are useless at the very time they are employing Sculptors ... The People or the Patron as an individual can do nothing. We don't want individual support only; we want public assistance, we want Parliament to vote Pictures as well as Statues to the Heroes or the Legislators of the Country - then indeed would a field be open, and from the industry of the Arts, then indeed would the Country spring to its proper station.<sup>143</sup>

He pressed the matter further in his Lectures of 1846, heavily criticising that 'the Art is becoming naturally a mere commercial speculation, or annual lottery', and continued:

Though all the critics blame the artists annually for the want of elevated subjects, is that their fault? ... They bring out what they are obliged to paint; they bring to market the goods which will sell ... Till a more enlightened system of patronage be in force, the Annual Exhibitions will be no test of the extent of British genius.<sup>144</sup>

Another non-Academician who pursued the matter was the prolific (and prolix) pamphleteer William Paulet Carey, who got into a well-publicised row about historical art with the fiery Haydon.<sup>145</sup> Carey proclaimed not to be attached to any Institution; however, he considered that both public and private patronage were equally acceptable: 'There ... ought to be created, a constant fund of patronage, duly flowing to historical painting, from Government or the people, or both, to develop high intellectual excellence in the arts.'<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> *The diary of Benjamin Robert Haydon*, ed. by Willard Bissell Pope (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), vol.1, pp. 259-265 (5-19 December 1812).

<sup>144</sup> Benjamin Robert Haydon, *Lectures on painting and design*, vol.2, pp. x-xi.

<sup>145</sup> *The Literary Chronicle* carried most of the reports of the quarrel (1819).

<sup>146</sup> W.P. Carey, *Brief remarks on the anti-British effect of inconsiderate criticism on modern art and the exhibitions of the living British artists* (London, 1831), pp. 5-6. See also his *Observation on the primary object of the British Institution and of the provincial institutions for the promotion of the fine*

There are several reasons as to why these calls remained largely unanswered; the arts were no more worthy of attention than many other causes, and state finances were tight during the Napoleonic period. Linda Colley has suggested that propagandistic patriotism of the kind enthusiastically brandished by artists was actually a deterrent to the government: patriotic fervour was, if not actively discouraged, certainly not encouraged, and left to private entrepreneurs and organisations such as the British Institution.<sup>147</sup>

Despite the Academy's strong adherence to tradition, there were many indicators that ideologies were changing and new theories were being embraced – not only economic ones. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, Shee decried Neoclassicism as commonplace and no longer avant-garde; in fact, eighteenth-century classicism, that 'exclusive creed' that did not look to Nature 'but through Grecian eyes' was denounced as being embraced by bigoted fools only.<sup>148</sup>

Notwithstanding its lofty ideology, in practice the Academy was a heterogeneous group of ambitious individuals intent on social-climbing and acquisition of authority and power in their own professional field. It is not surprising, then, that some of the most virulent disputes that shook it were not caused by external criticisms, but internal conflicts. The first years of the nineteenth

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*arts, showing the necessity, the wisdom, and the moral glory of cherishing a national spirit in the patronage of the British School* (Newcastle, 1829).

<sup>147</sup> Linda Colley, 'Whose nation? Class and national consciousness in Britain 1750', *Past and present*, 113 (Nov. 1986), pp. 97-117; pp. 116-7. The role of political prints and nationalistic caricatures falls outside the scope of this dissertation; see David Bindman, *The shadow of the guillotine* (London: British Museum Publications, 1989); Diana Donald, *The age of caricature: satirical prints in the reign of George III* (New Haven: Yale University Press for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 1996); and M.D. George, *English political caricature*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1959) for an introduction to the subject.

<sup>148</sup> Shee, *Elements of art* (London, 1809), Canto I, p. 42.

century were rife with trouble, stormy Council meetings, intrigues and personal abuse. Although the official minutes remain mostly silent about these conflicts, echoes reached the press, through gossip and pamphlets published by the factions in conflict; besides, we know about many of these fights through Farington's *Diary*, an excellent inside source that paints a most vivid depiction of the cutthroat art world of the time.

In 1803, two major disputes at the Academy transcended its walls. The first of these was the conflict between the Council and the General Assembly, which led to the suspension of five members of the Council. John Singleton Copley described in his *Concise vindication* how unjustly James Wyatt, John Yenn, John Soane, Sir Francis Bourgeois and himself (although the pamphlet is signed by an anonymous 'Authority') had been expelled due to the machinations of an enemy party within the Assembly which, jealous of the power of the Council, had tried to wrest some of it. 'It had long been a favourite object of policy with the party', complained Copley, 'to obtain the appointment of committees, from the General Assembly, for the purpose of transacting business which, properly, fell within the province of the Council.'<sup>149</sup> This, he argued, went against the regulations of the Academy, which had instituted the Council as executive power. Copley identified Farington as 'the avowed and active leader of the confederacy', which had already caused some grief during Reynolds's presidency; Dance and Flaxman were also members of the party.<sup>150</sup> Not long afterwards, John Landseer the engraver (and father of Sir Edwin

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<sup>149</sup> [J.S. Copley], *A concise vindication of the conduct of the five suspended members of the Council of the Royal Academy* (London, 1804), p. 37.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 14, 33-34.

Landseer) refuted Copley's accusations as a malicious public accusation, 'penned in affected candour'.<sup>151</sup>

The second conflict took place around the exhibition of West's *Hagar and Ishmael*. Some newspapers had reported on the dilemma faced by the Hanging Committee of the Academy about this picture, which had been recognised as having been shown before, and therefore according to the Academy rules could not be submitted again for exhibition. West had heard nothing about it until he read the report in the *Courier*; he admitted that he had forgotten that he had submitted the painting previously, but in any case, he adduced, it had been repainted and was 'an entirely new picture, the canvas and the stretching frame alone remaining'. The fact that the matter had come to public light caused more trouble than the incident itself; the General Assembly discussed prosecuting the Editors of those newspapers which had, in the Academy's view, vilified the Institution. Some evidence points at Copley as the source of the exposé; the atmosphere in the Academy was one of suspicion and constant intrigue.<sup>152</sup> The press called it a 'disgraceful contest' and shortly afterwards, a pamphlet was published about the affair, entitled *A rap for the P.R.A.; or, Three words to Mr. West, on his attempts to pass off an Old Lady of 76, for a Beauty of Eighteen Hundred and Three, with glances at Mr. Copley's Three Graces*, by a 'Peter Canvas'.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> [John Landseer], *A concise review of the concise vindication of the conduct of the five suspended members of the Council of the Royal Academy*, London, 1804, pp. 5,7.

<sup>152</sup> Whitley, *Art in England 1800-1820* (Cambridge, 1928), pp. 54-55.

<sup>153</sup> In a volume of press cuttings at the Royal Academy, vol. II, 1794-1818 (1803).



West's problems did not end that year. In December 1804, the antagonism of a certain faction within the Academy resolved itself in an attempt to oust West from the presidential seat, and to place James Wyatt in his stead. West stayed, but was nevertheless obliged to resign the presidency the following year.

1805 saw another dispute regarding the annual Exhibition – again, a mere excuse for the airing of personal antipathies and the antagonistic positions of rival factions. Farington was called to order by the General Assembly because of his acceptance of a work submitted late, a portrait of the actor Master Betty by his friend Northcote which was in direct competition with a similar painting by Opie.<sup>154</sup> The hanging of works at the Exhibition was a political affair, with artists competing with each other, trying to curry favour with the members of the Hanging Committee. It was the source of many of the conflicts at the Academy, rivalries, envy and accusations of favouritism. As a periodical complained, 'it is a public insult that Intrigues and Cabals, however sanctioned, should exclude the first artists in the Nation from public view.'<sup>155</sup> The situation had not improved 15 years later: 'Cabal and wrangling have increased, and works still occupy prime situations which would disgrace a broker's shop, while excellent productions are placed in corners, or excluded altogether.'<sup>156</sup>

Another source of conflict was the election of new members, or of the different official positions within the Academy. Farington was at the centre of many a storm caused by his incessant wheeling and dealing (fig. 14). His *Diary* is replete with

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<sup>154</sup> Whitley, *Art in England 1800-1820* (Cambridge, 1928), pp. 89-92.

<sup>155</sup> *St James's Chronicle*, 26-28 April 1785.

<sup>156</sup> In a volume of press cuttings at the Royal Academy, vol. II, 1794-1818 (1800).

notes about which artists had visited him with the purpose of influencing his vote; for instance, he wrote in 1796:

Beechey called on me this afternoon on account of the ensuing election of an Academician. - He said He called because some attention of the kind towards the Academicians had been common, and He would not be thought indifferent about the event of the election.<sup>157</sup>

Similar visits took place at most of the other Academicians' lounges. Turner, among others, was not averse to these techniques: already in 1798 he had got Farington's assurance that he would vote for him to be elected an Associate, as well as the promises of Nollekens, Gilpin, Bacon and Bourgeois; however, he was defeated at the election that time.<sup>158</sup>

This practice obviously engendered as many hostilities and rivalries as it did alliances; the sculptor Thomas Banks loathed Farington and his crony Robert Smirke, who had defeated him at an election to the Keepership of the Academy in 1804, although in the end the King had declined to accept Smirke as Keeper. Banks wrote in a letter about the incident:

With respect to my success in my canvas for the Keepership of the Royal Academy, it is just as much as I expected; my antagonist Mr Smirke with his friend Mr Farington having been laying out for it at least these two years by every means that secret influences and intrigue could employ among the members of the Royal Academy, so that I could hardly think of succeeding against such powerful rivals.<sup>159</sup>

Another instance of trouble at the Academy, one during which the Academicians showed an united front against one of their number, was the dispute

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<sup>157</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 7 December 1796.

<sup>158</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 26 September and 24 October 1798.

<sup>159</sup> Quoted by Whitley, *Art in England 1800-1820* (Cambridge, 1928), pp. 86-87.

over Soane's fourth lecture. In 1810, Sir John Soane referred to Smirke's recently erected Covent Garden Theatre as an example of a composition in which the entrance front was unsatisfactorily related to the side elevation. The Academy promptly informed him that no criticisms on the productions of living artists were to be included into lectures delivered at the institution. This infuriated Soane, who declined to give his next lecture, and this led to the lectures in architecture being suspended for nearly two years, and talk of resignation on Soane's part. Eventually, the breach was sealed.<sup>160</sup>

Younger Academicians, among them Martin Archer Shee, called for reforms. It was becoming obvious that these fights, which showed the tendency of the Academy to have petty arguments and its lack of internal unity made it lose lustre and prestige, which had been so essential to its self-image.

## 2.2 The enemies of the RA: Benjamin Robert Haydon and the 1835-36 Parliamentary Enquiry

During the first third of the nineteenth century, the Royal Academy would sustain attacks from outside its ranks as well as internal conflicts. As we saw in Chapter 1, the Academy received both positive and negative reviews from different quarters. The war with the connoisseurs, which will be dealt with in depth in Part II, was the most conspicuous antagonism of all, in which the battle lines were drawn along clear-cut social divides.

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<sup>160</sup> Dorothy Stroud, *Sir John Soane architect* (London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1984), pp. 80-1.

John Pye, criticising the alliance of the academy and the King, which created a virtual monopoly on the profits from art exhibitions in London in the last decades of the eighteenth century, remarked that those artists living in neglect 'sought to emancipate themselves by obtaining the patronage of the crown'; the Royal Academy aimed to educate future artists, as if the cause of the poor situation of the English art world was a scarcity of talent, when the real root of the problem was, according to him, attributable to by-now traditional reasons: a lack of art education in the people, the fashion for collecting Old Masters, and the ignorance of the government as to the value of native talent to such a great and commercial people as the British.<sup>161</sup>

But the Academy also received attacks from other artists, provoked either by jealousy of the status of Academicians (which proved that the Academy had gained its objective of elevating the professional standing of its members), or by mistrust of the ambiguous marriage of theory and practice implemented by the Academy. Of the latter, the most notable case was Benjamin Robert Haydon.

Haydon saw himself as a martyr for the cause of high art; he introduced himself and signed as 'Benjamin Robert Haydon, historical painter' (although some of his most acclaimed works were genre paintings in a style similar to that of his friend Wilkie). He repeatedly blamed his lack of success on the ignorance and meanness of the public and the authorities rather than on his own deficiencies. He had a completely disproportionate opinion of his own skills, and a stormy temper that got him into trouble too often. There may have been a market for history

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<sup>161</sup> John Pye, *Patronage of British art* (London 1845), pp. 289-290.

painting, but Haydon's exaggerated ambition, average talent and arrogance thwarted his dreams of glory.

Haydon particularly despised connoisseurs who proclaimed themselves arbiters of taste in art (a role that he, like most of his fellow painters both in and outside the Academy, believed belonged properly to artists), and complained about their interferences in his 1816 pamphlet *On the judgement of connoisseurs* being preferred to that of professional men. But he soon found himself another enemy: the Royal Academy. The origin of Haydon's hostility lies in the way the Academy dealt with his ambitious painting of 1809, *The assassination of Dentatus* (fig. 15). It had been promised a good place at the Exhibition Great Room, but finally it was relegated to a less prominent position in the Anteroom. Haydon was mortally aggrieved and considered it a personal insult ('by the rascality of Mr West it was hung so that nobody could see it'<sup>162</sup>), ascribed it to jealousy and intrigue, and from then on started a one-man war against the Academy, which he accused of wilfully hindering the improvement of art: 'There are three great points of hindrance to the advance of the higher walks in this country: the perversion of the Royal Academy, the neglect of the Government, and the prejudices of the People.'<sup>163</sup>

My object is not my own aggrandizement on the ruins of others, but to reform and direct those who have the means of aggrandizing the Art. Let me but see a desire in the Academy to foster instead of crush ... and that instant will I

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<sup>162</sup> *The diary of Benjamin Robert Haydon*, ed. by Pope, vol. I, pp. 60-61 (13 May 1809). See also David Blayney Brown, Robert Woof and Stephen Hebron, *Benjamin Robert Haydon, 1786-1846: Painter and writer, friend of Wordsworth and Keats* (Grasmere: The Wordsworth Trust, 1996), pp. 4-8. For the politics of the hang see John Sunderland and David Solkin, 'Staging the spectacle', and Michael Rosenthal, 'Turner fires a gun', in *Art on the line*, pp. 23-37 and 145-56, respectively.

<sup>163</sup> *The diary of Benjamin Robert Haydon*, ed. by Pope, vol. V, p. 305 (13 April 1813).

forget and forgive all my own paltry oppressions and back them with all my might and mind.<sup>164</sup>

Haydon wrote several pamphlets and articles in which he denounced the Academy as a group of scheming and vain men who had abandoned the cause of High Art in search of materialistic rewards. He described thus the transformation artists suffered when elevated to the rank of Academicians:

When a man becomes an Academician he suffers as great a change as if he had undergone chemical transmutation; however noble in feeling, however high his notions, however grand his ideas before his election, he instantly becomes cautious, timid, silent, politic, critical, effecting to know what he has never heard of, denying what he really knows, undervaluing his rivals and puffing those he need not fear, writhing in company from the praise of others ... To be an Academician is [the] height of a young Student's ambition, and to qualify himself by cringing intrigue the object of his wishes, and those precious moments that should be spent in painting by day and drawing by night.<sup>165</sup>

Haydon seemed to change his mind and rethink his opinion of the Academy years later when, in dire financial need, he considered applying to the institution, and whether it would be inconsistent with his principles; he concluded that it would not be so:

The Academy is not what it was when I attacked it. I consider it consciously modified, and why should I keep a senseless hostility? Young men of talent have been admitted, and the whole state and condition are improved. So thinking, I resolved to send my Pictures there.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> *The diary of Benjamin Robert Haydon*, ed. by Pope, vol. VI, p. 349 (30 April 1814).

<sup>165</sup> *Neglected genius: the diaries of Benjamin Robert Haydon 1808-1846*, ed. by John Jolliffe (London: Hutchinson, 1990), pp. 104-105 (1-4 April 1826).

<sup>166</sup> *The diary of Benjamin Robert Haydon*, ed. by Pope, vol. IV p. 224 (January 1812).

Afterwards he would regret this decision, fearing he had violated his credo, and duly resumed his attacks on the Academy, on the occasion of its proposed move to new premises:

After 40 years of struggle on the part of the Artists, at last the Government have consented, not to bestow employment & opportunity on Historical Painters, who have neither, but 25,000 to build a New Academy for people who have 40,000 in the funds, and to provide a better room for Mr Secretary or Mr Keeper.

My blood boils at this infamous job. I am meditating an attack.<sup>167</sup>

His venom was not reserved for the Royal Academy only; he wrote extensively against the notion of academies in general, which, he claimed, had not produced one single genius to rival Raphael or Phidias and tended 'rather to elevate insignificance than to nurse superior power'. This, he argued, happened because the incompetent had enough leisure to manage such bodies, whereas the truly talented devoted all their time to the study and practice of their profession and did not indulge in power-mongering. He related how the Royal Academy after Reynolds's death and Barry's expulsion was flooded with 'perpetual squabbles for superiority', and painted a gloomy picture of the future of English art if this nefarious institution was not divested of its authority.<sup>168</sup>

The 1830s were an eventful decade for the Academy. Government at the time experienced a shift to the left instigated by the advocates for reform which culminated in the first Reform Bill, in 1832; this, unexpectedly, brought artistic issues sharply into the political spotlight, albeit in a way that the most ardent

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<sup>167</sup> *Neglected genius: the diaries of Benjamin Robert Haydon 1808-184*, p. 142 (18 November 1832).

<sup>168</sup> Benjamin Robert Haydon, *On academies of art (more particularly the Royal Academy); and their pernicious effect on the genius of Europe* (London: Henry Hooper, 1839).

partisans of civic republicanism could not have foreseen. The debate opened with the above mentioned plan, to relocate the Academy from the Strand to new premises in Trafalgar Square that would be shared with a national collection of art (the origin of the National Gallery); radical MPs opposed the idea that the Academy, a private body, would occupy a building paid for by the public. In turn, the Academy was somewhat alarmed at the prospect of having to leave Somerset House, to which it felt it had a right of tenure in perpetuity, for a new residence which it had no assurance of having full rights to.

Parallel to this issue, left-wing MPs continued their attacks on the Academy, which they viewed as a privileged, monopolistic and politically backward body, this time by questioning the administration of the Academy's finances and demanding inspection of its returns. The President at the time, Martin Archer Shee, a regular painter but brilliant politician (Leslie said of him that 'he would have distinguished himself far more at the Bar than he did at his easel'<sup>169</sup>), managed the situation skilfully, by seeking the mediation of the King; rather than submitting himself and the Academy straight away to the demands of Parliament, Shee exercised the 'Royal' title of the institution he presided, and agreed to supply the required information only via royal request.<sup>170</sup>

However, this would be only the beginning of the clashes between Parliament and the Academy. In 1835 the reformist anti-Academy faction, led by William Ewart MP, moved for an enquiry into the state of the arts carried out by a Select

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<sup>169</sup> Leslie, *The inner life of the Royal Academy* (London, 1914), p. 269.

<sup>170</sup> Quentin Bell, 'Haydon versus Shee', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. 22 (1959), p.351.



Committee; the original aim of this committee would be 'to enquire into the best means of extending a knowledge of the Arts and of the Principles of Design among the people (especially the Manufacturing Population) of the Country', but also 'to enquire into the Constitution of the Royal Academy, and the effects produced by it.'<sup>171</sup> The idea was to review the affairs of the Academy and to evaluate whether it had accomplished the lofty goals it had been set by its founders, more than sixty years before; to decide, in short, whether it deserved its powerful status in the English art world.

It was the most serious attack the Academy had suffered so far, and it did not come from its traditional enemies, the connoisseurs, but from a largely bourgeois contingent in the political establishment. In the eyes of Ewart and his fellow MPs, the Academy was a bastion of aristocratic, *ancien regime* privilege and injustice - ironically, the same characteristics Academicians had deplored in the amateurs and connoisseurs from whom they had originally wrestled power and authority.

This was the opportunity for revenge Haydon had dreamed about for a long time. Along with many other witnesses, such as Gustav Friedrich Waagen, the director of the Berlin Museum; Frederick Hurlstone, the President of the Society of British Artists; and John Pye, the engraver and author of *Patronage of British Art*, Haydon testified before the Committee in June 1836. The Committee heard how the Academy monopolised the honours of the painting profession, how rife with

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<sup>171</sup> *The Times*, 15 July 1835. The report itself, however, changed the last phrase to 'and to enquire into the constitution management and effects of institutions connected with the arts'. Bell, 'Haydon versus Shee', p.351 n13. See also Peter Funnell, 'The London art world', in Fox (ed.), *London: world city, 1800-1840* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 163-166; and Thomas Gretton, "'Art is cheaper and goes lower in France". The language of the Parliamentary Select Committee on the Arts and Principles of Design of 1835-1836', in *Art in bourgeois society, 1790-1850*, ed. by Hemingway and Vaughan, pp. 84-100.

corruption and intrigue it was, how the Academicians used their status for their personal advantage, and how the Academy's contradictory public-private nature raised questions about its position in the art world. Haydon in particular complained about 'its exclusiveness, its total injustice ... The artists are at the mercy of a despotism whose unlimited power tends to destroy all feeling for right or justice.'<sup>172</sup> The impressions he recorded in his *Diary* show that he had not forgiven, not forgotten, those at the Academy whom he held responsible for the disaster of his *Dentatus*:

I called in yesterday at the Committee of Arts ... Howard was there. Good God! What a singular bit of retributive justice. He was on the hanging Committee that used me so ill, 1809. Good God! How he looked! How altered! How humbled!

O God, thou knowest this has been my great object, for 26 years. Bless my examination! Grant it may be clear, effective, & just ... Grant the result of this Committee's labours may be a final & effectual blow to the imposture of Academies all over Europe.<sup>173</sup>

Then it was the turn of the Academy to defend itself. Shee appeared before the Committee and answered aptly its questions; Haydon, however, called it a 'rambling defence' and described the scene as one of retribution, seeing his old enemies being examined like criminals.<sup>174</sup> The Committee's final report endorsed the arguments of the anti-academic faction, declaring that academies produced 'an

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<sup>172</sup> *Report from the Select Committee on Arts and their connexion with Manufactures*, 1836. Evidence of Haydon, q. 1063. Quoted by Bell, p. 352.

<sup>173</sup> *Neglected genius: the diaries of Benjamin Robert Haydon 1808-1846*, ed. by Jolliffe, 24-25 and 28 June 1836.

<sup>174</sup> Bell, 'Haydon versus Shee', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. 22 (1959), p.353. Bell notes that the three surviving accounts of Shee's examination – one by Haydon, the second Shee's biography written by his son, and the third the Committee's report itself – differ greatly, and points at the possibility of the official minutes having been tampered with (p. 355).

artificial elevation to mediocrity, degenerate into mannerism and fetter genius'<sup>175</sup> and particularly accusing the Royal Academy of exclusivity and unfairness. However, the everyday functioning of the Academy was unaffected, its statutes unchanged, and it continued to operate as the most prestigious artistic institution in London throughout the century. But it was no longer alone, and its star had been somewhat tarnished in the process.

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<sup>175</sup> *Report from the Select Committee on Arts and their connexion with Manufactures*, 1836, p. viii. Quoted by Bell, p. 356.

## PART II

### 'CONNOISSEURS SANS CONNOISSANCE'

When I speak of a painter I do not mean merely a professor, but any man (artist or not) of a liberal mind, with a strong feeling for nature as well as art, who has been in the habit of comparing both together.<sup>1</sup>

Connoisseurs, critics, patrons... the judges and consumers of art were at the non-productive end of the art world spectrum. During the period covered by this study, artists, as producers, saw such people as their antagonists in their fight for professional dignity, rather than as their necessary counterparts. The meanness of patrons, the scathing reviews of critics, and above all, the pretentiousness of connoisseurs who deemed themselves arbiters of taste, were perceived as obstacles to the artists' claims. Opinions such as the one stated in the quote above seemed to indicate that connoisseurs were ready once more to take back authority from artists, relegating the latter to the mere role of mechanics they had had during the first half of the eighteenth century.

During the transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, the issue of who should patronise art, and whether different genres were more or less deserving of enlightened patronage, would become a matter of contention, interspersed with nationalistic arguments and broadly debated by most members of

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<sup>1</sup> Uvedale Price, *Essays on the Picturesque* (1794). Quoted by John Brewer, *The pleasures of the imagination*, 2000 ed., p.620. Price maintained a lively debate with Richard Payne Knight on the theory of the Picturesque; see Funnell, 'Visible appearances', in *The arrogant connoisseur: Richard Payne Knight 1751-1824*, pp. 82-92.

the art world.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the nature of discussions on art at the turn of the century had more the character of conflicts of interest over what constituted art and who was better qualified to judge it, than of proper aesthetic debate.

Connoisseurship has always been concerned with attributions and authenticity of works of art. In the eighteenth century, connoisseurs, or *cognoscenti* (the French and Italian words for “those who know”, respectively), were the authorities who determined what works were good enough to deserve being part of a canon. Connoisseurs had extensive knowledge of works of art, which enabled them to identify those works, attributing them to schools, styles or individual artists, and to judge their relative quality. The methods of connoisseurship derived from Vasari in the sixteenth century, were revived by Winckelmann in the eighteenth, and finally systematised in the nineteenth by Giovanni Morelli.<sup>3</sup>

The position of authority of connoisseurs was challenged by English artists in the eighteenth century, as we have seen above; the Royal Academy played an important role in this, positioning artists at the forefront of the art world. However, as we saw in chapter 2, the increased public awareness of the conflicts within the Royal Academy and its subsequent loss of prestige paved the way for a reaction to take place. The image of the Academy as an eminently philanthropic organisation

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<sup>2</sup> This has been dealt with in several works by authors such as Linda Colley, ‘Whose nation? Class and national consciousness in Britain 1750-1830’; Fullerton, ‘Patronage and pedagogy: the British Institution in the early nineteenth century’; Funnell, ‘William Hazlitt, Prince Hoare, and the institutionalisation of the British art world’, and ‘The London art world and its institutions’; and Andrew Hemingway, *Landscape imagery and urban culture in early nineteenth-century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), among others.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Fernie, *Art history and its methods: a critical anthology* (London: Phaidon, 1995), p. 330. See also Wind, ‘Critique of connoisseurship’, *Art and anarchy*, pp. 31-46.

created for the benefit of the nation changed, so that its civic ideals began to be perceived as no more than the facade for an association of professionals in search of economic profit. After all, the professionalisation of painting meant that its pretensions to disinterested intellectualism clashed with the actualities of its being a way of earning a living. Alternative, smaller art societies began to spring up and flourish, mainly to cater for artists who were excluded from the Academy.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the expanding art world provided a wider market and more opportunities for sales; there was space for another arena in which to exhibit and sell modern British art. The Royal Academy no longer had the monopoly for this.

The relative loss of prestige of the Academy might have been exacerbated by the interim period between the death of Reynolds and the ascendancy of Turner, the biggest “stars” of the RA, during which no Academician shone. Was the Academy losing its power (if it ever had it) to produce and promote genuine English Genius? All this was an opportunity for connoisseurs to get back in the picture, and they did, with the creation of the British Institution.

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<sup>4</sup> For those societies see above, chapter 1.4, n.119, and below, chapter 3.1, n.27.

## Chapter 3

### The British Institution

Délivre nous, grand Dieu! de ces amateurs sans amour, de ces connoisseurs sans connoissance!<sup>5</sup>

As has been charted in Part I, during the latter third of the eighteenth century the English art world changed in such a way that allowed artists access to positions of authority that had been previously held by connoisseurs and other theorists. This shift took place mainly by means of the foundation of the Royal Academy and its consolidation as the premier art venue and school of the nation. By the 1790s, artists did have the upper hand in the London art world; as an artistic institution, the Royal Academy had no rivals. But the perceived decadence of the Academy after the death of its first President, which we have seen in preceding chapters, provided connoisseurs with a chance to regain the power they had lost to artists.

The ideology of the Academy was built upon the classical tradition, which upheld the art of the Ancients as the only valid models against which to compare contemporary art. English artists of the late eighteenth century believed, like their Continental counterparts, that in order to produce an art that would be worthy and relevant to the present and future generations, they had to study and learn from previous artists; that art was an unbroken chain where progress depended on previous efforts. However, actual first-hand knowledge of the works of the

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<sup>5</sup> 'Deliver us, oh God, from these amateurs without love, from these connoisseurs without knowledge'. Count de Stroganoff, President of the Imperial Academy of St. Petersburg. Quoted by Martin Archer Shee, *A letter to Joseph Hume, Esq. MP in reply to his aspersions on the character and proceedings of the Royal Academy*, London, 1838.

Ancients was scarce. At the close of the eighteenth century, there was no grand public collection of art in Britain equivalent to the Louvre in Paris, which had been founded in 1793. Although the practice of the Grand Tour had become more popular as the middle classes increasingly embraced it, access to classical works of art was not universal. Visits to private collections and auction houses provided artists with a measure of contact with the works, but this procedure was not always easy to arrange, was expensive, and did not allow for close study. To get to know a particular work of art, artists usually had to rely on reproductions (such as monochrome mezzotint engravings), low quality copies and unnaturally dark paintings, blackened with layers of varnish, greasy candle smoke and other disfiguring alterations due to the passage of time and bad conservation practices. Hogarth often had decried these dark paintings, caricaturing them in his *Time smoking a picture*; and he was not the only one to do so. A sketch that appeared in the *Ladies Miscellany* of 1770 featured a Sir Samuel Sapskull, a rich city knight, and a Mr Pallet, a dealer and connoisseur:

- Sir Samuel*        Well, Mr Pallet, what curious little picture have you got in hand?
- Mr Pallet*[...]    It is a landscape by Verdipratti; an original, very scarce. [...]
- Sir Samuel*        Why 'tis black as ink.
- Mr Pallet*         That's a proof of its age, Sir Samuel. 'Tis a prodigious advantage of pictures, they are mellow'd by time, Sir Samuel.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in *The eighteenth century*, ed. by Denvir, p. 79.



Haydon wrote in his diary about the paintings he saw during his visit to Paris in 1814, with a tinge of disappointment: 'Vandyke looked black; Teniers dirty; Rembrandt brown'.<sup>7</sup>

Complaints about the lack of public galleries of art had been heard in Britain since the eighteenth century; before the foundation of the Royal Academy, Thomas Martyn, professor of Botany at Cambridge, commented on how one of the best ways to advance the arts would be 'to give all possible opportunities to those who make them their study to contemplate the works of the best masters'; and to that end, he continued:

It ought to be acknowledged with gratitude that many of the collections of the great are ever open to the inspection of the curious, who have been permitted in the most liberal manner to take copies of their paintings, and to make drawings from them; but at the same time, it must be lamented that some cabinets are not accessible without difficulty and interest. It should be mentioned to the honour of the French nation, that their collections are come at, even by foreigners, with great facility, in particular the royal pictures are not locked up in private apartments from the eyes of the people, but are the pictures of the public.<sup>8</sup>

Private galleries had different arrangements for visitors, and usually the conditions for viewing, as well as the admission arrangements, were not ideal. In

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<sup>7</sup> Haydon, *Diary*, ed. by Pope, vol. VI, p. 374 (19 June 1814).

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Martyn, *The English connoisseur; containing an account of whatever is curious in painting, sculpture etc. in the palaces and seats of the nobility and principal gentry of England both in town and country, 1766* (quoted in *The eighteenth century*, ed. by Denvir, pp.177-178. In 1845, John Pye cited in *Patronage of British art* the main art collections in England up to 1766 (the most important one was that of Charles I, dispersed in 1649). See also F. Simpson, 'The English connoisseur and its sources', *Burlington Magazine*, vol. XLIII (1950); and R.E.D. Sketchley, 'Art patronage in England', *The art journal*, Aug. 1910, p.274, for fees charged for visiting private collections and poor accessibility.

1804 John Feltham listed 21 private collections in his guide to London, many of which were infrequently open to the public, or had strict rules for viewing.<sup>9</sup>

The Napoleonic wars, moreover, had complicated further the situation by making the customary passage to the Continent in search of great examples of classical art more difficult or even impossible. Proof of this was the near en-masse emigration of artists to Paris when the Peace of Amiens treaty was signed in 1802, the first time in years that visiting France was possible. As the Academician Martin Archer Shee (who would later become President of the Academy) described it:

Indeed, the emigration of the whole Academy, with the President at their head ... made it a sort of necessity on my part; as, not to have visited the treasures of art in Paris, will be a sort of stigma on the character of a painter or a connoisseur ... The plunder of the world has enriched Paris with treasures of art beyond number and above praise. In short, Italy is now in Paris.<sup>10</sup>

One of the aims of the Academy since its foundation, stated in Reynolds's first Discourse, was to be 'a repository for the great examples of the Art';

These are the materials on which Genius is to work, and without which the strongest intellect may be fruitlessly or deviously employed. By studying these authentick models, that idea of excellence which is the result of the accumulated experience of the past ages, may be at once acquired ... The Student receives, at one glance, the principles which many Artists have spent their whole lives in ascertaining; and, satisfied with their effect, is spared the painful investigation by which they came to be known and fixed. How many

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<sup>9</sup> John Feltham, *The picture of London for 1804, being a correct guide to all the curiosities, amusements, and remarkable objects, in and near London; with a collection of appropriate tables, two large maps, and several views* (London, 1804), pp. 255 ff. Quoted by Fullerton, 'Patronage and pedagogy', p.60, n7.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Archer Shee, letter to Mrs Dillon. London, 13<sup>th</sup> October 1802. Quoted in M. A. Shee, Jr., *Life of Sir Martin Archer Shee, President of the Royal Academy*, 2 vols. (London, 1860) pp.250-251.

men of great natural abilities have been lost to this nation, for want of these advantages!<sup>11</sup>

But it would seem that great British artists would continue to be lost to the nation, since the mentioned facilities for study at the Academy were rather inadequate. The Schools were furnished with plaster casts after the antique, and in the Library students could find prints and books to copy from, but if they wanted to copy an Old Master painting, they had to go somewhere else.<sup>12</sup> One can detect a hint of frustration in Barry's words, when, from his position as Professor of Painting, he told his students:

The Academy, at present, is but a drawing-school, no more; and although it holds out the temptation of a gold medal, inviting you to paint, yet it does not provide you with any authorised, legitimate exemplars, for the study of painting.<sup>13</sup>

Throughout the first 50 years of the Academy's existence, the need for a collection of works by the masters was frequently put forward, with no visible result; Barry, for instance, mentioned it in his *Letter to the Dilettanti Society* of 1799:

It will ... be found, upon mature consideration, that the highest service this Academy can render the public, is to be the happy means of effecting a compleat repository of all the materials necessary for such advanced and enlarged art, as is worthy the glory of the nation, and the high spirit and extended information of the age we live in.

And further on:

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<sup>11</sup> Reynolds, 'Discourse I', p.15.

<sup>12</sup> William Sandby, *The history of the RA of Arts*. London, 1862. Vol. I, p.54.

<sup>13</sup> Barry, 'Lecture I'. Quoted in *A letter to the Dilettanti Society*, pp. 181-2, note.

This national collection of all the materials of art, is absolutely necessary for the formation of the pupils and of the public (who ought to grow up with them).<sup>14</sup>

Reynolds had made available paintings and prints from his own private collection to students (and friends - he lent Beaumont a painting by Jacques Foucquières<sup>15</sup>), but the measure was obviously not enough. Besides, there was the question of the quality of the works; Reynolds's collection, according to Payne Knight, was full of bad copies and counterfeits:

We are aware, indeed, that even the best artists are not always the least fallible judges in their own art; of which Sir Joshua Reynolds was a remarkable instance. No unfledged peer or full-plumed loanjobber was more liable to be deceived, even in those branches of the art which he professed most to admire: false Correggios, false Titians, and false Michael Angelos swarming in his collection; which he certainly believed to be true.<sup>16</sup>

Shortly before his death Reynolds offered his collection to be bought by the Academy, but the offer was rejected. A few years later, James Barry tried to convince his fellow academicians to purchase the Orléans collection when it came up for sale in 1798, but without success.<sup>17</sup> Eventually, the creation of the National Gallery in 1824 would provide the nation with such a collection; but the Academy, as an institution, had failed to furnish its students with 'the materials on which Genius is to work.'

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<sup>14</sup> Barry, *A letter to the Dilettanti Society*, pp. 26, 61.

<sup>15</sup> Owen and Brown, *Collector of genius*, p. 64.

<sup>16</sup> [Knight], 'Works and life of Barry', pp. 310-11. The criticism was not disinterested; Knight was trying to undermine Reynolds's authority while strengthening his own.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Wark, notes to Reynolds's *Discourses*, p.15.

Therefore, few actual examples of the Old Master paintings advocated by Reynolds and the Royal Academy as the ideal models for modern art were available for students to learn from, and in some cases, the examples that were available were in a less than perfect condition. Adding yet another layer of separation between the art and the modern artist, the canonical classical tradition, which formed the roots of Academic ideology, was based on a corpus of Roman copies of Greek sculptures, and paintings inspired by them, especially Italian Renaissance and seventeenth-century artists such as Poussin or Claude. The conception of what classical art was had been heavily filtered through the ideas of the late-seventeenth-century French Académie; British artists studied and interpreted works of art through the idiom of a foreign art-historical tradition. As a result of all the above circumstances, the knowledge of the works of art that constituted said classical canon of art was often second-hand, incomplete, and remote, unless the painter was fortunate enough to have visited Italy or had access to several private collections in Britain.

At the turn of the century, however, a series of events changed this situation. Archaeological excavations and discoveries provided scholars with real specimens of classical art, not just Roman copies, Renaissance reinventions or seventeenth-century pastiches. The purchase and transfer to Britain in 1807 of the Parthenon Marbles by Lord Elgin, for instance, resulted in an outright revolution in the way Greek art was appreciated, and influenced modern art and fashion. West said of them: 'I have found in this collection of sculpture, so much excellence in art and a variety so magnificent and boundless, that every branch of science connected with

the fine arts, cannot fail to acquire something from this collection.'<sup>18</sup> Whereas the classical tradition, and particularly the theory of Ideal Beauty, had been a conscious reaction against naturalism, the findings at the turn of the century undermined those theories and promoted a re-evaluation of Greek art as the fountainhead of Western art as more realistic than had been previously thought.<sup>19</sup>

Another event that changed the understanding of classical art was a consequence of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars exposing Britain to an unprecedented influx of Continental art. The most important contingent of works to arrive in London was the so-called 'Orléans collection', the product of the breaking-up of a sizeable part of the French royal collections. Hazlitt's glowing appraisal of those works gives an idea of the effect they had viewed together under the same roof:

A mist passed away from my sight ... A new sense came upon me, a new heaven and a new earth stood before me ... Old Time had unlocked his treasures, and Fame stood portress at the door. We had heard of the names of Titian, Raphael, Guido, Domenichino, the Caracci – but to see them face to

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<sup>18</sup> Benjamin West to Lord Elgin, quoted in William St Clair, *Lord Elgin and the Marbles* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p.167. For the philosophical and political implications of the Elgin Marbles see Alex Potts, 'The impossible ideal: Romantic conceptions of the Parthenon sculptures in early nineteenth-century Britain and Germany', in *Art in bourgeois society, 1790-1850*, pp. 101-22. The Marbles will be discussed at more length in the chapter devoted to Richard Payne Knight.

<sup>19</sup> However, Haydon denied in his *Lectures*, published in 1844, the validity of the Pompeii and Herculaneum frescos to measure the greatness of Classical art, and recommended his students to believe rather the descriptions of writers such as Pliny or Cicero. Haydon, *Lectures on painting and design* (London, 1844), pp. 233-4.

face, to be in the same room with their deathless productions, was like breaking some mighty spell.<sup>20</sup>

This sale, and many others in a smaller scale, led to the establishment of new private collections and the expansion of existing ones.<sup>21</sup> West told Farington and Northcote that he had great hopes of purchasing the main part of the Orléans collection for the Academy; it would provide 'a noble collection for young artists to refer to without being obliged to go to Paris after a peace to study such works as the French have collected.'<sup>22</sup> Many artists and critics spoke of it as having been a revelation: However, the Academy did not acquire it.

The arrival of high-quality Old Masters into the British market meant that the scarcity of examples that had affected artists was remedied; now they could visit auction houses, or the newly-replenished private collections, in order to view these works and copy from them wherever it was allowed. However, this fact did not solve the artists' problems, and in one sense exacerbated them.

Artists had traditionally compared themselves and their works with the Old Masters, inserting themselves into the heroic tradition of art. Reynolds had advised

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<sup>20</sup> Hazlitt, 'On the pleasures of painting', *Complete Works*, vol. VIII, p. 14. Originally published as an essay in *The London Magazine*, December 1820. One of the most celebrated pictures in this collection was Rembrandt's *The cradle*, which was acquired by Richard Payne Knight. Michael Clarke, 'Collecting paintings and drawings', in *The arrogant connoisseur*, p. 95.

<sup>21</sup> For the impact of the Napoleonic wars, see F. Haskell, *Rediscoveries in art*, 1976. For the Orléans collection, see Jordana Pomeroy, 'Collecting the past to create a future: the Old Masters, artists and patrons in early nineteenth-century England' (PhD thesis, Columbia University, 1996), pp.26-32.

<sup>22</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 11 January 1799.

young painters to 'enter a kind of competition, by painting a similar subject, and making a companion to any picture that you consider as a model'<sup>23</sup>; and later on:

He, who borrows an idea from an antient, or even from a modern artist not his contemporary, and so accommodates it to his own work, that it makes a part of it, with no seam or joining appearing, can hardly be charged with plagiarism ... But an artist should not be contented with this only; he should enter into a competition with his original, and endeavour to improve what he is appropriating to his own work. Such imitation is so far from having any thing in it of the servility of plagiarism, that it is a perpetual exercise of the mind, a continual invention.<sup>24</sup>

But this comparison could well work against them. The moderns had to fight against the preference of collectors for the works of the masters of the past; as they had done in the eighteenth century, patrons would compare contemporary painters with their predecessors, often with unfavourable results for the moderns. Despite favouring the creation of a national collection of art for the benefit of students, Shee blamed this prejudiced preference for the neglect in which modern British art found itself. The wars with France, he argued, had damaged the artist's trade in more than one way:

The disorders of the Continent ... have cut up [the artist's] interests, with a double edge of operation; for while they disconcerted all those commercial speculations, through which he might have expected employment from the printseller, they also occasioned such an inundation of foreign art to be poured upon us, as at once swept away all his hopes of encouragement from the patron.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Reynolds, 'Discourse II', p. 31.

<sup>24</sup> Reynolds, 'Discourse VI', p. 107. Turner would follow Reynolds's instructions verbatim: his 'quotations' or borrowings from Claude, Poussin and Watteau are well known. This will be dealt with in chapter 6.

<sup>25</sup> Shee, *Rhymes on art*, p. xv.



The abundance of Old Master paintings in the market meant that there was more competition for modern painters in this regard. Equally, the Vasarian idea of an art that evolved from its infancy to an apex and henceforth declined presupposed that after the heights reached by the masters of the past, modern art was unavoidably in decadence. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, there were few collectors of modern English art.<sup>26</sup>

### **3.1 From 'an association so friendly to the arts' to 'preceptors of artists'**

Two circumstances lie at the root of the foundation of the British Institution in 1805. Firstly, the expansion of the art world, together with the perceived decadence of the Royal Academy at the turn of the century, motivated artists to create alternative venues to showcase and sell their art. Although the rules for admission at the Academy's prestigious Summer Exhibition were not completely rigid, and the lower rungs of the art hierarchy ladder, such as watercolours, prints and architectural models were not excluded from it altogether, they suffered against the competition of larger and, often, dramatically brilliant oil paintings. Practitioners of these branches of the arts were therefore prompted to set up organisations of their own that would look after their own interests and where they could display their

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<sup>26</sup> For some of the most notable patrons and collectors of modern art in early nineteenth century, see the bibliographical references in Part III, n96.

works for sale; for instance, the Society of Engravers, in 1802, or the Society of Painters in Watercolours, in 1805.<sup>27</sup>

Plans for the creation of art societies that catered for contemporary British artists had been posited since the beginning of the century, joining the cries for a national collection of art similar to the Louvre in Paris to be created. Between 1801 and 1803, Josiah Boydell circulated his proposal of a national collection of native art which would sell as well as exhibit works of art and engravings after them, and distribute premiums, but nothing came of it. In 1802 the British School opened, an openly commercial venture, intended for the exhibition and sale of paintings, sculptures and other works of art by living and past British artists:

A new exhibition for the encouragement of the British School of painting was lately opened ... The object of this institution is to afford an opportunity to artists to display such of their production as they intend for sale ... This institution evidently deserves public patronage, and from the united contributions of some of our best artists it is very likely to obtain it.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> For the Society of Engravers: *Abstract of the rules, orders and regulations, of the Society of Engravers, established 1802, under the immediate patronage of His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales* (London, 1804). See also Anthony Dyson, *Pictures to print: the nineteenth century engraving trade* (London: Farrand Press, 1984).

For the Society of Painters in Watercolours see: Bury, 'The Royal Society of Painters in Watercolours'. See also Martin Hardie, *Watercolour painting in Britain*, vol. II, The Romantic period, ed. by Dudley Snelgrove with Jonathan Mayne and Basil Taylor (London, 1967), p. 114; and the works mentioned above in connection with alternative art societies, chapter 1.4, n119.

<sup>28</sup> *Monthly Register*, v.II (late 1802), p. 173.

However, despite being supported by academicians and peers, and having as its patron the Prince of Wales, the British School closed the following year.<sup>29</sup>

The marked lack of a public national collection, together with the existence of private collections of Old Masters recently enlarged with new additions, was the second determining circumstance in the creation and success of the British Institution. As we have seen, the Royal Academy declined to purchase Reynolds's collection in 1791; it also rejected Robert Udney's offer in 1802. The Government refused to acquire William Buchanan's collection (which was subsequently sold to J. J. Angerstein), and that of Joseph Count Truchsess, in 1803.<sup>30</sup> In 1812 Haydon wrote in his diary, anticipating the National Gallery by over a decade:

Let us have a Public monument of Talent open to all, at all seasons, and at all periods, to the Native and the Foreigner, and not yearly make gigantic efforts which are dispersed and inefficient as soon as the summer ends.<sup>31</sup>

In May 1805 a plan to address that glaring want was put forward by a group of connoisseurs and philanthropists, among them Richard Payne Knight and George Beaumont, to create a public gallery for the exhibition and sale of works by British

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<sup>29</sup> Josiah Boydell, *Suggestions towards forming a plan for the encouragement, improvement, and benefit, of the arts and manufactures in this country, on a commercial basis. In 2 letters addressed to Robert Udney, Esq. Dated December 22 & 23, 1801* (London, 1805). See also John Landseer, *Lectures on the art of engraving, delivered at the Royal Institution of Great Britain* (London 1807), p. 130n. Quoted by Fullerton, 'Patronage and pedagogy', pp. 60-1.

For the British School, see Whitley, *Art in England 1800-1820*, pp. 45-6; and Gage, 'The British School and the British School', in *Towards a modern art world*, pp. 109-120.

<sup>30</sup> Fullerton 'Patronage and pedagogy', p. 59. For Truchsess see Whitley, *Art in England 1800-1820*, p. 63.

<sup>31</sup> Haydon, *Diary*, ed. by Pope, v. I, p. 277 (December 1812)

artists, together with 'a few selected specimens of each of the great schools.'<sup>32</sup>

Academicians such as West and Farington were informed of the scheme:

On our way home [West] desired me to be at his house tomorrow evening at 8 to hear a Plan read which had been drawn up by Mr. [Thomas] Barnard for the establishing a National Gallery of Painting & for encouraging Historical painting. – West had invited Sir George Beaumont, Wm. Smith, & Knight to meet him and meant to ask Lawrence & Smirke.<sup>33</sup>

When the meeting finally took place, with Knight, Beaumont, Sir Abraham Hume, Thomas Barnard, William Smith, Lord Lowther, West, Lawrence and Farington in attendance, the issue of subscription was raised; Knight proposed that 'subscribers of £50 and upwards should alone have votes, which would prevent Common people from interfering in the direction of the business'; Farington would note later that Barnard confided him that he did not agree with Knight, who 'seemed desirous to make it *Aristocratical*'.<sup>34</sup> Then Knight asked whether the presence of a few Academicians at the discussions would not stir jealousy, and suggested that the Council of the Academy send two or more members to attend the Meetings in an official capacity along with the President, but West replied that the Academicians present had come at his request 'not as Academicians but as his particular friends', and that 'he could not refer to the Academy till he knew His Majesty's sentiments'.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *Outline of the proposals for the British Institution* (London, 1805), unpaginated, clause 1.

<sup>33</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 23 April 1805.

<sup>34</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 18 May 1805.

<sup>35</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 9 May 1805.

His Majesty's sentiments on the subject were quite clear: he clearly specified that he did not want artists to have anything to do with the management of the new body. Not surprisingly, given the history of scandals and conflicts in which the Academicians had been involved. However, they did not appreciate the exception made by the King; Lawrence in particular was reported to be 'indignant'.<sup>36</sup> The by-laws explicitly stated the place artists would have at the Institution:

The views of this Establishment are directed, not only to the promotion of the Fine Arts, but to the increase of the honour and emolument of our own professional Artists; the Institution being formed, not as a Society of Artists, but for their benefit. No subscription will, therefore, be expected from professional Artists; but their admission will be otherwise provided for. At the same time if any Artist prefers it, he may subscribe in any one of the classes of subscription; and have the same privileges of admission and introduction to the Exhibition and Gallery, as the other Subscribers of the same Class; *but no one will be capable of being elected on any Committee, or of voting as a Governor, while he continues to be a professional Artist.* [my stress]<sup>37</sup>

In other words: they were admitted and catered for, but they would have no voice in the society's running. Eventually, only the President of the Royal Academy would have an honorary position in the governing body of the Institution, albeit one without any executive power.

The British Institution for Promoting the Fine Arts in the United Kingdom was officially founded in June that year, its aims being announced to be:

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<sup>36</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 30 May 1805.

<sup>37</sup> 'By-laws of the British Institution for promoting the fine arts in the United Kingdom, established the 4<sup>th</sup> of June, 1805, under the patronage of His Majesty', chapter 1, clause 5. In *An account of the British Institution for promoting the Fine Arts in the United Kingdom, containing a copy of the by-laws, a list of the subscribers, together with extracts from the minutes of the proceedings of the committees and general meetings* (London, 1805). See also *Minutes of the British Institution*, 7 vols., MSS, 1805-70 (Victoria and Albert Museum, English MSS), 11 June 1805.

To encourage and reward the talents of the Artists of the United Kingdom; so as to improve and extend our manufactures, by that degree of taste and excellence, which are to be exclusively derived from the cultivation of the Fine Arts; and thereby to increase the general prosperity and resources of the Empire.<sup>38</sup>

The wording of the Institution's by-laws reveals to which extent the new society was careful to state in print its willingness to avoid any rivalry with the Royal Academy:

The British Institution being intended to extend and increase the beneficial effects of the Royal Academy ... and by no means to interfere with it in any respect, a favourable attention will be paid to such Pictures as have been exhibited at the Royal Academy; and the British Institution will be shut up during their annual exhibition.<sup>39</sup>

The Institution was to promote history painting, the highest genre of all in the academic hierarchy, and to redress the neglect it had suffered. This aim would be achieved by giving out annual "premiums" to the best paintings in that category submitted each year to the Institution exhibition, which, in order to avoid direct competition with the Academy, was held at a different time of the year. This arrangement suited artists, because it gave them the opportunity to attract buyers to works that had been rejected at the more exigent Academy, or which had been exhibited there but were unsold.

Why would the British Institution succeed where other ventures, such as the British School, failed? Peter Fullerton suggests several reasons for this. The Academic connections among the founders would hopefully guarantee that

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<sup>38</sup> 'By-laws of the British Institution', chapter 1, clause 1.

<sup>39</sup> 'By-laws of the British Institution', chapter 1, clause 4.

tensions between the Academy and the new body could be contained; however, the lack of actual involvement of Academicians with the day-to-day running of the Institution would help ensure that it would not become a new arena for the jealousies and rivalries currently dividing the Academy. The support of the crown, and the number of powerful and influential men among its subscribers, also gave the Institution additional credibility. And finally, Fullerton argues, the organization and energies devoted by the Institution to break the virtual monopoly over exhibition and sales of contemporary British art that the Academy had held for decades are evident in the special regard in which the Institution seemed to hold the Academy.<sup>40</sup>

Membership of the Institution was acquired through subscription; wealth, not artistic merit, as was the case with the Academy, was the determining element. As quoted, there were several classes of subscription: depending on the amount paid, the entitlements available ranged from plain subscribers to Governors (who contributed 50 guineas per annum) and Life and Hereditary Governors. The executive body of the Institution, the Board of Directors, was elected from among its members; above this, the Earl of Dartmouth, George Legge, was chosen as its first President. The success of the new society was almost instantaneous: the number of subscriptions since the very beginning was so high that in December of the same year of its foundation the former site of Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery, at 52 Pall Mall, could be purchased and refurbished to serve as exhibiting galleries for the

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<sup>40</sup> Fullerton, 'Patronage and pedagogy', pp. 61-2.

Institution.<sup>41</sup> It was a lavish setting for an art gallery: the *Monthly Magazine* described it as having 'a very splendid appearance', with walls covered in scarlet paper which gave it, at first, 'the idea of a magnificent suite of rooms in a private mansion'.<sup>42</sup> (fig. 16)

Indeed, the private character of the Institution (as opposed to the eminently "public" functions of the Royal Academy) was one of its most notable characteristics. Apart from the sale of contemporary British art, the British Institution exhibited great Old Master paintings from the collections of its members; owners lent their pieces – the Institution only borrowed the works, it did not buy them – for display before the public and the artists of the nation, in a bigger gallery than any private one. This way, private property was put to the service of the general public. Thomas Smith wrote in his *Recollections of the British Institution*, in 1860, that the British Institution had exerted a 'humanizing influence'; not only it patronised artists, it also served the general public by making available what had been private property.<sup>43</sup>

The first exhibition opened in February 1806; the entry fee was one shilling, the same price as for the Royal Academy exhibition. Farington reported that the

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<sup>41</sup> Fullerton, 'Patronage and pedagogy', p. 63. See also Jordana Pomeroy, 'Creating a national collection: the National Gallery's origins in the British Institution', *Apollo*, v. CXXXVIII, no. 438 (August 1998), pp. 41-9.

<sup>42</sup> *Monthly Magazine*, vol. XXI, p. 253 (1 April 1806).

<sup>43</sup> Thomas Smith, *Recollections of the British Institution* (London, 1860). Quoted by Ann Pullan, 'Public goods or private interests? The British Institution in the early nineteenth century', in *Art in bourgeois society, 1790-1850*, ed. by Hemingway and Vaughan, p. 28. Linda Colley has called the British Institution 'perhaps the most effective means by which patrician collectors were able to make their private possessions appear a public good'. *Britons: forging the nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 176.



Institution had received more pictures than the galleries could hold; West, for instance, had sent 22 paintings.<sup>44</sup> However, one year later, Farington believed that 'the artists have not sent their best works', and John Hoppner uncharitably dubbed the submissions 'the puke of the Royal Academy Exhibition'.<sup>45</sup> The Academy did not allow at its exhibition works that had been shown somewhere else, thus preserving its exclusivity, whereas the Institution's submission rules were far less strict, and explicitly welcomed works exhibited previously at the older society, as the by-laws stated.

In any case, the British Institution exhibitions were popular with the public. According to the *Morning Post*, by 1807 the Institution had become 'the favourite morning lounge of our fashionable amateurs'<sup>46</sup>. The theme of fashion was recurrent; the *tout Londres* took the British Institution exhibitions to their hearts, as they had done with the Royal Academy a generation earlier. The *Sun* reported in 1817 that 'these exhibitions constitute one of the most agreeable haunts of taste and fashion we have ever attended'.<sup>47</sup> In its capacity as a market, the Institution was also a success; in 1806, buyers spent over £11,000 in paintings exhibited there. Its aim to sell the productions of British artists was being achieved with considerable ease.

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<sup>44</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 17 February 1806 and 29 November 1805.

<sup>45</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 16 May 1806 and 21 March 1806.

<sup>46</sup> 'British Gallery', *Morning Post*, 7 April 1807.

<sup>47</sup> *Sun*, 9 July 1817.

At first, artists reacted favourably to the Institution. As early as 1806, Prince Hoare regarded the Institution to be 'an association so friendly to the arts';<sup>48</sup> and just three years later Shee, another Academician, praised it for addressing 'a want which has long been felt', surely making reference to the lack of an art collection for students at the Academy, and declared:

The founders of the British Institution are justly entitled to the regard and gratitude of the Artist, for their exertions in his cause; they have rescued him from the illiberal prejudices of the collector, and the interested depreciation of the picture-dealer.<sup>49</sup>

Even Haydon had good words for the Institution, particularly for its capacity as a market for contemporary British art, and its policy of acquiring the works that had obtained the highest prizes each year, implemented from 1813 onwards: 'I congratulate the Institution most sincerely on their perseverance in purchasing; let them pursue with undeviating cause this plan and it must ultimately advance the Art'. The Institution's special encouragement of history painting through premiums to the best works submitted annually in this category also deserved praise from him: 'The Institution has done an immense deal. They are entitled to the thanks of the country and the support of the arts;' but, he added, 'without positive employments, the life of an historical painter must be one continued scene of danger and risk'.<sup>50</sup> The Institution patronised artists and funded art, but did not

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<sup>48</sup> Prince Hoare, *An enquiry into the requisite cultivation and the present state of the arts of design in England* (London 1806), p. v.

<sup>49</sup> M.A. Shee, *Elements of the arts, a poem; in six cantos; with notes and a preface; including strictures on the state of the arts, criticism, patronage, and public taste* (London, 1809), pp. xviii and 25.

<sup>50</sup> Haydon, *Diary*, ed. by Pope, vol. V, pp. 338, and vol. VI, p. 344 (9 January and 16 March 1814).

secure stable state encouragement for the arts. It was born as, and remained, a private institution, made up of private individuals, and the patronage it provided shared that character. Many shared Haydon's views on the subject, when he wrote about private patronage not being enough, expecting the state to give adequate support in order to elevate the prestige of national art, and with it that of the nation as a whole:

The People or the Patron as an individual can do nothing. We don't want individual support only; we want Parliament to vote Pictures as well as Statues to the Heroes or the Legislators of the Country - then indeed would a field be open, and from the industry of the Arts, then indeed would the Country spring to its proper station.<sup>51</sup>

Shee shared Haydon's views about the arts of a nation being the best advertisement of its status: 'Whatever may be the power or prosperity of a state, whatever the accumulations of her wealth, or the splendour of her triumphs, to her intellectual attainments must she look for rational estimation; on her arts must she depend "for living dignity and deathless fame"'; for money spent on the arts would not mine the nation's prosperity, but on the contrary, 'they produce large returns of respect and consideration from our neighbours and competitors'.<sup>52</sup> He also believed, like Haydon, that patronage ought to come from the state, and not only from private sources; it was in vain to expect that British art could maintain a high standard 'if the spirited sallies of genius are not seconded by those resources of vigour and defence, which the state only can effectually supply'.<sup>53</sup> And due to the

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<sup>51</sup> Haydon, *Diary*, ed. by Pope, vol. V, p. 265 (19 December 1812).

<sup>52</sup> Shee, *Rhymes on art*, pp. xi-xii, xxii.

<sup>53</sup> Shee, *Rhymes on art*, p. xviii.

fickleness of individuals, only liberal and enlightened state patronage could satisfy the demands of art in Britain.<sup>54</sup>

Not all artists were positive about the Institution, though. Some were suspicious from the very beginning; Callcott, for instance, recorded conversations on the subject between artists:

Some observations passed also on the [?subject?] of this new Institution in favour of the Arts. We all seemed to agree it had the appearance rather of desiring to get the patronage into their own hands than to benefit the Arts. H[oppner] said ... that the artists ought to try their earnestness by demanding very large prices.<sup>55</sup>

Callcott, as well as his circle of friends, was well aware that one of the more prominent Directors of the British Institution was Beaumont, and of the conflict this would bring about. By the early nineteenth century, Beaumont had already begun to criticise Turner and his followers, as we will see in chapter 4.1; and although both Beaumont and Knight briefly patronised him, the willingness of the connoisseurs to become arbiters and judges of art disposed Callcott to suspect their motives.

In our way to Owen, T[?homson?] told me he had been conversing with Opie further on the subject of the new institution, that he was himself of the opinion that *the committee was composed of such persons as would be biased*, and appealed to me with [illegible] whether I did not think they would endeavour to [?praise?] me at the expense of Turner, I acknowledged I thought such a disposition too evident. - My reputation is assuredly too much owing to his.<sup>56</sup> [my stress]

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<sup>54</sup> Shee, *A letter to the President and Directors of the British Institution; containing the outlines of a plan for the national encouragement of historical painting in the United Kingdom* (London, 1809), pp. 24-5.

<sup>55</sup> A.W. Callcott, 'Journals', July 1805. MSS, Bodleian Library, p.5.

<sup>56</sup> A.W. Callcott, *Journals*, July 1805. MSS, Bodleian Library, p.5.

The Institution, however, did not only function as an alternative marketplace for contemporary art. What at first was described in the original aims and designs of the Institution like a sideline to its activities, and was announced with the intention to serve as a useful aid to artists, later proved a key point in the Academy's criticisms of the Institution, changing the perception that most artists had of it. The "British School", the name that the British Institution schools received, opened in the summer of 1806. It was a facility that allowed artists to study from Old Master paintings loaned from the private collections of Directors of the Institution (fig. 17). Despite its name, there were no courses or lectures; but it proved nevertheless of 'immediate and important service to our young artists', and of 'benefit to the arts of this country'.<sup>57</sup>

The first display of works at the British School included 23 paintings belonging to 16 different owners, all of which save 3 were members of the Institution. Among the works requested were paintings of the Northern Schools by Van Dyck (*Portrait of Gevartius*, loaned by John Julius Angerstein), Rubens (*St. Bavon received by the Church*, from the collection of the Reverend Holwell Carr) and Rembrandt (*The cradle*, loaned by Richard Payne Knight, and the *Adoration of the Shepherds*, by Angerstein), and Italians such as Guido Reni (*The fall of the Angels*), Annibale Carracci (*Landscape and figures*; both paintings from the collection of Sir Thomas Baring), and Salvator Rosa (*Jason and the Hesperian dragon*, loaned by William Smith MP).<sup>58</sup> Painters were allowed to copy fragments of works, and rules were enforced

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<sup>57</sup> *Minutes of the British Institution*, 8 May and 3 June 1806.

<sup>58</sup> *Minutes of the British Institution*, 19 June 1806. See Whitley, *Art in England, 1800-1820*, p. 111 for a full list of the paintings on display.

to avoid forgery and the sale of copies. Equally, the criteria for admission of students became increasingly restrictive; by 1808, only a certificate of competence in advanced drawing provided by either a Director of the Institution or a Royal Academician would allow an artist access to the paintings.<sup>59</sup> However, that same year 89 students were admitted, and the next year artists like Haydon, David Wilkie and John Constable were among the applicants.<sup>60</sup>

Soon, however, the benefits of this arrangement would be overshadowed by the artists' suspicions about the real intentions of the Directors. Firstly, despite the high ideals underpinning the display of masterpieces of the past, the fact remained that the Institution and its School were implicitly proclaiming the value of the works exhibited as the unique cultural property of their owners. Secondly, there was cause of concern regarding the authority of the Academy. By means of the British School, the Institution provided the examples that artists needed for their education and that, in the absence of a National Gallery of paintings, were mostly beyond the artists' reach. Despite its stress on the necessity of learning from the Ancients, the Academy had been unable to provide its students with such a facility - and that struck a raw nerve. The fact that no formal teaching took place at the British School, unlike at the Academy, did not dispel the pedagogic intention of the Institution in providing this service to the artists of the nation; after all, Academic theory had entreated them to copy from the eminent models of the past. The Directors and the owners of the works that were loaned to the School were

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<sup>59</sup> *Minutes of the British Institution*, 13 June 1808.

<sup>60</sup> *Minutes of the British Institution*, 7 January 1809.

providing such examples, and in doing so, they were regarded as having usurped the Academy's teaching role. Lawrence complained that the Directors had 'departed from the original object [of the Institution] ... and were becoming *Preceptors of Artists*; thereby acting in direct rivalry or opposition to the Royal Academy as a seminar.'<sup>61</sup> Already Callcott had voiced the Academy's fears, tinged with more than a little paranoia:

The active Directors of the British Institution will gradually assume a controuling power over Artists, and should they obtain the application of any fund granted by Government for promoting the Arts will sink the importance of the Royal Academy.<sup>62</sup>

Sir Thomas Bernard discussed with Callcott - perhaps a little unwisely, seeing as the painter was one of the first to doubt the sincerity of the Directors' motives - the plans to have a grand gallery at the Regent's palace that would house 300 casts from the antique, which would be available for young artists to study from, and which would be under the superintendence of the Governors of the British Institution. 'He was ignorant', Callcott told Farington, 'that the study of the Antique was one great part of the business of the Royal Academy - students being admitted there for that purpose'. Callcott also informed Bernard that the Academy had been approached to take part in that plan, and afterwards stormed off to complain to Farington that 'all this tended to add to the power & influence of the Governors of

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<sup>61</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 10 November 1816.

<sup>62</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 8 April 1813.

the British Institution, who might eventually look to establish an Authority over the Body of Artists'.<sup>63</sup>

To some, the emphasis on the study of the Old Masters would only spell disaster for modern art. Constable, notwithstanding his association with the Academy, always placed the direct study of nature above that of the art of the past, as his conversations on the subject with Beaumont prove. His view of the role the British Institution and its schools would play on British art was decidedly pessimistic: 'There will be no genuine painting in England in thirty years', he lamented; 'this will be owing to pictures driven into the empty heads of the junior artists by their owners, the Directors of the British Institution.'<sup>64</sup>

Artists equally were critical of the way the Institution attempted to direct taste through its awarding of premiums to what it regarded as the best examples of history painting. This measure, which initially would have been welcomed as belated and necessary support for this most exalted genre, was soon regarded as yet more evidence of the Directors' 'arrogant pretensions' to judge the merits of history painting, traditionally considered as the Academy's speciality and responsibility. Haydon, who despite not being associated with the Academy was a staunch defender of the principal status of history painting, fell out with Beaumont, Knight and, by extension, with the Institution over his colossal painting of *Macbeth*, which failed to receive the highest accolade in 1811. Although he gained the Institution's premium for history painting one year before, for his *Dentatus* (which had suffered

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<sup>63</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 1 December 1814.

<sup>64</sup> Charles Robert Leslie, *Memoirs of the life of John Constable, Esq., RA* (London, 1949 (1st edn., 1845)), p. 95.



the ignominy, in Haydon's eyes, of being hung in a dark corner at the Academy – see chapter 2.2), the rejection of *Macbeth* (which had been begun as a commission from Beaumont) was enough to make Haydon's volatile blood boil, and to turn him against the Institution, which in his view was as bad as the Academy. He reflected thus on the false taste and misleading intentions of his erstwhile admired Directors:

My object is not my own aggrandizement on the ruins of others, but to reform and direct those who have the means of aggrandizing the Art. Let me but see a desire in the Academy to foster instead of crush, let me but see a feeling in the Directors to patronise great works for their Halls and their palaces, instead of cherishing little ones for their parlours and drawing rooms, and that instant will I forget and forgive all my own paltry oppressions and back them with all my might and mind.<sup>65</sup>

After 1817, the Institution changed its award-giving policies, and started purchasing modern works of art, either from the exhibition or, more rarely, commissioned, instead of distributing premiums. The trend started in 1811, when a large canvas by the president of the Royal Academy, West's *Christ healing the sick*, was bought by £3,000 – the largest sum paid to an artist in Britain so far. It was a gesture aimed at making artists see that the right kind of art would be duly rewarded; the Directors hoped to move other painters 'to excellence, by giving such a public and honourable example of the reward of talent rightly directed'.<sup>66</sup> The fame of the painting (and of the price paid for it) attracted large crowds, which in turns translated into an increase in revenues, and prestige, for the Institution.

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<sup>65</sup> Haydon, *Diary*, ed. by Pope, vol. VI, p. 349 (30 April 1814). For the quarrel about *Macbeth* see also Brown, Woof and Hebron, *Benjamin Robert Haydon, 1786-1846*, pp. 8-9; and Owen and Brown, *Collector of Genius*, pp. 169-76.

<sup>66</sup> *Minutes of the British Institution*, 13 February 1811.

However, Haydon commented, this famous purchase did not improve the situation for history painters at large:

Three thousand guineas for a Picture appear a great sum! – but has it produced him a single Commission? No Great Town steps forward and orders an Historical Picture for its Hall, as it does a monument for its Church. It is never thought of.<sup>67</sup>

The Institution continued to buy high-profile history paintings in the style (and scale) it regarded as best and most worthy of reward: Henry Richter's *Christ giving sight to the blind* in 1812, Richard Westall's *Elijah restoring the life to the widow's son* in 1813, William Hilton's *Mary anointing the feet of Jesus* in 1814... Its efforts in promoting history painting were publicised by donating contemporary works to churches.<sup>68</sup>

A decade after its creation, the intentions of the British Institution and the connoisseurs at its helm to lead the English art world was becoming clear. Ann Pullan has identified as the main reason for the foundation of the Institution 'the needs of Empire'. Directing arts patronage was seen as a national cause, since the artistic output of the country could be regarded as one of the gauges by which to measure the status of Britain among its peers. In keeping with the classical tradition upheld at the Academy, the idea behind nurturing the arts in Britain was to make the latter comparable to ancient Greece or the courts of Renaissance Italy; the arts of a nation were the best advertisement of its prosperity and vigour. However, above imperial considerations, the members of the aristocratic Institution were interested

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<sup>67</sup> Haydon, *Diary*, ed. by Pope, vol. VII, p. 419 (April 1815).

<sup>68</sup> Fullerton, 'Some aspects of the early years of the British Institution' (MA thesis, University of London, 1979), p.18; Pomeroy, 'Collecting the past to create a future', p. 203.

in protecting the value of their property – in this case, their collections of Old Master paintings –, and therefore the promotion of contemporary history painting soon stopped being their priority.<sup>69</sup>

The British Institution had been born out of a vacuum in the English art world that the Royal Academy had not been able to fill adequately. It attempted to fill that gap, by providing the examples students needed through loans of paintings from its members, and at the same time, acting as another exhibition and sales venue for modern art. Despite its intention, clearly set out in its by-laws, to help contemporary British art, and to aid and complement the Academy, it was not long before the Institution was perceived to change its policy, turning its attention to exhibitions of Old Masters and of British painters from the previous century. Those shows constituted an unspoken snub to modern artists, not only because of the connotation that they were less deserving of notice than Reynolds, Gainsborough or Hogarth, but also because through the staging of such popular exhibitions the Institution was implicitly claiming the renown of that first generation of great English art for itself.

It was widely felt that the Institution was attempting to correct and improve the labours of the Academy, and to fill its shoes. The Directors were seen as attempting to return authority in art to connoisseurs, by dictating once more what constituted great art. By addressing the Academy's shortcomings, the Institution implicitly highlighted them, appearing as the more efficient of the two; and the

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<sup>69</sup> Pullan, 'Public goods or private interests?', pp. 27, 34.

popularity of its exhibitions, as evidenced by its receipts, shows that the public did express a preference for the Institution's way of doing things.

Artists were not happy. After the decades of efforts to situate themselves at the vanguard of English art, they were loath to relinquish the privileges they had acquired with the aid of the Academy. When the Institution shifted its stance from promoting contemporary art to emphasising the importance of Old Master paintings in its annual exhibitions, the old prejudice about modern British art being inferior to the productions of Continental masters came back to haunt artists.

The years during which the Academy had seemed to lose some of its power had provided connoisseurs with an opportunity to get back in the leading position of arbiters of art. The same year that the Institution was founded, another instance of their authority being acknowledged added to their increasing influence in the London art world. Appointed in 1802 to select and supervise the sculptures that would be erected in St. Paul's Cathedral to commemorate national heroes, the Committee of National Monuments, known as 'Committee of Taste', was composed of notable connoisseurs such as Beaumont, Knight and Charles Townley (fig. 18). Understandably, artists resented what they regarded as professional intrusion; Farington told Beaumont tersely that the Academy had already designated a committee with the same purpose.<sup>70</sup>

The leader of the group was said to be the controversial Knight; his taste for the antique, particularly his knowledge of coins, medals and bronze sculpture, apparently was enough to qualify him for the task. However, some artists were

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<sup>70</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 1 April 1802.

distraught at having in such a position of power a critic of modern painting and amateur of the 'luxurious displays of Rubens' who opposed consulting artists in matters related to the Committee's activities.<sup>71</sup> As we will see in more detail in the next chapter, Knight objected to history painting and to painters imitating sculpture, and vice versa. For him, statuesque poses in painting could only bring 'crudeness, stiffness, coldness'; besides blaming Barry of paranoia, he accused him of misleading his students with the wrong examples (which coincidentally were also "wrong" in the political sense):

He holds out to the pupils, as objects of emulation and admiration, the sanguinary savage David and his murderous associates; whose principles and practice are happily as little deserving imitation in art as in morals or politics.<sup>72</sup>

Beaumont assured Farington that he could keep Knight in check, but to all effects both connoisseurs were well known for their dogmatic views, one hardly better than the other in that respect in the artists' eyes.<sup>73</sup>

The war between artists and connoisseurs was not only a conflict between opposing aesthetic perceptions. There was in it an element of class warfare, which places it in the wider context of the political turmoil of the time, with the rise of Reformist ideals and the clashes in Parliament between the different factions. Because of its heritage - both its "Royal" appellative and its adherence to traditional, hierarchical art theory -, the Academy could have been identified with

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<sup>71</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 24 August 1805.

<sup>72</sup> Knight, 'Northcote's *Life of Reynolds*', p. 268; 'Works and life of Barry', p. 313.

<sup>73</sup> Owen and Brown, *Collector of genius*, pp. 153-4. See also Clarke and Penny, *The arrogant connoisseur: Richard Payne Knight 1751-1824*, pp. 80-1.

the conservative mindset, and certainly the politicians that opposed the Academy in the 1830s did so on the grounds that it was an exclusivist institution, a relic of an aristocratic past. But the Royal character of the Academy was not its only identity. It was, first and foremost, an association of professional men bent on defending their interests against the intrusion of amateurs. The methods for election as a Royal Academician might not have been democratic in the strict sense of the term; but Reynolds's ideas that any man with access to the right education could become a gentleman, independently of their birth, were definitely revolutionary and anti-establishment.

The identity of the Academy seems to have been established through ideological comparison and juxtaposition with other societies and institutions, much in the same way as British art was defined by its similarities and differences with Continental (and in particular French) art. During the first decades of the nineteenth century, when the British Institution entailed the greatest threat to the Academy's position at the head of the English art world, the battle lines appeared to be drawn along social strata. A large percentage of the Directors and Governors of the British Institution belonged to the upper classes, being either aristocrats or wealthy financiers, industrialists and men with important connections to government. The Academy, on the other hand, represented the interests of professional painters, who had to practice art in order to earn a living. In 1816, the *New Monthly Magazine* believed that the public of the Institution's exhibitions of Old Masters were of a 'better class' than that attending contemporary art ones; it was as if the former 'are of a more refined cast, and seem in some degree to partake of the

superiority of the pictures they behold'.<sup>74</sup> The rivalry between artists and connoisseurs, embodied in the antagonism between the Academy and the Institution, was reaching a critical point.

### 3.2 The Catalogues Raisonnées

In 1813, the Institution went beyond its exhibitions of contemporary art and staged the first of its displays of paintings by British Old Masters, devoted to Sir Joshua Reynolds. The Directors must have felt confident enough of the position the Institution had reached in the London art world, since the new exhibition took place during the summer, thereby directly competing with the Royal Academy, whose annual exhibition took place traditionally in that season. The *Times* compared both shows and found the Academy's wanting: it did not 'display any picture which justifies that expectation'.<sup>75</sup>

The catalogue was cautious in stating that the reason behind exhibiting works by the first President of the Academy was 'not for the purpose of opposing the merits of the dead to those of the living', but

To call attention generally to British, in preference to foreign art, and to oppose the genuine excellence of modern to the counterfeited semblance of ancient productions, which too frequently usurp its place; and under the

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<sup>74</sup> *New Monthly Magazine*, August 1816, p. 59.

<sup>75</sup> *The Times*, 22 June 1813.

authority of names deservedly venerable, absorb that wealth and patronage which ought to foster and protect the British School.<sup>76</sup>

So far, so good; the aims of the Institution could be seen to follow verbatim the claims of artists. However, one sentence hinted at the true intentions behind the exhibition: after stating that Reynolds elevated both the art and its practitioners to a station 'which it is gratifying to observe, that they are likely to maintain and extend', the author of the catalogue - allegedly the Director and connoisseur Richard Payne Knight - stated that 'the finer pictures may teach the collector what to value, *and the artist what to follow*' [my stress].<sup>77</sup>

The following year, another exhibition of British Old Masters took place during the summer: this time it consisted of works by Hogarth, Gainsborough, Richard Wilson and Zoffany. Like its predecessor, it attracted the public's attention and proved immediately popular. The catalogue, once again widely believed to have been written by Knight, stated the Institution's aims in staging these innovative exhibitions, reminding its readers of the benefits to young artists that the Institution had provided:

The Directors of the British Institution have, in pursuance of the plan which they originally proposed, adopted those measures which appeared to them best calculated to facilitate the improvement and lead to the advantage of the British artist; with this view they have set before him many examples of painting of the Foreign School, which appeared to them capable of affording instruction in the various branches of his art; but in offering specimens for his

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<sup>76</sup> 'Preface to the Exhibition in the year 1813', *An account of all the pictures exhibited in the rooms of the British Institution from 1813 to 1823, belonging to the nobility and gentry of England: with remarks, critical and explanatory* (London: Priestley and Weale, 1824), p. 3.

<sup>77</sup> Preface to the Exhibition in the year 1813', p. 6.



study, they have not forgotten the works of the eminent men which the British School has produced.<sup>78</sup>

If Reynolds was not proof enough that 'England is a soil in which the polite arts will take root, flourish, and arrive at a very high degree of perfection', the author of the catalogue argued, the present exhibition disproved the theories that denied the ability of the British to create works of art that could hold their own compared with the art of the Continent, and demonstrated the worth of the British School at its best.<sup>79</sup>

Haydon also believed in the strength and worthiness of the British School, which had arisen despite all the scepticism of Dubos, Winckelmann and those who doubted that Britain could produce an art worthy of being compared with the best the Continental masters had to offer, and declared with his usual arrogance: 'In spite of our fogs and our tasteless Government, in spite of all the obstructions in Earth, we will be the greatest Historical Painters of the World'.<sup>80</sup> However, his attitude towards Knight was one of contempt and outright hatred. As we will see in chapter 4, the connoisseur attacked history painting in his review of Northcote's *Life of Reynolds*, published in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1814, immediately attracting the ire of the committed Haydon. The catalogue to the 1813 exhibition also contained malicious jabs against contemporary artists: speaking about Reynolds's practice of the comparatively lower genre of portraiture, despite his insistence on the

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<sup>78</sup> 'Preface to the exhibition in the year 1814', *An account of all the pictures exhibited in the rooms of the British Institution from 1813 to 1823, belonging to the nobility and gentry of England: with remarks, critical and explanatory* (London: Priestley and Weale, 1824), p. 11.

<sup>79</sup> 'Preface to the exhibition in the year 1814', p. 12.

<sup>80</sup> Haydon, *Diary*, ed. by Pope, vol. VI, p. 398 (19 November 1814).

importance of high art, Knight argued that Reynolds was not 'one of those aspiring geniuses, those self-selected favourites of nature, who imagine that professional eminence is a spontaneous gift of heaven ... and will not therefore degrade the native dignity of their talents by undertaking any but important subjects'. One did not have to be as paranoid as Haydon to perceive the sarcasm with which those lines were written. By then, Haydon and Knight had already crossed swords on the subject of history painting, as we will see in more detail in the next chapter.

The text of the 1814 exhibition catalogue, which showcased the ideology of the Institution, was at once patronising and provocative, entreating modern painters to reach the same heights of excellence as the previous generation of British artists had achieved, even taunting them, hinting that despite the money invested in patronage of modern art since the days of Hogarth, Gainsborough and Reynolds, no works of a comparable level had been produced.

The present exhibition, while it gratifies the taste and feeling of the lover of the art world, may tend to excite animating reflections in the mind of the artist - if at a time when the art received little comparative support, such works were produced, a reasonable hope may be entertained that we shall see the productions of still higher attainment under more encouraging circumstances.<sup>81</sup>

That encouragement, however, would only be effected as long as the young artists exhibiting at the Institution complied with the Directors' criteria. Both Beaumont and Knight were dismissive of the new trends in English art, namely the landscape painting of Turner and his circle, and of the talk of "genius" that surrounded them. The annual exhibitions of Old Masters were seen as a saving

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<sup>81</sup> 'Preface to the exhibition in the year 1814', p. 16.

device through which the taste of both artists and the public would be corrected and improved, and redirected to comply with what the connoisseurs at the Exhibitions regarded as true art: the pictures that hung in their galleries and that they loaned every year for the Institution's British School. Those were the examples young artists had to follow, as well as work hard with indefatigable industry, disobeying the siren calls of genius. As Knight put it in his review of the works of Barry in the *Edinburgh Review* of 1810, and later in the catalogue for the 1815 exhibition, genius cannot exist without study and work.<sup>82</sup>

As Pullan argues, the British Institution contributed to the breakdown of the traditional relation between artist and patron, replacing commissions with a market system which underlined the identification of the work of art with a commodity.<sup>83</sup> Shee had already mentioned in his *Elements of art* of 1809 his concern over the preference shown at the Institution for Dutch small-scale painting over the Italianate Grand Style advanced by the Academy; it was, according to him, related to the economic interests of the Directors, who would rather promote 'commodities that suit the market' over history paintings, works that could 'exercise a moral influence'.<sup>84</sup> Kriz argues that Shee's writings illustrate the dilemma that artists faced at the turn of the century: to celebrate British commercial mind, which had given impetus to the arts, or to condemn an art which was no more than a luxury commodity.<sup>85</sup> 'The arts treated commercially', he wrote, 'never did, and never can

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<sup>82</sup> [Knight], 'Works and life of Barry', p.324; 'Preface to the exhibition in the year 1815', p. 19.

<sup>83</sup> Pullan, 'Public goods or private interests?', pp. 35-6.

<sup>84</sup> Shee, *Elements of art*, p. 28.

<sup>85</sup> Kriz, *The idea of the English landscape painter*, p. 57.

flourish in any country. The principle of trade, and the principle of the arts, are not only dissimilar, but incompatible'. One is 'sordid commerce of mechanics', the other 'the liberal intercourse of gentlemen'.<sup>86</sup>

Other authors, however, were less precious about the origin and character of patronage, as long as the arts were funded. William Carey, who was not attached to either society, not being a professional artist nor a wealthy collector, proclaimed: 'I am not inclined to take arms against a public benefit, merely because it is connected with a private interest', and that men who put public above private interests made a mistake in criticising the British Institution, since 'the large fortunes, known liberality, and enlightened minds' of the Directors placed them above concerns for self-interest.<sup>87</sup> His was one of the voices calling for increased economic encouragement for the arts in order to advertise the greatness of the nation:

Although no fund can create genius, there may, or must exist, or ought to be created, a constant fund of patronage, duly flowing to historical painting, from Government or the people, or both, to develop high intellectual excellence in the arts.<sup>88</sup>

The hostilities between artists and the Institution reached an all-time high in 1815. That year, the Directors decided to follow the successful exhibitions of British Old Masters with a show dedicated to the Dutch and Flemish Schools. The motive

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<sup>86</sup> Shee, *Rhymes on art*, p. xix; and *Letter to the President and Directors of the British Institution*, pp. 8-9. Beaumont disapproved of Shee's *Rhymes*: Farington, *Diary*, 16 April 1806.

<sup>87</sup> Carey, *Observations on the primary object of the British Institution and of the provincial Institutions for the promotions of the Fine Arts; showing the necessity, the wisdom, and the moral glory of cherishing a national spirit in the patronage of the British School, and a national pride in the excellence of the British artist, respectfully addressed to the nobility, gentry, and opulent classes, in the United Kingdom* (Newcastle, 1829), pp. 2, 4.

<sup>88</sup> Carey, *Brief remarks on the anti-British effect of inconsiderate criticism on modern art and the exhibitions of the living British artists*, pp. 5-6.

put forward by the Institution for this exhibition was, once again, 'to gratify the public taste, and to animate the British artist to exertion'.<sup>89</sup> It was the first public exhibition of Old Masters that took place in Britain; and as such, it was a great success. To artists, however, it seemed as if the promotion of contemporary art – the much vaunted end of the Institution – suddenly became secondary. They did not wait to respond.

At a dinner at Beaumont's in May that year, attended by Wordsworth and artists, Beaumont, surprised, told Farington of the refusal by the Academicians *en bloc* of the tickets that the Directors of the Institution had offered them for the Dutch and Flemish Masters exhibition:

He said he understood ten had sent answers declining them and very few accepted them ... the letter of the Secretary was an ill written and foolish composition, but it could not be supposed that the Directors authorised it, and it seemed not to be a sufficient cause for the Academicians to declare war against the British Institution.<sup>90</sup>

Perhaps to Beaumont this reaction seemed exaggerated; not so to certain artists, who had been muttering among themselves about the pretensions of connoisseurs for quite some time. Finally, with the 1815 exhibition, it seemed to them that the true pedagogical intentions of the Directors were revealed. During a conversation between Lawrence, Farington and Smirke, the latter said of the state of art in England:

Speaking of it generally very little encouragement is given. He thought the *British Institution* conducted as it does much harm. The bringing forward the

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<sup>89</sup> 'Preface to the exhibition in the year 1815', p. 17.

<sup>90</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 21 May 1815.

works of the great artists of former periods is calculated to induce those who have money to lay out to purchase such works from seeing the unlimited admiration of them, - instead of encouraging the British Artist of this period although this was the professed design of the Institution at its commencement.<sup>91</sup>

Once again we see the old argument about the preference of collectors and patrons for Old Masters being blamed for the lack of investment in modern British art. The connoisseurs who lent their works for the British Institution exhibitions were not completely disinterested; Pullan asserts that the exhibitions were displays of the power of possession.<sup>92</sup> The owner's name was as prominent in the catalogues as that of the painter, implying that for the Institution, the role of collectors in purchasing and displaying a painting for the benefit of the public was as important in the wider scheme as that of the artist who had painted it. Implicit in the Director's attitude was the idea that the seal of approval of a work of art was granted not by it being good per se, but by being owned by a reputed collector. Passing through the hands of a renowned connoisseur augmented the pedigree of a picture, as well as its price.

In the summer of that year, a spoof *Catalogue Raisonné* [sic] of the pictures now exhibiting at the British Institution shocked the London art world. It was published anonymously, as an independent pamphlet and serialised in the *Morning Chronicle* (fig. 19). Dripping with sarcasm, its frontispice proclaimed it to be

printed with a sincere desire to assist the Noble Directors in turning the Public Attention to those particular pieces which they have kindly selected with the benevolent intention of affording the most favourable contrast to Modern Art,

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<sup>91</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 15 August 1815.

<sup>92</sup> Pullan, 'Public goods or private interests?', p. 37.

the Encouragement, of which it is well known, is the sole Aim and Profession of the Institution.<sup>93</sup>

The *Catalogue* ironically praised the efforts made by the Institution in improving the nation's taste, but actually consisted of a savage critique of the taste and knowledge of its members, as well as of the perversion of its goals implicit in the change of attitude from endorsing modern British art to being a mere vehicle for showcasing the contents of Institution members' art collections. In the Preface, making a reference to the declaration of principles in the 1813 Reynolds catalogue, the author stated that the British Institution clearly set out with the intention to help British art; but 'the Directors in reality have it in view artfully to lead their readers to conclusions diametrically opposite to those they apparently wish to elicit'.<sup>94</sup> The works exhibited, the author of the *Catalogue* claimed, were of too low quality for the Directors to be serious about their importance as pedagogical aids:

Happy, happy modern artist then! Benevolent, glorious discriminating cherishers of modern art, admirable Directors! ... What a debt of gratitude is there not due to you in thus holding up to ridicule, works which if they were suffered to obtain any influence as examples, would corrupt all good taste, and be productive of nothing but manner, manner, dreadful ruinous destructive manner.<sup>95</sup>

The main point of conflict was the quality of the paintings on display. Some of the works exhibited at the Institution had indeed questionable attributions; many were dark, badly preserved or had been excessively restored. The taste of some

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<sup>93</sup> *A catalogue raisonnée of the pictures now exhibiting at the British Institution* (London, 1815), frontispice.

<sup>94</sup> *Catalogue raisonnée* (1815), p. 7.

<sup>95</sup> *Catalogue raisonnée* (1815), p. 17.

connoisseurs, such as Beaumont, for paintings mellowed out by time is well known; collectors tended to appreciate an aged, darkened appearance as proof of authenticity.<sup>96</sup> However, in some cases this patina was not genuine, but due to inadequate conservation or restoration methods, or simply forged by unscrupulous dealers. Whitley tells us of Alexis Delahante, a picture dealer of French origin who used to give the paintings he brought to Britain a temporary brown glaze of liquorice mixed with oxgall, in order to satisfy his clients, although he personally detested the practice and removed said glaze as soon as the client left.<sup>97</sup> In the view of artists, attempting to teach artists their own profession was bad enough, but to do it with the help of the wrong tools was to add insult to injury. James Elmes, in the *Annals of the Fine Arts*, wrote in 1816 that

[the Directors] abandoned their original plan, and instead of patronising native artists, form exhibitions of old and bad pictures, for the insidious purposes of puffing the several owners, and of affixing a high and false value to them for the purposes of sale.<sup>97b</sup>

Whether the pictures exposed be originals or copies, the *Catalogue* stated, they served one purpose: 'to raise a laugh at the expense of the possessor', for if they were copies, the owners had been duped; and if they were originals, they demonstrated the bad taste of those who purchased them.<sup>98</sup> In the final paragraphs,

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<sup>96</sup> A example of this is a famous anecdote narrated by Leslie in his biography of Constable. Beaumont recommended the colour of an old Cremona fiddle for the prevailing tone of everything, to which Constable answered by placing an old fiddle on the grass, to demonstrate that such tints did not correspond with Nature. Leslie, *Memoirs of the life of John Constable*, p. 114.

<sup>97</sup> Whitley, *Art in England 1800-1820*, p. 215. It was Delahante who brought Veronese's *Consecration of St. Nicholas* into Britain.

<sup>97b</sup> James Elmes, *Annals of the Fine Arts*, 1816. 'Whitley Papers'.

<sup>98</sup> *Catalogue raisonnée* (1815), p. 24.



after all the jibes, the irony and sarcastic witticisms, the author of the *Catalogue* exposed the artists' view of connoisseurs:

On the mere strength of a most mischievously superficial acquaintance with old pictures, do ninety-nine out of a hundred set themselves up as arbiters in art, whilst coming to the judgment seat totally unprepared with any information at all drawn from the contemplation or study of nature; they are of course quite inadequate to appreciate the merits which a new and genuine view of it may present. *Their* ONLY standards are old pictures; hence if the new production fails to remind them of somewhat they have seen before, it is instantly condemned.<sup>99</sup>

And added a last plea to stop the malignant influence of the Institution in the English art world:

I call then on the independent governors and subscribers – I call on the public to beware how they administer support to such a plausible, but destructive establishment as the present British Institution. And let the artist of talent look with a cautious suspicion to that favour which is a mere bait to lure him to destruction, which finally must lead to the overturn of all his own hopes and the total annihilation of the art itself.<sup>100</sup>

The attack focused particularly on Richard Payne Knight and Sir George Beaumont, the two most prominent Directors, connoisseurs and members of the Committee of Taste; the 'Letter of Dedication' of the *Catalogue* referred to them obliquely ('Although we know more than one Director who takes upon himself to dictate, we only know of one who undertakes to write'<sup>101</sup>). Some of the most scandalous, or even slanderous opinions, were uttered by the invented character of

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<sup>99</sup> *Catalogue raisonnée* (1815), pp. 66-7.

<sup>100</sup> *Catalogue raisonnée* (1815), p. 67.

<sup>101</sup> *Catalogue raisonnée* (1815), letter of dedication.

the "Incendiary", who after a comment on Reynolds's objections to cold colouring, declared:

I shall not allow this opportunity to pass, without noticing a point materially connected with this opinion of Sir Joshua Reynolds. The interest exerted to keep up the absurd prejudice that professional men cannot be proper critics in art, because they have not an *university education*, is daily losing ground. The progress of science has shewn, that men who busy themselves about *things* will always say more to the purpose, than those who busy themselves about *words*.<sup>102</sup>

Commenting on the *Château de Steen* by Rubens, one of the pictures exhibited, the author of the *Catalogue* launched a long diatribe against Beaumont, the owner of the painting. In it he claimed, sarcastically, that Beaumont's dislike of Turner, together with exhibiting a poor example of Flemish landscape painting, was in fact a devious plan on the connoisseur's part to increase the painter's fame:

On what principle could we pretend to explain the abuse with which the noble Director, who is the possessor of this invaluable production, pours forth on the greatest landscape painter of the present day, if he really was so deficient in taste and judgment as seriously to hold this up as an example of art. No, his pretended value of this thing is a mere farce, his abuse and his admiration are both equally the offspring of his ungovernable love and zeal for the moderns. Only imagine the noble Director arguing with himself thus – 'If I *affect* to *despise* the best of the moderns, and see that I make my abuse sufficiently gross, as I am a practitioner myself, I may indulge a fair hope that it will be placed to the account of jealousy and the despair on my part of being able to produce any thing which will bear the least competition with the works I pretend to put down. Now having a high reputation amongst my friends, I shall by this piece of cunning, induce a still higher of the artist I *affect* to abuse whilst in setting up as a specimen of great talent ... by bringing forward such a paltry daub to be laughed at, I shall afford, according to my heart's desire, the strongest inducement to the encouragement of modern art and particularly that department of the art to which I am more particularly attached – The Art of Landscape Painting'.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> *Catalogue raisonnée* (1815), p. 44.

<sup>103</sup> *Catalogue raisonnée* (1815), p. 20.

Knight was repeatedly referred to as 'the learned Director' with more than a little irony:

Thus the learned Director ... with great temerity has ventured to assert that which every one who has eyes, will instantly deny, namely, that in the picture of Christ in the Garden, by Correggio ... the sole mass of light on the robes of the principal figures, is of as *pure and bright a SKY BLUE as ultramarine could produce*. Now either the learned Director does not know what the term *sky blue* means, (which is rather extraordinary to be sure), or for the sake of his position he has affirmed, that which is quite the contrary to what he knows to be the fact; he either never saw ultramarine in his life, and does not know the gaudy tint it may be made to produce, or he has, for the sake of his theory, stated a falsehood.<sup>104</sup>

The anonymous *Catalogue* was widely ascribed to one or several Academicians.<sup>105</sup> Beaumont told Farington that he did not believe it to have been written by one person, 'but by four or five', and that he suspected he knew one of the authors; later he attributed it to Havil, which Farington regarded as 'a great improbability'.<sup>106</sup> Smirke ascribed it to Philips, who denied it; several persons believed it had been written by Mr. Fawkes, Turner's patron, because 'it perfectly agreed with much that He had said of the British Institution exhibition', and 'there had been a *virulence of criticism* on the pictures painted by *Turner*, such as should be reserved for Crime, but wholly disproportioned to a subject of Painting however

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<sup>104</sup> *Catalogue raisonnée* (1815), p. 44.

<sup>105</sup> As Peter Fullerton noted, both the British Library and the Royal Academy Library currently list the *Catalogue Raisonné* as attributed to Robert Smirke, following the attribution given by Samuel Halkett and John Laing, *Dictionary of anonymous and pseudonymous English literature*, new & enlarged edn. (Edinburgh, 1926), vol. I, p. 251. However, he argues, the case is by no means proven. Fullerton, 'Patronage and pedagogy', p. 72, n79; and 'Some aspects of the early years of the British Institution', chapter 3. According to Jordana Pomeroy, it was Abraham Raimbach who attributed the *Catalogue Raisonné* to Smirke, noting that this attribution has never been neither confirmed nor disproven. Pomeroy, 'Collecting the past to create a future', p. 211, n62.

<sup>106</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 9 and 21 June 1815.

much disapproved'.<sup>107</sup> Sir Abraham Hume spoke of it as being 'so poorly written that He could not impute it to any *Academician*, as it would, in that case, have been better done'.<sup>108</sup>

The effect of the *Catalogue* in the artistic community was akin to the explosion of a bomb. Most artists recognised with varying degrees of openness that they were pleased by it; Smirke, Thomson and Lawrence thought it was very well written, and Thomson believed that due to the influence of the *Catalogue*, the Directors were driven to purchase Wilkie's *Distraint for rent*.<sup>109</sup> Others criticised its style; Farington, always prudent with his opinions, after perusing it simply recorded that 'it contained very severe animadversions on the views & conduct of the Directors of the Institution'.<sup>110</sup> Lord Egremont told Philips, who in turn told Farington, that the Directors had held a meeting to decide what ought to be done regarding the *Catalogue*; the Institution was abuzz with amazement and indignation at the insolent pamphlet.<sup>111</sup> By far the strongest reaction was that of Beaumont, who was said to be extremely distressed by the whole affair:

He appeared to be quite broken up in constitution. His countenance fallen; His spirits gone, He seemed to be fast declining towards dissolution. – Thomson ... attributed this great change, probably temporary, to the present uneasiness of His mind caused by the mortification He feels from this publication.

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<sup>107</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 10, 21 and 12 June 1815.

<sup>108</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 21 June 1815.

<sup>109</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 10, 21 and 22 June 1815.

<sup>110</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 10 June 1815.

<sup>111</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 21 June 1815.

A few days later the artist William Owen confirmed Thomson's report, adding yet another surprising (and welcome) effect of the *Catalogue* on the connoisseurs:

Owen spoke to me about the bad state of Health in which Sir G.B. seemed to be, & of the great alteration in His look; He appeared to be wasting away. – Owen thought it was owing to what He had felt from the pamphlet *Catalogue*, though he spoke as if He made light of it ... 'It has, however, I am sure done good in one quarter. P. Kn[igh]t. is become so civil since He read what is said of Him as not to seem to be in His manner the same man'.<sup>112</sup>

Peter Funnell has argued that the *Catalogue Raisonné* served as a watershed in the war between artists and connoisseurs. Whereas the conflicts dealt with the artists' self-perception of their own social status, and about which sector of the art world should control the course of British art, the doubts expressed about the effectiveness of the Institution referred to the wider issue of the sources and nature of patronage: should the state be involved in it? Or should it just depend on private individuals?<sup>113</sup>

Haydon, avowed enemy of the Academy and, due to his confrontation with Knight and fluctuating attitude towards Beaumont, not a friend of the British Institution either, contemplated the ongoing conflict with a certain degree of superciliousness; one would get the impression that he regarded himself as the only one entitled to have fits of temper and to publish inflammatory articles venting his grievances with his artistic enemies. He was not wholly exempt of reason; but he seemed to be blind to the fact that he was decrying much the same traits in the Academy that he himself showed when faced opposition.

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<sup>112</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 5 July 1815.

<sup>113</sup> Funnell, 'The London art world and its institutions', p. 161.

The Artists complain, the Directors wish to run the Masters against them; why complain? If it be true, let them exert themselves, and try to run against the Old Masters. I am no Friend to these groanings, they are all excuses to Idleness.

And further on:

'Well', said an Academician [Thomas Stothard], 'this will destroy us all, Mr. Haydon'. 'Destroy us', said I, 'God forbid. I'll answer it will rouse me' ... Nothing in my opinion shews the mean feeling & the paltry talent of the Academy more completely than the way they have taken up the present exhibition of fine works of the Institution; instead of being fired to excel, they are excited to decry, instead of doing justice to the genius of the great men who have painted, they set about insinuating mean motives to those who have collected them. From my heart & soul I despise them & their paltry souls, & God grant that no infatuation may ever come over my feelings to make me disgrace myself by joining them.<sup>114</sup>

1816 saw the publication of a second *Catalogue Raisonné* (the spelling mistake was corrected), to all appearances written by the same author(s); even more flippant than the previous one, it included a reference to the Elgin Marbles controversy, an attack on Knight, particularly because of his views on the latter, and a parody of the London art world set in Africa, with the equivalents of the Academy and the Institution. Beaumont and Knight were, respectively, caricaturised as "Figgity", 'a man of some taste, and a tolerable Painter; but uncertain, capricious, cowardly, and treacherous as a Hyaena, who entices the little children into his den, and then devours them ... it is but just to acknowledge, that for 24 successive moons, he has been constant in his dislike to green leaves and blue skies', and "Sooton", 'a

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<sup>114</sup> Haydon, *Diary*, ed. by Pope, vol. VII, pp. 431-3 (5 May 1815).

prodigious scholar – he understands thoroughly the languages of Tallika ... and has written a learned dissertation of the Indian worship of the Lingam'.<sup>115</sup>

The *Catalogue* insisted on some points that its antecedent of the previous year had made, such as the Institution's preference for Old Masters over modern art, despite its professed intention to aid and promote the Academy and contemporary artists, as well as the corrupted taste of the amateurs who allowed bad pictures to act as the examples that ought to teach modern artists to paint. 'At the foundation of the British Institution', began the conclusion to the pamphlet,

the inducement held out to the artists to join in its support, was simply, that a number of Noblemen and Gentlemen proposed to unite themselves into a Society, for the purpose of aiding and assisting the Professor in the disposal of his labours. A proposal of such promise was received by the Artists, of course, with all the demonstrations of gratitude it, in appearance, deserved. But a very little time had elapsed, before it became obvious, that of this description, were, in reality, raising up, and giving sanction to, an intermediate body, between themselves and the public, to prejudice their merits.<sup>116</sup>

The artists' reaction against this betrayal, the *Catalogue* explained, was only natural, 'to defend what they esteem the rights of the Profession', whereas the Directors' intentions were 'to persevere, and if possible, compel the Artists, by submission, to sanction their authority. Hence, the last six or eight years have been spent in indirect endeavours, on the part of the Institution, to reduce the Artists to obedience'. This, the author argued, had been achieved through a refusal to

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<sup>115</sup> *A catalogue raisonné of the pictures now exhibiting in Pall Mall* (London, 1816), preface to Part II.

<sup>116</sup> *Catalogue raisonné* (1816), p. 40.

purchase any work that had been exhibited at the Royal Academy, with the exception of Wilkie's *Distraint for rent*.<sup>117</sup>

The reasons behind the writing and publishing of the 1815 *Catalogue* were facetiously explained thus:

Some very invidious people have assiduously endeavoured to set afloat a notion that our Catalogue of last year was in reality a satire on the Institution, under the mask of a defence ... Now, merely for the sake of argument, let us grant the assertion - That it was our intention to ridicule the Institution; and by pointing out the faults of the Pictures, to deter their owners from publicly exposing their want of judgment, and folly, in priding themselves on the possession of such trash.<sup>118</sup>

However, the author turned serious a few pages later, when stating what amounted to a declaration of principles:

The complaint which artists make, is not so much against the exhibition of truly great works ... [artists object] to the exhibition of trash and absurdity which can only serve to pollute the public taste under the sanction of venerable names ... On such occasions as the present, the public must not imagine then that the artists are busily employed to point out the defects of the best things from any ignoble feeling of malignity, or from any envious sense of delight at the errors and faults of their superiors. No! Finding their exertions annually forced into this unfair and ungenerous competition, where prejudice, high sounding names, and the self-love - self-importance, and self-interest of the owners of the several Works are mustered in public array against them; self-preservation compels them in return, to shew that the greatest, even of the antients, are not without defects which reduce them to a level with the moderns; nor the moderns destitute of merits which entitle them, on some points, and points of the first importance - to take the lead.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> *Catalogue raisonné* (1816), p. 40.

<sup>118</sup> *Catalogue raisonné* (1816), p. 8.

<sup>119</sup> *Catalogue raisonné* (1816), pp. 28-9.



Farington discussed this new *Catalogue* with Northcote, Cadell, Landseer, Lawrence and Smirke, and recorded the collective opinion that 'in parts it was very well done, the satirical part laughable'; 'very humorous', written 'with the true, legitimate, English humour'.<sup>120</sup> It is certainly an entertaining read, its witty and sharp humour still fresh, as demonstrated in the closing 'Advertisement to the Directors', which warned them that:

The Spies of the Institution are ... known to the Incendiary. It will, therefore, be necessary to hire a fresh set of Ear-wiggers for the next Season. The tall Old Man in Black, and the short Young one in Brown, are totally useless, as they have not the art to hide the object for which they are retained.

The artists were particularly pleased with the merciless teasing of Knight, who had recently exposed himself to ridicule with his opinions on the Elgin Marbles, as we will see in the next chapter.

What! Will you delegate the arbitration, in matters of taste, to one who thus ungenerously avows, that, had he lived in the days of Pericles, he would have objected to the claims of Phidias? Surely such a taste and such a judgment are not of a character to preside over art, or to be suffered to interfere with men capable of doing justice to such a glorious event as this, which the nation has now in contemplation.<sup>121</sup>

However, once the mirth and malicious comments were over, some artists realised that this kind of attack would not be without consequences, not all of them positive to the artists' cause. Philips shared with Farington his apprehensions that 'this publication might cause persons of distinction, Amateurs, to withdraw their attention from the Arts or rather from Artists, from the thought that whatever they

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<sup>120</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 26 July, 3 and 4 September 1816.

<sup>121</sup> *Catalogue raisonné* (1816), p. 46.

might do as Patrons might be followed by unfavourable representation'.<sup>122</sup> Farington assuaged Philips's fears, but the fact of the matter remained that relations between artists and connoisseurs seemed, in 1816, to be at their lowest ebb.

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<sup>122</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 24 November 1816.

## Chapter 4

### The connoisseurs

As has been pointed out previously, the period around the turn of the century was characterised by an extremely dynamic art world, where ideas on art and standards of taste were in a state of flux. The divergence between the theory upheld by the connoisseurs and modern artistic practice points towards the collapse of traditional aesthetics that would come about later in the nineteenth century. This chasm would be exemplified by the critical reaction to Turner's and, to a lesser extent, Constable's work from the 1820s onwards; but two decades earlier, the attacks against the original manner of the former had already begun, launched by one of the most influential connoisseurs of the time: Sir George Beaumont.

#### 4.1 Sir George Beaumont

Beaumont! Bid Albion's chief support her claim,  
Bid wealth supply what yet is left of fame,  
Each hallow'd model to her school resign,  
And Raffael's grace with Titian's hue combine.<sup>123</sup>

Sir George Beaumont, Baronet, was widely regarded as one of the main arbiters of taste of his time, a fine collector and patron, and an accomplished amateur artist. At the same time, those who opposed his views saw him as a threat to modern art, inconstant in his tastes and affections for artists, capricious, unreasonable and stubbornly conservative at a time of great change and innovation in British art. The

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<sup>123</sup> William Sotheby, *A poetical epistle to Sir George Beaumont, Bart. on the encouragement of the British School of painting* (London, 1801), p. 23.

figure of Beaumont is in itself representative of the contradictions and shifts of the British art world of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (fig. 20).

He was born in 1753, the same year that Hogarth published his *Analysis of beauty*. Surrounded by art from early on, like most noblemen of his generation, he undertook drawing lessons under Alexander Cozens, and was introduced by his tutor to the engraver William Woollett, who had secured an international reputation thanks to his engravings of landscapes, particularly by Richard Wilson; and to Woollett's apprentice, Thomas Hearne, who would later in life become a renowned topographical artist. While he studied in Oxford, Beaumont joined a group of enthusiastic amateur artists with whom he sketched regularly.<sup>124</sup> Through common friends he met Sir Joshua Reynolds, whom he admired greatly; soon the young amateur painter gained Reynolds's trust, and this friendship left a deep imprint in Beaumont's taste and judgment in artistic matters. He regarded himself as Reynolds's disciple, more in his ideology than in his own practice as a painter, and in the disputes about art at the turn of the century he took a decidedly Reynoldsian and traditionalistic stance. Haydon acknowledged that Reynolds had passed his mantle to Beaumont, and declared that he had been 'an extraordinary man, one of the old school formed by Sir Joshua - a link between the artist and the nobleman, elevating the one by an intimacy which did not depress the other'.<sup>125</sup> Wilkie - who was also patronised by Beaumont, but never caused his patron as many headaches as his friend Haydon did - also paid a posthumous tribute to

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<sup>124</sup> Luke Herrmann, 'Sir George Beaumont: disciple of Sir Joshua Reynolds', in *Sir George Beaumont of Coleorton, Leicestershire: '... a painter's eye, a poet's heart'* (exh. cat.) (Leicester Museum and Art Gallery, 1972?), pp. 6-8.

<sup>125</sup> Haydon, *Lectures on painting and design*, p. 322; and *Autobiography*, I, pp. 405-6.

Beaumont, writing in a letter to his widow that 'He, in what he did, and what he said, tried only to continue and follow up what his friend Sir Joshua had so happily begun.'<sup>126</sup>

Uncharacteristically, Reynolds shared with Beaumont some of his technical recipes and experiments, something he never did with his actual pupils. He allegedly told Beaumont to 'mix a little wax with your colours' but not to tell anybody, as he did himself; and it was to Beaumont that he uttered his nonchalant reply, 'All good pictures crack', when the baronet expressed doubts about the properties and durability of the unorthodox media employed by the painter.<sup>127</sup> However, when asked by his friend Oldfield Bowles whether it would be worthwhile to employ Reynolds to paint the portrait of his daughter, given the widely-commented fugacity of Reynolds's gorgeous painterly effects, Beaumont replied: 'No matter, take the chance; even a faded picture from Reynolds will be the finest thing you can have'. Bowles was swayed, and today the portrait by Reynolds of *Miss Bowles* hangs in the Wallace Collection.<sup>128</sup> As an emblem of his reverence for the painter, in 1812 Beaumont erected a cenotaph to Reynolds's memory in the grounds of his residence, Coleorton Hall, inscribed with a poem by Wordsworth:

On my patrimonial grounds have I

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<sup>126</sup> David Wilkie to Lady Beaumont, 12 March 1827, MA 1827.

<sup>127</sup> A. Graves and W.V. Cronin, *History of the works of Sir Joshua Reynolds* (London, 1899-1901), p. 70; C. R. Leslie and Tom Taylor, *Life and times of Sir Joshua Reynolds, with notices of some of his contemporaries* (London, 1865), vol. I, pp. 112-113. Samuel and Richard Redgrave recorded Beaumont's reply as 'a faded picture by Reynolds is better than the best of Romney's.' Bowles had been considering Romney as the portraitist before Beaumont convinced him otherwise. Redgrave, *A century of British painters*, pp. 61-2.

<sup>128</sup> Leslie and Taylor, vol. II, p. 134. Reynolds's materials and techniques will be considered in more detail in Part III of this dissertation.

Raised this frail tribute to his memory;  
From youth a zealous follower of the Art  
That he professed; attached to him in heart  
Admiring, loving, and with grief and pride  
Feeling what England lost when Reynolds died.<sup>129</sup>

However, his own style was more reminiscent of that of Wilson and Paul Sandby than that of the first President of the Academy. He started exhibiting at the Royal Academy in 1779, although adverse criticisms stopped him from exhibiting his works. From 1794 onwards he was a regular at the Academy exhibition, his sketches and landscape oils receiving often positive reviews, such as the 1796 one in the *Morning Herald* which found in Beaumont's work 'pure nature charmingly designed and wrought up it all the magic glow of the Flemish School', and 'all the brilliant beauties of Ruysdael, without his formalities'. Others were glowing to the point of extravagance, perhaps confusing Beaumont's social status with his artistic ability. The *Monthly Magazine* of 1800 stated that 'the landscapes of Gainsborough, Turner and Sir George Beaumont, may, without peril of comparison, embellish the same gallery with those of Claude de Lorraine and Carlo Maratti'.<sup>130</sup> Lord Harcourt thought that Beaumont was 'the best of *amateur artists*', although he was 'too slight'.<sup>131</sup> Even professional artists had praise for Beaumont's efforts; in 1794, John Singleton Copley spoke highly of one of Beaumont's landscapes, exhibited that year at the Academy, asserting that it 'would have done credit to any artist in any

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<sup>129</sup> Quoted by Herrmann, 'Sir George Beaumont: disciple of Sir Joshua Reynolds', p. 8. Farington was present when the first stone of the Cenotaph was laid: Farington, *Diary*, 30 October 1812.

<sup>130</sup> *Morning Herald*, 'Royal Academy', 1796; *Monthly Magazine*, August 1800, p. 37. Owen and Brown's *Collector of genius* is a comprehensive source for an overview of Beaumont's work as a painter.

<sup>131</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 17 March 1805.

country'.<sup>132</sup> In 1799 he became an associate member of the Sketching Club, and would often go in sketching holidays accompanied by members of this society and other artists.<sup>133</sup>

Years later, when his star was on the decline, the conflicts in which he had been involved (particularly his controversy with Turner) had damaged his reputation as connoisseur and arbiter of taste, and his style of painting was out of fashion, in 1827 the critic for the *London Magazine* attacked Beaumont's pictures and judgment in his review of the British Institution exhibition, but not without alleging a certain reluctance to criticise such an illustrious character:

Sir George Beaumont has been so long and so highly lauded that it seems more than bold to doubt, and yet we shall doubt his powers in landscape, and perhaps also his judgment respecting art in general. If he looks at nature it is through Wilson; yet not through Wilson great and new, but blackened by varnish and yellow lake, and smoke. Surely the colour of a landscape is an essential portion of it - we almost think it is the most essential. Docks and grass and the leaves of trees are not made of tar, nor water of milk and bitumen, nor skies of lampblack and indigo ... This might have been a picture painted two centuries ago, but it would not be the less bad now, and what will it be two centuries hence. We only hope Sir George does not judge landscape as he paints it.<sup>134</sup>

Owen and Brown have argued that, in the interim period between the death of Wilson and Gainsborough, and the emergence of Turner and Constable, landscape painting did not have a leading figure, and Beaumont could legitimately claim his

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<sup>132</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 11 April 1794.

<sup>133</sup> Beaumont had done this previously; for instance, he and Hearne had made the Tour of the Wye together in the summer of 1794. Farington, *Diary*, 4 July 1794.

<sup>134</sup> *London Magazine*, September 1827. The work reviewed was Beaumont's *Jacques and the wounded stag*, his last major painting. The review was published posthumously; Beaumont had died in February that year.

place along his contemporaries.<sup>135</sup> In the pursuit of art he went beyond his peers; at one point in his career, he was generally regarded as one of the best landscape painters of his generation, if an amateur one. As Allan Cunningham said of him, 'He adorned the gentleman with the artist, and the artist with the gentleman, and stood high in the ranks both of genius and courtesy'.<sup>136</sup> Haydon, who maintained a complicated and conflictive relationship with Beaumont, nevertheless did, on his patron's death, acknowledge his importance in the English art world:

Born a painter, his fortune prevented the necessity of application for subsistence, and of course he did not apply. His taste was exquisite, not peculiar or classical, but essentially *Shakesperian*. Painting was his great delight... His ambition was to connect himself with the art of the country, and he has done it forever... His loss, with all his faults, will not easily be supplied. He founded the National Gallery. Let him be crowned.<sup>137</sup>

However, he was first and foremost a connoisseur, and the role he played in the art world of the time was that of a patron, collector and expert on a wide range of artistic fields: besides his expertise in the visual arts, Beaumont was an amateur actor and generally interested in the theatre, and befriended and encouraged two of the most important poets of the time, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth. Beaumont's first-hand experience of artistic activity was conducive to a better rapport with his protégés; but, crucially, painting was for him a sideline, not a way to earn a living, as it was for the artists that surrounded him.

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<sup>135</sup> Owen and Brown, *Collector of genius*, p.80. Felicity Owen also wrote a short essay, 'Beaumont the Artist', for the exhibition catalogue *Sir George Beaumont of Coleorton, Leicestershire*, pp. 25-28, where she argues that Beaumont's technical dexterity was superior to his artistic vision, but that in any case he was an amateur who painted for his own pleasure.

<sup>136</sup> Allan Cunningham, *The lives of the most eminent British painters, sculptors, and architects*, 6 vols. (John Murray: London, 1829-33; revised edn., 1880), vol. III, p.1.

<sup>137</sup> Haydon, *Autobiography*, I, pp. 405-6.



Because of his close relationship with painters, and his own activity as one, Beaumont occupied a sort of intermediate space between artists and connoisseurs, fluctuating between the two sides. He was a regular at the Royal Academy, not only exhibiting his paintings there; his academic contacts, of which Farington was only the most prominent, ensured that his attendance to the Academy's annual dinner was a usual event.<sup>138</sup> His intimacy with the institution was so pronounced that in 1806, during the troublesome presidency of Wyatt, and the internal disputes concerning the election of the next candidate, the art collector Henry Hope declared that 'it would be advisable to have for a President a person not professional, but a man of distinction, Sir George Beaumont He then named'. Lawrence, who was present, 'very properly cut Him short'.<sup>139</sup> Artists must still have been stung by their exclusion from the ranks of the British Institution, and the idea of a connoisseur – even one with such connections as Beaumont – becoming the next President of the Academy surely enervated them.

Beaumont's influence as a connoisseur began to make itself felt with his election as member of the Society of Dilettanti, in 1784. In it he made the acquaintance of two men who would later rise to prominence as leading personalities in the artistic and aesthetic debates of the turn of the century: Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight. The former he already knew, and a solid friendship developed between them. Knight, on the other hand, was more of a competing collector and patron, although as Owen and Brown note, it was rather a

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<sup>138</sup> Farington recorded Beaumont's attendance in 1794, 1795, 1796, 1797, 1801, 1803, 1805, 1812 and 1821, as well as several occasions when he was not only invited but also suggested other guests.

<sup>139</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 3 November 1806.

case of friendly rivalry, not enmity.<sup>140</sup> Their personalities were also complementary: Knight was known for his argumentativeness and somewhat outrageous, outspoken demeanour, whereas Beaumont's milder manners and civility ensured smoother interaction with both artists and other connoisseurs. However agreeable on the surface, though, Beaumont's ideas were firmly rooted and he was as pugnacious in defending them when necessary as Knight. Together they would rule the English art world as undisputed arbiters of taste.

In 1801 William Sotheby published a poem dedicated to Beaumont, inspired by his proposal to improve the British School of painting by means of the exhibition of masterpieces of past British masters. The author listed those famous British artists who were the 'guide and glory of the British School', stating that their fame would be irrelevant compared with those who would arise if the Arts were supported. Essentially it was yet another call for artistic patronage and encouragement; it is worth noting, though, the role ascribed by the writer to Beaumont: his standing as connoisseur and his influence in the artistic matters of the nation were acknowledged, and he was regarded as the catalyst that would facilitate that glorious end for British art.

Go then, oh Beaumont! 'tis no private call:  
Link'd with the arts, the realm shall stand or fall;  
Invoke the senate! Bid the nation hear,  
The father of his people bows his ear.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Owen and Brown, *Collector of genius*, pp. 59-60.

<sup>141</sup> Sotheby, *A poetical epistle to Sir George Beaumont, Bart*, p. 23

Beaumont's role as arbiter of taste seemed to be confirmed with his appointment to the 'Committee of Taste' in 1802, of which no professional artist was a member. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, this committee, created for the selection of works to commemorate the nation's heroes, was one of the causes for discontent among artists. These believed that the importance of the Royal Academy as a body of professional artists had been ignored by the Government, and regarded the election to the committee of connoisseurs in preference to artists as a direct affront, one of the worst blows in the war between connoisseurs and them. Speaking in 1816 of how great a loss for the English art world the death of Reynolds had been, William Owen told to Farington that 'had He lived it would have been impossible for Mr. Payne Knight & the *other Members of the Committee of Taste* to have obtained the importance they have done and that they should be referred to for decisions as they now are'.<sup>142</sup>

Beaumont exercised his taste not only in purchases made for himself. He also advised others on artistic matters, as he had done with Bowles regarding Reynolds. For instance, Lady Inchiquin, Reynolds's niece, consulted him on the sale of the pictures he had inherited from the painter.<sup>143</sup> The art dealer William Buchanan believed that 'it would be absurd to say that anybody was Sir George Beaumont's adviser'.<sup>144</sup> Not needing anybody's guidance in art, he was his own adviser.

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<sup>142</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 27 January 1816.

<sup>143</sup> Owen and Brown, *Collector of genius*, pp. 85-6, 147.

<sup>144</sup> Buchanan to Stewart, 24 February 1804. Quoted by Hugh Brigstocke, *William Buchanan and the nineteenth-century art trade: letters to his agents in London and Italy* (London: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 1982), p. 142.

As a collector, Beaumont soon fixed his attention upon the Old Masters, probably encouraged by Reynolds, although he did not follow to the letter his mentor's exhortations to venerate Italian Renaissance artists above all others, and from the 1780s onwards developed a taste for the painting of the Northern Schools, particularly that of Flanders. Nevertheless, the most sought after painters for his collection were Claude and Poussin: in a letter to Gilpin, Beaumont recorded Wilson's opinion of Claude, who was, according to the painter, 'the only person that ever could paint fine weather and Italian skies ... There is one picture of his which makes my heart ache. I shall never paint such a picture as that, were I to live a thousand years'.<sup>145</sup> Surely mindful of this, by 1786 Beaumont had achieved his ambition, and purchased a Claude: *Landscape with Hagar and the Angel*, a work that he came to love so much that he carried it with him in his travels, and recalled after donating it to the National Gallery, to stay with him until the end of his life.<sup>146</sup> Subsequently he acquired other works by Claude, as well as Poussin; but some of the best pictures in his collection were by Northern masters, Flemish, Dutch and British.

His activities as patron of contemporary artists were also noted, notwithstanding the fact that he was by no means one of the wealthiest. Beaumont was used to being surrounded by artists; Farington, who had been Wilson's pupil,

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<sup>145</sup> Beaumont to Gilpin, 9 November 1802. Quoted by Owen and Brown, *Collector of genius*, pp. 64-5. The quote is remarkably similar to the anecdote told of Turner by his friend George Jones that as a young man he wept in front of Claude's *Seaport* in Angerstein's collection because, as he exclaimed, 'I shall never be able to paint anything like that picture'. George Jones, 'Recollections of J.M.W. Turner', in *Collected correspondence of J.M.W. Turner, with an early diary and a memoir by George Jones*, ed. by John Gage (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 4.

<sup>146</sup> Whitley, *Art in England, 1821-1837*, p. 109.

was in friendly terms with Beaumont for most of their lives, although their relation cooled considerably as a consequence of the rivalry between the Academy and the British Institution, as we saw in the preceding chapter. Farington's *Diary* abounds with references to Beaumont, and is one of the best sources to trace the life and deeds of the baronet. His role as patron was not limited to commissioning works, however. As an amateur painter, he probably regarded himself as more of a mentor than a mere client, and it was in this guise that he took younger artists under his wing. Perhaps in imitation of Reynolds, who used to lend students works from his collection, Beaumont encouraged, and advised artists, among them Girtin, the portrait painter John Jackson, Constable, Haydon and Wilkie, recommending them what examples to study, and even in which direction to take their careers, even in the case of those such as Constable from whom he never purchased a work. Constable, who was introduced to Beaumont in his youth, developed his career under the attentive eye of the connoisseur, although he never acknowledged Constable's genius as a landscape painter.<sup>147</sup> He showed the painter his gallery, encouraging him to copy the masters and read Reynolds's *Discourses*, but Constable seemed intent on choosing his own path, and although he was grateful for Beaumont's attentions, he preferred to take Nature as his model. Leslie summarised thus their relationship:

Sir George thought Constable too daring in the modes he adopted to obtain this quality; while Constable saw that Sir George often allowed himself to be deceived by the effects of time, of accident, and by the tricks that are, far oftener than is generally supposed, played by dealers, to give mellowness to pictures; and in these matters each was disposed to set the other right ... But however opposite in these respects their opinions were, and although

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<sup>147</sup> See Michael Rosenthal, *Constable: The painter and his landscape* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 22-28, for Beaumont tutoring the young Constable.

Constable well knew that Sir George did not appreciate his works – the intelligence, the wit, and the fascinating and amiable manner of the Baronet had gained his heart, and a sincere and lasting friendship subsisted between them.<sup>148</sup>

An eloquent example of the admiration Constable felt for Beaumont was his painting of *The Cenotaph* (fig. 21), the monument to Reynolds that Beaumont had erected in Coleorton, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1836 with the wish to see the names of Reynolds and Beaumont once more in the catalogue.<sup>149</sup>

Beaumont also played the part of pedagogical patron with the Scottish painter David Wilkie, who was introduced to him in 1806 through another of his protégés, John Jackson.<sup>150</sup> That year, Wilkie's *Village politicians*, his first exhibit at the Academy, had been an instant success; the press praised him as a new manifestation of 'the genius of Teniers', and asserted that 'there is hardly anything in the Flemish school superior to this effort of juvenile genius. If his future efforts should but correspond with this proof of his talents, Scotland will have as much reason to be proud of him as England has of her Hogarth'.<sup>151</sup> Beaumont and his fellow patron Lord Mulgrave enthusiastically championed Wilkie, and commissioned paintings from him; Beaumont's picture would be *The blind fiddler* (fig. 22), with which he was so impressed that he offered to pay for it more than it had been previously agreed. He had lent Wilkie a small painting by Teniers as a

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<sup>148</sup> Leslie, *Memoirs of the life of John Constable*, pp. 113-4.

<sup>149</sup> *Sir George Beaumont of Coleorton, Leicestershire*, p. 43.

<sup>150</sup> For Wilkie's relationship with Beaumont see Allan Cunningham, *Life of Sir David Wilkie* (London, 1843); H.A.D. Miles and David Brown, *Sir David Wilkie of Scotland* (Raleigh: North Carolina Museum of Art, 1987); Owen and Brown, pp. 156-60, 168-74, and 184-5.

<sup>151</sup> *The Mirror of the Times*, 1806. Quoted by Whitley, *Art in England, 1800-1820*, pp. 105-6.

model for the *Blind fiddler*, and subsequently, sensing the Northern sensibility of this genre painter, directed him to Rembrandt and Ostade, and later to Watteau. Farington said that Beaumont was 'in a fever about Wilkie's extraordinary merits', so much so that he even proposed him to be elected as an Academician without the previous step of becoming an Associate – a suggestion that was understandably taken a dim view of at the Academy.<sup>152</sup> Beaumont's flights of eloquence about his favourites – of whom Wilkie was not the first – did not endear him with his audience, who tended not to take him seriously and in some cases felt irritated by his enthusiasm, and even more so by his sudden disenchantment with his discoveries. During the Venetian Secret affair, Beaumont was one of the connoisseurs lampooned in Gillray's caricature *Titianus Redivivus* (fig. 32), depicted as a *putto* labelled "Ventus Beaumontisus", a reference to his "puffing" of new artists.<sup>153</sup> The actor Kemble stated that Beaumont 'never endeavoured to raise one man but to put down another'<sup>154</sup>; and Northcote published an article in the journal *The Artist* in which he criticized patrons that gushed over their new discoveries, giving them rides on a 'flying coach', implicitly referring to Beaumont.<sup>155</sup>

Overall, Wilkie benefited from being patronised by Beaumont; his docile temper also ensured that he knew when and how to bow to his patron's suggestions. A very different case was that of his fellow painter and friend Haydon.

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<sup>152</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 9 April 1807; Owen and Brown, *Collector of genius*, p. 159.

<sup>153</sup> See chapter 5 below for an account of the Venetian Secret, also known as Provis affair.

<sup>154</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 6 May 1806.

<sup>155</sup> *The Artist: a collection of essays, relative to Painting, Poetry, Sculpture, Architecture, the Drama, discoveries of Science, and various other subjects*, ed. by Prince Hoare, 2 vols. (London, 1810), vol. I.

As he had done with others, Beaumont attempted to guide and mould into one of his pupils the promising history painter, who had started gaining critical notice when he exhibited his *Flight into Egypt* at the Academy. But Haydon, notwithstanding his close friendship with the Scottish painter, did not share Wilkie's meekness or, indeed, his sense of propriety. As we have seen, he had a completely disproportionate concept of his own genius and worth, and his arrogant behaviour confused Beaumont first, then, according to Haydon himself, terrified him, and ended up causing a permanent estrangement that only was assuaged posthumously, when Haydon reflected on Beaumont's goodwill and other positive qualities.

It started innocently enough, with Beaumont praising to the skies Haydon's talent, on the occasion of the painter's success at the Academy. He still had hopes of finding a great British history painter; in 1809 he wrote to Wordsworth about Haydon, certain that he would 'turn out the best historical painter this country has ever produced'.<sup>156</sup> He was so vehement in his praise that even Mulgrave commented that Haydon was 'Sir George's hero, who is with him every day', while 'Wilkie is on the decline in favour'.<sup>157</sup>

As we saw in chapter 2.2, Haydon's *Dentatus* suffered an ignoble fate at the Academy Exhibition, prompting the excitable painter to a hatred of the institution that would only abate slightly much later in life, when during periods of financial

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<sup>156</sup> Beaumont to Wordsworth, 26 February 1809, Dove Cottage Trust. Quoted by Owen and Brown, *Collector of genius*, p. 163.

<sup>157</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 3 April 1809. Haydon corroborated this in his *Diary*, 13 May 1809.



worries he considered burying the hatchet and soliciting its support.<sup>158</sup> Beaumont was doubtlessly bothered by the abrupt manner of his new protégé, but nothing could possibly have prepared him for the furore between 1809 and 1811 over his commission of a painting on the subject of *Macbeth*. The commission itself was quite casual – but Haydon took to the task with characteristic zeal. When asked how big it would be, Haydon replied ‘Any size you please, Sir George’.<sup>159</sup> Beaumont suggested a whole length, and Haydon, as ever fond of large-scale paintings, proceeded; Beaumont’s words were vague enough that Haydon fancifully planned a huge Michelangelesque effort. The connoisseurs’ taste for domestic-scale painting was related to their view that appreciation of art was essentially a private activity, and works of art themselves were private property. This obviously clashed with the opinions of artists such as Haydon, who sought to create a public art which had to be of a large enough size that large crowds could profit from its contemplation. Haydon, as a civic-minded painter, saw Beaumont’s attitude towards large-scale painting as illustrative of the way the private interests of connoisseurs hindered the promulgation of serious national art.<sup>160</sup>

In January 1810 Beaumont was quite alarmed to see the painting quite advanced, and at a scale he disliked, so he changed his mind and asked for a

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<sup>158</sup> *Neglected genius: the diaries of Benjamin Robert Haydon 1808-1846*, ed. by Jolliffe, pp. 104-105 (1-4 April 1826).

<sup>159</sup> Haydon, *Autobiography*, vol. I, p. 98.

<sup>160</sup> Beaumont was not the only connoisseur who preferred small, cabinet-size paintings. Knight opposed large pictures on aesthetic grounds, because, he argued, the whole of a composition ought to be visible from a chosen viewpoint. Clarke, ‘*Collecting paintings and drawings*’, p. 104.

smaller painting. This was a sore disillusionment for Haydon, who, identifying himself with the destiny of his profession at large ruminated:

Was this a Patron of Taste? – was this like one anxious for the improvement and advance of Art, to permit a youth to go on in security for four months, gratifying his fancy, and stimulating his exertions by the wish to please his employer and then telling him he should like a smaller Picture as his house was not adapted for large ones? – why did he not tell me this before I began.<sup>161</sup>

In a lengthy but private diatribe against the connoisseur in his *Diary*, Haydon vented his frustration, accusing Beaumont of being ‘a man who wishes to have the reputation of bringing forward Genius without much expence’, who acquired sketches cheaply from young artists in order to be able to boast, if the artists achieved fame, that he had known them since the beginning, and in the opposite case, deny all knowledge. He further accused Beaumont of something that others had perceived as well: his fickleness in his support for artists, the rapidity with which he grew tired of one and picked up the next for yet another ride in his ‘flying coach’.

Sir George never comes to Town, but he brings Doubt, Irresolution & Misery in his train, to let loose upon every Artist, as his whim directs or his fancy excites ... Sir George is always under the influence of some fancy, and this he has the power of communicating to others with such fascination, that no man can resist him, - While this fancy lasts, he acts with real warmth, and sincerity, but it is soon succeeded by a new one which sets things before him in a new light, and he then thinks it no dishonour or immorality to act and speak as this directs him, tho it be in compleat contradiction to his former opinions ... such a man of rank is a dangerous character.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Haydon, *Diary*, ed. by Pope, vol. II, p. 127 (February 1810).

<sup>162</sup> Haydon, *Diary*, ed. by Pope, vol. II, pp. 124-6 (February 1810).

Haydon vilified Beaumont's prestige as connoisseur and accused him of meanness at the same time, because he never purchased pictures at the exhibitions:

You are a lamentable instance, Sir George, how much cunning is an overmatch for sincerity – you never lay out a penny at either the exhibition or institution, and yet you have more the reputation of the patron of art than those Noblemen and Gentlemen who lay out thousands – in short such is your management that [you] have got and keep your reputation by never buying – by lamenting that there is nothing to suit your exquisite taste, &c. – [you] thereby insinuate that those who do buy have no taste at all ... I have no hope of putting a stop to your conduct – I only wish to check its influence, by laying open the secret spring of its motions.<sup>163</sup>

However, Haydon did not limit his character assassination of Beaumont to the pages of his *Diary*; his circle of friends, and by extension the whole of the London art world, soon knew of his grievances. Beaumont attempted to pacify the irascible painter: partly on his insistence, the British Institution awarded in 1810 its £100 premium for history painting to *Dentatus*, as a sort of compensation; however, Haydon was only temporarily mollified, for when he went to visit Mulgrave to see where his painting had been hung, he found it unpacked in the stables. Farington, despite being both a member of the Academy which so much venom drew from Haydon, and a friend of Beaumont's (although by this time he was beginning to compile evidence of the connoisseur's blunders and of the antipathy excited against him by his inconstant taste) took pity on his fellow painter and told him 'not to give up his observation and feelings'.<sup>164</sup>

Years later, in 1814, Beaumont approached Haydon once more with the intention to reconcile, when the latter exhibited with astounding success at the Oil

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<sup>163</sup> Haydon, *Diary*, ed. by Pope, vol. II, p. 145 (March-June 1810).

<sup>164</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 15 January 1811.

& Watercolour Society in Spring Gardens his *Judgment of Solomon* (fig. 23), a massive essay in the classic historical manner, conceived in competition with West's *Christ rejected*. Beaumont congratulated the painter, and although he was unable to purchase it for the British Institution, he obtained a payment of 100 guineas for Haydon and proposed a 250 guineas commission for him.<sup>165</sup> Haydon saw this triumph as a step in the reformation of national taste, which he undertook as his personal crusade. He prayed that he life spared 'till I have reformed the taste of my Country, till great works are felt, ordered & erected, till the Arts of England are on a level with her Philosophy, her heroism, & her Poetry, & her greatness is compleat'.<sup>166</sup>

Beaumont commissioned and bought works by contemporary artists, but owed his prestige as a collector largely to his purchases of Old Masters. His collection, if not extensive, was balanced and selected with undoubted good criteria, and was comprehensive enough to be representative of the taste of the time: a combination of classical pastoral and historical pictures, landscape, genre and portraiture, both Continental and British, Ancient and Modern, although with a decided bias towards the great schools of the past. The Old Masters hung in the purpose-built gallery at Coleorton, whereas he kept his contemporary British paintings at his residence in London.<sup>167</sup> The list of pictures which constituted Beaumont's gift to the National Gallery may serve as a summary of the best in his collection: Claude

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<sup>165</sup> Owen and Brown, *Collector of genius*, p. 180.

<sup>166</sup> Haydon, *Diary*, ed. by Pope, vol. VI, p. 351 (April-May 1814).

<sup>167</sup> Jordana Pomeroy, 'Collecting the past to create a future', p. 170. For a full list see *Annals of the Fine Arts*, no. 277, pp. 80-2 (1820).

Lorraine's *Landscape: Narcissus (Narcissus and Echo)*, *Landscape with a goatherd and goats*, *Landscape: Hagar and the Angel*, and the ascribed to Claude *Landscape: the death of Procris*; Poussin's *Landscape: a man washing his feet at a fountain (Landscape with figures)*; Rembrandt's *The Deposition*, and the attributed to Rembrandt *Seated man with a stick (A Jew merchant)*; Bourdon's *The return of the Ark*; Rubens's *Château de Steen*; Both's *Rocky landscape with herdsmen and muleteers (Landscape - morning)*; Wilkie's *The blind fiddler*, Reynolds's *A man's head*; Wilson's *Ruins of the Villa of Maecenas*, and *Niobe*; West's *Pylades and Orestes*, and Canaletto's *Campo S. Vidal and S. Maria della Carità (The stone mason's yard)*.<sup>168</sup>

He was one of the original members of the British Institution, and lent works of his collection both to the Institution's Schools and to the later exhibitions of Old Masters. Thus his educational attitude became institutionalised and expanded on a nationwide scale, perhaps in the hope of instilling something akin to his tastes in the nation at large, and in the younger generations of artists in particular. From the beginning of the nineteenth century he had begun to complain about the state of modern art; he was persuaded that the proliferation of watercolour painting lay at the root of what he saw as the neglect of traditional oil painting. 'Much harm', he told Farington, 'has been done by endeavouring to make painting in oil to appear like water colours, by which, in attempting to give lightness and clearness, the force of oil painting has been lost'.<sup>169</sup> As a passionate believer in Academic theory and its traditional hierarchy of genres, this rejection of the higher walks of art in favour of what was, effectively, an amateur's tools (which were nevertheless being turned

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<sup>168</sup> Sir George Beaumont of Coleorton, Leicestershire, p. 54.

<sup>169</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 12 October 1812.

into an innovative and tremendously rich, expressive method of painting by artists such as Girtin and Turner) convinced Beaumont that the greatness of the British School was in jeopardy.<sup>170</sup>

Beaumont shared Reynolds's dream of a British School that would hold its own among the best European Schools, and believed that this would be achieved precisely by adopting the style of those schools. Compared with his beloved Old Masters, he found very little to admire in modern painting:

The practice of many artists [has] become very meretricious, 'an influenza', which has affected in a very high degree Westall, Turner, a little Lawrence. That harmony and modesty which distinguishes great masters is not seen, but crudeness and bravura are substituted.<sup>171</sup>

The British masters in Beaumont's collection belonged to the previous generation – Reynolds, Wilson, Gainsborough. He compared modern painting with those and with the Old Masters, believing that the key to the success of the present and future British School lay in continuing a tradition that already existed, not in exploring new avenues. Beaumont's allegiance to the principles advocated by his masters coloured his evaluation of modern British art, and he wished that 'the Painters of the Present time would look at and study the pictures of Sir Joshua Reynolds and Richard Wilson in which they would find true art of the first character'.<sup>172</sup> Farington, another pupil of Wilson and fellow traditionalist, concurred with Beaumont regarding the abuse of technique by the younger generation of

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<sup>170</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 1 June 1808, 8 June 1811. For watercolour and its possibilities see Greg Smith, *The emergence of the professional watercolourist: Contentions and alliances in the artistic domain, 1760-1824* (London: Ashgate, 2002).

<sup>171</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 3 May 1803.

painters, and in a discussion among artists stated his belief that '*Art is too predominant* in our modern works; that the pure style accompanied by great simplicity is not now attempted; but bravura in execution, and contrivances for extraordinary and affected effects are now the prevailing considerations'.<sup>173</sup>

New painting styles that ignored the classical values of modest, balanced colouring were beginning to appear as a side-effect of the commercialization and commodification of painting. The conditions in which works were displayed at venues such as the Royal Academy, where pictures hung frame against frame, largely determined the style of modern painting. As Kriz has suggested, it is not surprising that artists had to increase the brilliancy of their colours raising the tonal key, and stressed painterly effects, in a bid to make their works stand out from their surroundings.<sup>174</sup> This, given the competitive market-like nature of the English art world, was essential with regards to sales. Opie made this connection in his *Lectures* at the Academy, but with a disregard for practicality that was only too common in academic theory, he deplored the practice:

In a crowd, he that talks loudest, not he that talks best, is surest of commanding attention; and in an exhibition, he that does not attract the eye, does nothing. But ... it becomes the true painter to consider, that they will avail nothing before the tribunal of the world and posterity. Keeping the true end of art in view, he must rise superior to the prejudices, disregard the applause, and contemn the censure of corrupt and incompetent judges; far

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<sup>172</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 5 June 1815.

<sup>173</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 21 March 1805.

<sup>174</sup> Kriz, *The idea of the English landscape painter*, pp. 38-9.

from being fashionable, it must be his object to reform, and not to flatter, - to teach, and not to please, - if he aspires, like Zeuxis, to paint for eternity.<sup>175</sup>

Although he was not alone in his opinions about modern art, Beaumont's position as an amateur and connoisseur, as well as his well-known practice of taking up and subsequently dropping up-and-coming talent, made him unpopular with artists who were defending their livelihood. Even Hearne, Beaumont's old acquaintance, believed that 'Sir George Beaumont desires to be supreme Dictator on works of art; gives opinions - sweeps away those artists who at the time are not his Objects'.<sup>176</sup> As has been outlined in the previous chapter, it was Beaumont's involvement with the British Institution that antagonised him most with artists as a collective. Nevertheless, Beaumont is best remembered in the annals of the history of art for his bitter, relentless and short-sighted criticisms of Turner.

In 1801, the young painter gained considerable attention with his painting *Dutch boats in a gale: fishermen endeavouring to put their fish on board*, later known as the *Bridgewater seapiece*. It was actually Beaumont who informed Farington that 'West has spoken in the highest manner of a picture in the Exhibition painted by Turner, that it is what Rembrandt thought of but could not do'; a few days later, Fuseli agreed on the Rembrandtesque feel of the painting, and equally commended it. Beaumont must have felt curious; the very next day he visited the Exhibition, and told Farington that he thought very highly of Turner's picture, although the sky looked too heavy and the water was 'rather inclined to brown'. It is quite ironic that

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<sup>175</sup> Opie, 'Lecture I', *Lectures on painting by the Royal Academicians*, ed. by Wornum (London, 1848), p. 257.

<sup>176</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 6 July 1809.



he would single out the brownness of the picture as one of its defects.<sup>177</sup> Two years later, his lukewarm appraisal of Turner had rather cooled, when he told Farington that 'Turner finishes his distances and middle distances upon a scale that requires *universal precision* throughout his pictures - but his foregrounds are comparatively *blots, & faces of figures without a feature being expressed*'. He compared the water in *Calais Pier, with French poissards, preparing for sea: an English packet arriving to 'veins in a marble slab*'.<sup>178</sup> Of Turner's other exhibit that year, *The festival upon the opening of the vintage at Macon*, Beaumont commented that 'the subject is borrowed from Claude but the colouring forgotten'.<sup>179</sup> William Segquier recounted that Turner had begun the picture on an unprimed canvas, and the colours in it were very bright, especially greens and yellows.<sup>180</sup> In this we can see the origin of Beaumont's complaints about Turner's vivid colours, which will be analysed in more depth in chapter 6, and his dismay at the painter's attempts to equate himself with the Old Master.

Even within the Academy, Beaumont was not alone in his opinions about Turner. The older generation of painters was also quite puzzled by his novel approaches to painting: Hoppner decried the 'presumptive manner in which he paints, and his carelessness'; hesitating between perplexity and admiration, he added that 'so much was left to be imagined that it was like looking into a coal fire,

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<sup>177</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 18, 25 and 26 April 1801.

<sup>178</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 4 May 1803.

<sup>179</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 3 May 1803.

<sup>180</sup> John Burnet, *Turner and his works* (1852), pp. 78-9. Quoted in *Turner 1775-1851* (exh. cat.) (London: Tate Gallery, 1974), pp. 50-1.

or upon an old wall, where from many varying & undefined forms the fancy was to be employing in conceiving things'; Turner's 'presumptive & arrogant' manners made those characteristics unacceptable to painters educated under Reynolds's dictum of 'gentlemen artists'.<sup>181</sup> Farington believed that 'His pictures have much merit, but want the scientific knowledge and Academic truth of Poussin, when he attempts the highest style'.<sup>182</sup> And in conversation with Farington, Opie and Fuseli, Northcote argued that the effect in Turner's pictures was based on novelty; 'they were too much compounded of art and had too little of nature'.<sup>183</sup> Constable agreed with this judgment; possibly influenced by Beaumont, he told Farington that 'Turner becomes more and more extravagant, and less attentive to nature'.<sup>184</sup>

As the years passed, Beaumont's treatment of Turner became increasingly harsh. In 1806, he spoke of the works contributed by the painter to the first British Institution exhibition, *Narcissus and Echo* and *The goddess of Discord choosing the apple of contention in the garden of the Hesperides*, saying that they 'appeared to him to be like the works of an old man who has ideas but had lost the power of execution'; the artist William Havell, though, continued Beaumont, probably puzzled if not positively incensed, 'speaks of Turner as being superior to Claude, Poussin, or any other'. A few days later, Beaumont continued his evaluation of the painter: 'Turner ... is perpetually aiming to be extraordinary, but rather produces works that are

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<sup>181</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 29 April 1803.

<sup>182</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 13 June 1802.

<sup>183</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 2 May 1803.

<sup>184</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 17 May 1803.

capricious and singular than great. His colouring has become jaundiced. His former pictures were better than His present'.<sup>185</sup>

Havell was not alone: by then, Turner had begun to draw a coterie of admirers and imitators – Callcott, S.W. Reynolds, William Daniell, John Crome – around him, whose 'vicious practice' was commented upon by Farington, Beaumont and others.<sup>186</sup> The real danger of Turner's unorthodox manner lay in his popularity among fellow painters: Turner's pictures were increasingly talked about by critics and public, and commanded hefty prices. This in itself was suspicious; after all, Reynolds had sternly advised in his *Discourses* against the temptation of pandering to the degenerate tastes of an uneducated public.<sup>187</sup> Therefore, it seemed as if Turner was sinking in a sea of dreadful mannerisms, with the sole purpose of attracting buyers dazzled by his painterly tricks, dragging young promising artists with him, eager to jump in the bandwagon.

This situation continued for some time, until in 1811 Callcott complained of Beaumont's continued disparagement of his friend and master, which damaged Turner by dissuading buyers. Beaumont acknowledged, Callcott said, that 'Turner had merit, but it was of a wrong sort & therefore on account of the seducing skill displayed should be objected to, to prevent its bad effects in inducing others to imitate it'.<sup>188</sup> The smear campaign against the painter was apparently one-sided,

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<sup>185</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 5 and 26 April 1806.

<sup>186</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 3 June 1806.

<sup>187</sup> Reynolds, 'Discourse V', *Discourses*, ed. by Wark, p. 90.

<sup>188</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 8 June 1811.

with Turner conspicuously silent against the barrage of criticism of the connoisseur; if he made comments on the subject, they were not propagated. However, in an art world criss-crossed by rivalries, conflicts and scandals, it seems hard to believe that, had Turner launched into a Haydonesque attack of Beaumont, it would not have been immediately publicised. Therefore, it seems quite likely that the painter limited himself to sarcastic annotations and drawings in his sketchbooks like the one entitled *The amateur artist*, in which a myopic painter stares complacently at his own work, and which Owen and Brown believe might be a caricature of Beaumont.<sup>189</sup> (fig. 24)

It was actually Callcott who was the most vocal in his attacks to Beaumont, who by then was identified with the British Institution and its plans to educate the nation's taste. Callcott's reputation had been established before the comparisons with Turner began, but since 1806 he was identified as one of Turner's followers. Northcote told Farington that 'Callcott had founded himself on Turner's manner, which several others had adopted'<sup>190</sup>; and Beaumont said of the younger painter that he was 'merely a follower of Turner & seems to look at nothing else'.<sup>191</sup> This identification would harm their reputations within certain circles, but it affected neither Callcott nor Turner's sales as much as the former complained to

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<sup>189</sup> Turner collection, Clore Gallery, London, T.B. CXXI-B. Quoted by Owen and Brown, *Collector of genius*, p. 166.

<sup>190</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 6 May 1806.

<sup>191</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 21 October 1812.

Farington.<sup>192</sup> Rather, it would seem that Callcott's harsh cries against Beaumont were a reflection of his suspicions about the increasing power of the British Institution, because of the substantial threat it posed to the supremacy of the Royal Academy, as much as a retort to the connoisseur's unfair criticisms of his colleague. David Brown has suggested that the association between Turner and Callcott began actually as a campaign orchestrated by critics and connoisseurs based at the Institution to promote Callcott and make him a rival that would challenge Turner's supremacy in landscape painting; Richard Payne Knight bought a landscape exhibited by Callcott in 1805, and Sir John Leicester, another member of the British Institution, bought Callcott's *Water mill* later that year.<sup>193</sup> However, if that was the Directors' intention, it proved a failure. Callcott, although not as fractious as Haydon, was a bellicose adversary.

After the *Dentatus* affair at the Academy, Callcott took the opportunity to wage revenge on Beaumont. He wrote a long letter to an unknown editor, much in the style of the parodies of connoisseurs extolling the virtues of bad paintings that Hogarth and his contemporaries had written, in which Callcott posed as a visitor to the Academy exhibition. He was assailed by Beaumont, who praised Haydon's *Dentatus* extravagantly:

There ... is a picture as admirably painted as it is infamously treated ... It is full of Energy & Enthusiasm & would have received its due ... if the envy & malice of the council had not thought it necessary to suppress such merit.

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<sup>192</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 8 April 1813. However, Callcott had told Farington previously (8 June 1811) that 'Turner was too strong to be materially hurt by [Beaumont's] continued cry against Turner's pictures'.

<sup>193</sup> David B. Brown, *Augustus Wall Callcott* (exh. cat.) (London: Tate Gallery, 1981), p. 24.

At that moment, a “friend” arrived to warn him that he was listening to Beaumont, ‘esteemed by the world at large as the first connoisseur of the day’, and against paying attention to his vacuous puff, which was worthless, because:

The praise you have heard bestow is none other than what I have heard him regularly bestow upon the whole race of existing artists at their first appearance. He has deemed every one the greatest in his turn as long as he only promised well but the moment he began to fulfil his promise ... he had made a point of pulling him to pieces, and for this simple reason, that while an artist remains below mediocrity, it is a display of his judgment to point out his beauties but directly he is above par then the tables must be turned ... as this Gentleman has become the Demagogue of the picture Criticks so he conceived himself under the necessity of making the artists feel the weight of his power.<sup>194</sup>

The letter was never published, but the hostilities continued. In 1813 Callcott did not exhibit at the Royal Academy, blaming Beaumont for not having sold a picture in the past three exhibitions; a few days later, Beaumont told Farington that he ‘did not approve [Callcott’s] manner of colouring his pictures, nor his imitating Turner; indeed there was no knowing the pictures of one from those of the other’. That year he had come up with the pejorative label “white painters” to refer collectively to Turner and his followers.<sup>195</sup>

The apex of Beaumont and Turner’s antagonism took place during the conflictive years of 1814-15, when the Institution was devoted to its exhibitions of Old Masters. The success of the exhibitions must have reinforced Beaumont’s convictions, and he persevered on his attacks on Turner’s unnatural mode of

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<sup>194</sup> Callcott to an unknown ‘Editor’, from papers on deposit in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Quoted by Owen and Brown, *Collector of genius*, p. 166.

<sup>195</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 8 and 15 April 1813. The rationale behind the term “white painters” will be explored in Part III.

painting. The painter's reply was to submit a Claudean picture for the Institution history painting premium: *Apullia in search of Appullus vide Ovid* (fig. 25). Hidden under the exquisitely crafted paint there was an insolent intention: not only did Turner employ a classical treatment, borrowing the composition and overall appearance of Claude's *Jacob with Laban and his daughters* (fig. 26) (in the collection of his patron and fellow Director Lord Egremont), in a bid to demonstrate that he certainly could paint like the Old Masters; the subject was a clever allusion to the Institution's policy of recommending the copying of Old Masters. Ovid's tale is a condemnation of mimicry: the Apulian shepherd was metamorphosed into a tree with bitter berries as a punishment for impersonating the nymphs. And to cap it all, the painting was submitted late and without an apology. It failed to get the premium, ostensibly because of Beaumont's influence at the Institution.<sup>196</sup>

Reviewing the exhibition for the *Morning Chronicle*, Hazlitt, who generally believed that Turner's paintings were 'a waste of morbid strength [which] give pleasure only by the excess of power triumphing over the barrenness of the subject', welcomed *Apullia*, where, he thought, Turner had avoided all the vices he had been accused of by the connoisseurs; in it 'all the taste and all the imagination being borrowed, his powers of eye, hand, and memory, are equal to anything'. Judging from this picture and *Mercury and Herse*, Hazlitt 'could almost wish that this gentleman would always work in the trammels of Claude or Poussin'.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Martin Butlin and Evelyn Joll, *The paintings of J.M.W. Turner* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and the Tate Gallery, 1977) pp. 79-80.

<sup>197</sup> *Morning Chronicle*, 5 February 1814.

If Turner's challenge had any effect on Beaumont, it was to inflame him further. The following year he launched an aggressive attack on modern painters, not only Turner; but the latter received most of the connoisseur's venom. That year he exhibited *Dido building Carthage* (fig. 33) and *Crossing the brook* (fig. 27), pictures that garnered general critical acclaim; Thomas Uwins hailed him as 'the greatest of all living geniuses', and his works that year 'surpass all his former outdoings'.<sup>198</sup> Robert Hunt declared that he would rank *Dido building Carthage* beside the best works of Poussin, Rubens and Claude; and the critic for the *St. James's Chronicle* said of the same work that it was a painting that 'in grandeur and ideal beauty, Claude never equalled'.<sup>199</sup> Beaumont, probably taken aback by all that praise, examined the painting attentively, wishing 'to satisfy Himself that He was not mistaken in the judgement He had formed upon it'. His conclusion, as he told Farington, was that

He felt convinced that He was right in that opinion, and that the picture is painted in a false taste, not true to nature; the colouring discordant, out of harmony, resembling those French Painters who attempted imitations of Claude, but substituted for his purity & just harmony, violent mannered oppositions of Brown and hot colours to Cold tints, blue & greys; that several parts of Turner's picture were pleasingly treated but as a *whole* it was of the above character.

And of *Crossing the brook* he had to say, returning to the simile he had used to describe Turner's paintings in 1806:

It appeared to him *weak* and like the work of an Old man, one who no longer saw or felt colour properly; it was all of *peagreen* insipidity. – These are my sentiments said He, & I have as good a right & it is as proper that I shd.

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<sup>198</sup> *Memoir of Thomas Uwins, R.A.*, 2 vols., ed. by Mrs Uwins (London: Longman, Brown, Green & Co., 1858), vol. I, p. 39.

<sup>199</sup> *Examiner*, 28 May; and *St. James's Chronicle*, 11 May 1815.



express them as I have to give my opinion of a poetical or any other production.<sup>200</sup>

It was the most damning judgment Beaumont had been heard to utter. Only a few days later, retribution arrived in the form of the *Catalogue Raisonné*. As has been outlined above, Beaumont was deeply affected by this cruel rebuke. It cannot be doubted that he carried out what he perceived as his duty as a connoisseur – it was his right and it was proper that he expressed his opinion – with the intention of improving the British School. That artists would take this intention as an unwelcome interference must have shocked him.

The criticisms being made by Beaumont, among others, that Turner was neglecting nature refer to what arbitrarily had been regarded as nature throughout the eighteenth century: a series of conventions that depicted visible reality in a particular way, and that through repeated use by painters had been assimilated as the true representation of nature. Turner was breaking those conventions, using new shortcuts to represent nature, but at the same time he was using these new methods in pictures that owed a great deal to the masters of the past, which perhaps made those innovations all the more glaring in Beaumont's eyes. Wilkie summarised it well in the letter he wrote to Lady Beaumont after hearing of his patron's death:

[Beaumont] remained true to his first attachment [the "golden age" of British painting], the scale and the hues of the British School were undergoing a

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<sup>200</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 5 June 1815.

change. This is was impossible for him to see with indifference ... it has been the great and leading question in modern art.<sup>201</sup>

Van Akin Burd has argued that the ambiguity in Reynolds's *Discourses*, as well as his emphasis on the study of classical art, lie at the root of a common misunderstanding of his theory of the Ideal. Reynolds directed painters to compare Nature and art in order to arrive at an understanding of the perfect forms of which the material ones are but an imperfect reflection; but his contemporaries and followers, notably the Professors of Painting at the Academy, and Beaumont among the connoisseurs, often arrived at the easy conclusion that hard study of the right models, and compliance with certain rules, would enable the painter to depict the Ideal. It was this misunderstanding, Burd maintains, that predisposed Beaumont and others against Turner; when Turner used unconventional colouring or lighting, they interpreted this contravention of an arbitrary set of rules as a misrepresentation of nature itself.<sup>202</sup>

Beaumont regarded himself as Reynolds's disciple, but in several ways, Turner was the true successor of the first President of the Academy. He was the painter Reynolds had hoped for, the one who would compete with and continue the work of the Old Masters, as Reynolds had written in the *Discourses*.<sup>203</sup> But he was also Reynolds's spiritual heir, in that he followed the older painter's revolutionary programme, according to which anyone with the right education could have access to high patrician academic culture. Turner's origins were working-class, but in his

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<sup>201</sup> Wilkie to Lady Beaumont, 12 March 1827.

<sup>202</sup> Burd, 'Background to *Modern painters*', pp. 254-60.

<sup>203</sup> See chapter 6, n72.

paintings and his writings he demonstrated (not always successfully) his ambitions to master a canonical body of writings and paintings that used to be the exclusive province of the higher classes. Therefore, one could argue that part of Beaumont's critique of Turner was in fact an uneasy, class-driven censure of his social aspirations. In this antagonism between the aristocratic connoisseur, for whom painting was essentially a gentleman's pastime, and the proletarian painter striving to attain a previously exclusive intellectual status, we can see a summary of the struggle between artists and connoisseurs that is the central subject of this dissertation.

#### 4.2 Richard Payne Knight and the Elgin Marbles

There are many elegant writers in the present day possessed of every requisite for discoursing on the arts, except a practical acquaintance with them.<sup>204</sup>

Beaumont's colleague at the British Institution was, unlike him, a pure connoisseur; he did not practise the art he judged, and his prestige was built upon his collection of painting and antiques and his writings on art and aesthetics. Richard Payne Knight, argues Funnell, was representative of the thought on art of his time, when discussions stopped being purely theoretical, and many other issues, such as the question of patronage, were implicit in art theory. As a connoisseur, Knight abandoned his theoretical position to discuss the questions of artistic

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<sup>204</sup> Prince Hoare, *The Artist*, vol. I, no. 1 (14 March 1807), pp. 8-10.

training and the way the arts should be funded, and in the process incurred the wrath of contemporary artists.<sup>205</sup>

Where Beaumont was generally as civil as to seem ingratiating, Knight was outspoken and controversial, never shrinking from stating his opinion. Frank Messmann has called him 'the last of the eighteenth-century virtuosos, following in the footsteps of such celebrated amateurs as Horace Walpole and William Beckford'.<sup>206</sup> Knight's education was forged in the Grand Tour, which he made in 1772-3; later, in 1776-7 he also toured Switzerland and Italy in the company of artists and amateurs such as John Robert Cozens and Charles Gore. During these travels he gave evidence of his profound interest in Greek art; later in life he would become a renowned Greek scholar who once criticised Winckelmann because he 'understood nothing of the Greek language', as well as the owner of a rightly famed collection of ancient Greek coins, intaglios and bronzes (fig. 28).<sup>207</sup> He was elected to the Society of Dilettanti in 1781: this learned club of gentlemen, established in 1734, was sneered at by Horace Walpole as a place for which 'the nominal qualification for membership is having been in Italy, and the real one, being drunk'.<sup>208</sup> The Society was as famous for the – exaggerated or real – excesses of its members as for the scholarship demonstrated by its publications and the sponsoring of expeditions

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<sup>205</sup> Funnell, 'Richard Payne Knight: aspects of aesthetics and art criticism in late eighteenth-nineteenth century England', pp. v-vi.

<sup>206</sup> Messmann, *Richard Payne Knight: the twilight of virtuosity*, p. 9.

<sup>207</sup> Knight, *An analytical inquiry into the principles of taste* (London, 1805. 4th edn., 1808; reprinted as facsimile, 1972), p. 147. For Knight's early years see: Nicholas Penny, 'Richard Payne Knight: a brief life', in *The arrogant connoisseur*, pp. 2-4; and Messmann, *Richard Payne Knight*, pp. 27-36.

<sup>208</sup> Quoted by Brewer, *The pleasures of the imagination*, p. 257. For the Dilettanti see Lionel Cust, *History of the Society of Dilettanti*, ed. by Sidney Colvin (London, 1914).

and research on various cultural fields. In 1786 Knight supervised the publication of *An account of the remains of the worship of Priapus lately existing at Isernia, in the kingdom of Naples*, the results of an expedition to the Mediterranean which had found the material remains of that antique cult, which was followed by Knight's own *A discourse on the worship of Priapus and its connexion with the mystic theology of the Ancients*. Beyond a treatise on archaeology, Knight's *Discourse* elaborated on compared religion, tracing the origins of Christianity to fertility rituals. Knight, aware that many would deem the work obscene, had specified that he intended it 'for the Society and a few real dilettanti'.<sup>209</sup> Despite the Society's assurances that the book would be available only to its members, the treatise soon became more widely available, attracting many attacks for its immorality. The *Discourse* was regarded as representative of the debauchery that many believed prevailed among scholars and the upper classes. Knight did not seem to be personally affected by this early polemic; in fact, one could say, as his admirer Thomas Love Peacock did, that he was 'fond of paper war' and thrived in controversy.<sup>210</sup> However, as we will see below, the accusations of depravity and rakishness would stay with him and be brought up later in his subsequent fights with artists (fig. 29).

In 1794 Knight wrote *The Landscape, a didactic poem*, which was addressed to his fellow connoisseur Uvedale Price and consisted of a criticism of the style of landscape gardening popularised by "Capability" Brown in the eighteenth century,

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<sup>209</sup> Knight to Sir Joseph Banks, 18 June 1785, 'Banks Letters', 20 vols. (Department of Botany, Natural History Museum), vol. IV, ff. 143-5. Quoted by Funnell, 'The symbolic language of antiquity', *The arrogant connoisseur*, pp. 50-63.

<sup>210</sup> Thomas Love Peacock, *Works*, ed. by H.F.B. Brett Smith and C.E. Jones (London, 1934), vol. VIII, p. 188.

and an advocacy of more uneven and intricate types of garden. This work made Knight relatively famous, once again stimulating much controversy. His love of rough landscapes invited political comparisons: he was known as a Whig, and the fact that he did not openly condemn the revolutionary events in France made some suspect that he supported the Jacobin radicals.<sup>211</sup> More importantly, *The landscape* signalled a shift in Knight's aesthetics: in it, he stressed the notion that the painter must imitate nature closely, shunning idealisation altogether:

I do not ... mean to insinuate that the landscape painter is to confine himself to a servile imitation of the particular scenes that he finds in nature: on the contrary, I know that nature scarcely ever affords a complete and faultless composition; but nevertheless she affords the *parts* of which taste and invention may make complete and faultless compositions; and it is by accurately and minutely copying these parts, and afterwards skilfully and judiciously combining and arranging them, that the most perfect works in the art have been produced.<sup>212</sup>

Another idea that can be found in *The Landscape*, as well as in later writings, was Knight's preference for chiaroscuro and colour over line and design; this flew in the face of current academic doctrine, which stressed the importance of *disegno* over *colorito* in a bid to emphasise the intellectual component of art as opposed to the merely sensual, as has been discussed in Part I. For Knight, though, stimulating the senses was the prime function of art, as he argued in his 1814 review of Northcote's *Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, although he still posited that this was no base sensuality, but an immediate way of affecting the mind:

As for the delight afforded by rich, mellow, and splendid harmony of colours and light and shade, we cannot but think that Sir Joshua Reynolds, though so

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<sup>211</sup> Penny, 'Richard Payne Knight: a brief life', p. 10.

<sup>212</sup> Knight, *The landscape, a didactic poem* (London, 1795, 2nd edn.), p. 47.

successful in producing it, has unreasonably debased it in his Discourses, by treating it as a pleasure of mere sensuality. There are unquestionably some colours or modifications of light more grateful to the eye than others; but the mere organic pleasure that any of them afford, is so imperceptible amidst the higher gratifications, that it can in no case be properly called sensuality.<sup>213</sup>

This was a barbed comment. Reynolds, who had insisted in his writings on the superiority of line and design, had been nevertheless particularly masterful in colouring. Knight made use of this well-known dichotomy between Reynolds's theory and practice to illustrate his point that colour (the traditionally regarded as "sensual" component of art) was more important than design and composition, which were perennially endorsed by academic lecturers. It was also an oblique swipe at artists pretending to write theory instead of devoting their time and effort to their proper occupation: painting. Knight had already recommended industry to painters in *The landscape*, at the same time that he criticised 'inspired' genius:

All art, by labour, slowly is acquired; -  
The madman only fancies 'tis inspired.  
The vain, rash upstart, thinks he can create,  
Ere yet his hand has learn'd to imitate;  
While senseless dash and random flourish try  
The place of skill and freedom to supply.<sup>214</sup>

And he would make it clearer later, in his review of the works of Barry, which he began in a disparaging manner, stating that

By far the most frequent obstacle to the success of what are called students of genius in painting, has been, forming too exalted notions of their art as an

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<sup>213</sup> [Knight], 'Northcote's *Life of Reynolds*', p.292.

<sup>214</sup> Knight, *The landscape*, p. 7.

effusion of mental energy, and too humble notions of it as an effort of manual labour and acquired practical dexterity.<sup>215</sup>

He added a few years later, in his review of Northcote's *Life of Reynolds*: 'It is by temperate and moderate, but at the same time active and constant exercise, that the faculties of the mind, as well as those of the body, are strengthened and preserved'.<sup>216</sup> In the same article he renewed his censure of artists who indulged in theory instead of devoting their time to the necessary practice of painting:

Though knowledge may refine and improve taste, it cannot create it; nor can both together produce practical skill and executive art, - which can only be acquired by long and continued exertion of practical industry.<sup>217</sup>

*The landscape* was criticised in Henry Tresham's poem *The sea-sick minstrel*, of 1796. Tresham, an advocate of high art, ranked 'the desire of attaining superior excellence amongst those exalted energies which tend to elevate both mechanic labours and intellectual powers'; Knight's plea for naturalism contravened academic theory, which regarded idealisation in landscape, as well as in other genres of art, as essential. Tresham asked rhetorically:

Could Sir Joshua Reynolds rise from the dead, what would he think of a doctrine tending to narrow the powers of the mind, separate extensive observation from dexterity of practice, make partial imitation supersede combined excellence, and, at one blow, hew down every branch of knowledge founded on the study of the great masters?<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> [Knight], 'Works and life of Barry', p. 293.

<sup>216</sup> [Knight], 'Northcote's *Life of Reynolds*', p.278.

<sup>217</sup> [Knight], 'Works and life of Barry', p. 305.

<sup>218</sup> Henry Tresham, *The sea-sick minstrel* (1796), pp. 58, 23. Quoted by Funnell, 'Richard Payne Knight: aspects of aesthetics and art criticism in late eighteenth-nineteenth century England', pp. 124-30.



Knight was critical of Academies because, by stressing the intellectual component of art, and filling young artists' minds with elevated ideas, they were neglecting what he regarded as the essential requisite for a painter: 'persevering and well directed industry and observation'.<sup>219</sup> In other words, academic honours distracted artists from their practice. Besides, academies provoked 'corporate pride and vanity', stirred professional jealousies, and did not produce great artists, despite their claims, but rather tended to yield mediocre and mannered art.<sup>220</sup> Provocatively, he compared academicians to animals who have been 'trained to go behind, and accustomed to follow the steps of a leader, will not easily be taught to lead', and continued his simile thus:

An academy may be considered as a sort of manege, in which every one learns his paces according to the fashion of the day, and not according to the natural structure of his organs. Thus, they get into a style of blameless mediocrity, which, though not best adapted to the talent of any one individual, is the best adapted for a central point of union, at which all talents may meet.<sup>221</sup>

Knight's critique of history painting was based on his belief that painting should be a purely private art form. As a connoisseur, he was concerned with the perception, not the creation, of art; and neither was he interested in intellectual art, in which he did not believe. Painting was to be, for him, 'an imitation of nature, as seen by the eye and not as known or perceived by the aid of the other senses; and

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<sup>219</sup> [Knight], 'Northcote's *Life of Reynolds*', p.278.

<sup>220</sup> [Knight], 'Works and life of Barry', p. 311, and 'Northcote's *Life of Reynolds*', p.279-80.

<sup>221</sup> [Knight], 'Northcote's *Life of Reynolds*', pp.279-80.

this consideration... is alone sufficient to guide both the artist and the critic to the true principles of imitation'.<sup>222</sup>

Evidently, such opinions did not earn Knight the sympathies of artists, especially of academicians. His undermining of the basic tenets of academic dogma made him a clear target of the artists' hostility towards connoisseurs. Even his peers acknowledged his conflictive character: Walpole believed that he was 'arrogant and assuming', and that 'his dictatorial manner is very offensive'.<sup>223</sup>

In 1805, when Knight had already gained a considerable reputation as a connoisseur – he had been elected to the Committee of Taste three years earlier, and was considered its leader – he published his *Analytical inquiry into the principles of taste*. It continued his debate with Price on the aesthetics of the picturesque, and at the same time countered Edmund Burke's influential *Philosophical enquiry into the origins of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful*. Burke had posited the idea that objects possess certain inherent qualities upon which our reactions and feelings depend; Knight, influenced by Archibald Alison's philosophical associationism, contested this, and fought against the notion of a standard taste. 'There is scarcely any subject,' Knight said in his *Inquiry*, 'upon which men differ more than concerning the objects of their amusements'.<sup>224</sup> For Knight and his fellow associationists, aesthetic responses were aroused by associations formed from experience, and although there was a certain margin allowed for 'cultural conformity' and general

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<sup>222</sup> [Knight], 'Northcote's *Life of Reynolds*', p. 285.

<sup>223</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 24 July 1796.

<sup>224</sup> Knight, *Analytical inquiry*, p. 2. That he should regard art as a mere amusement must have rankled with professional artists.

associations, the main conclusion was that there could not be any hard and fast rules guiding excellence in art. This denial of the existence of a standard of taste, as well as his idea that painting was, in essence, imitation of visible appearances, stirred artists against him, prompting Hoppner to attack him in an essay in *The Artist* in 1807. In it the painter seized on Knight's dubious morals as well as on his contempt for the institution of history painting and the status of high art in general to criticise his stance on taste.<sup>225</sup>

Many criticised Knight's *Inquiry* as contradictory in places, and his manner as satirical, in writing as well as in conversation. Farington recorded a dinner at Beaumont's where Knight's work was spoken of as containing weak arguments, and 'the little attention which Knight pays to arguments brought against him in conversation' was duly noticed.<sup>226</sup> Price took Knight's references to him in the *Inquiry* so ill that it took the intervention of Lady Oxford to reconcile the two. Later that year Price started answering Knight's book; Farington noted that 'a decided coolness has subsisted between them ... Lady O[xford] said Knight is not liked in the country'.<sup>227</sup>

The same year that he published his *Analytical inquiry*, Knight had also been a founder member of the British Institution, which contributed to his being perceived

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<sup>225</sup> *The Artist*, vol. I, no. 11 (23 May 1807). For the *Analytical inquiry* and Knight's theory of visible appearances see Messmann, *Richard Payne Knight*, pp. 108-118; Funnell, 'Richard Payne Knight: aspects of aesthetics and art criticism in late eighteenth-nineteenth century England', chapter I; and 'Visible appearances', in *The arrogant connoisseur*, pp. 82-92. For associationism see Hemingway, 'Academic theory vs. association aesthetics'.

<sup>226</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 25 May and 21 June 1806.

<sup>227</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 21 June 1806 and 13 October 1806.

by some artists as a particularly notorious and dangerous enemy. However, by affiliating himself with the Institution, which handed out annual premiums to the best paintings in different categories, he was contradicting his stance on patronage. In his writings there is evidence that he opposed the state funding that artists like Barry, Hoare or Shee demanded as the only way to genuinely encourage art:

Patronage, to be beneficially effective, must be discerning as well as liberal; and skilful and judicious in selecting and employing merit, as well as just and generous in rewarding it ... We seriously apprehend, that the gentlemen, who with such liberal views and beneficent intentions, have associated themselves to promote the arts in the United Kingdom, will only increase the number of ... transitory prodigies; and, by flattering their momentary hopes, embitter their permanent disappointments. All the academical prizes given in different parts of Europe, during more than a century past, have done nothing more; - they may, indeed, have spoiled many a painter, but have certainly never made one. The best encouragement, then, that can be given to an artist ... is employment adapted to his capacity and acquirements, sufficient to enable him to live comfortably, by severe toil and study ... Prizes, pensions and academical honours, have only nourished indolence, and pampered pride.<sup>228</sup>

And four years later he added: 'The best charity to artists and their families, is timely and liberal employment to those who have capacity and industry for liberal art'.<sup>229</sup>

Knight argued that academies were counterproductive to art, and that the wealth invested in them was wasted, for all they did was to aggrandise unnecessarily and detrimentally artists' egos, never really fostering the real genius they boasted about:

There seems, indeed, to be something in the very nature and essence of academical instruction adverse to the ultimate object and end of the art which

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<sup>228</sup> [Knight], 'Works and life of Barry', pp. 323-25.

<sup>229</sup> [Knight], 'Northcote's *Life of Reynolds*', p.275.

it professes to teach; since not one of the numerous and magnificent establishments of this kind, which have arisen in Europe within this last century, has produced a great artist. Those who have adorned them, either preceded their institution, in their respective countries, or sprang up beside them, and became members to give, not to receive instruction.<sup>230</sup>

It cannot be doubted that what caused most to decry Knight's theoretical position was his dismissal of the role of academies and academic training as well as his arguments against state patronage of the arts. Haydon, a staunch anti-academicist, agreed with him on the uselessness of such institutions, but was however furious about Knight's idea that the arts ought not to be funded by the state.<sup>231</sup> Haydon and Knight clashed with each other in 1812 over the latter's review of the works of Barry, in which he disdainfully belittled the importance of history painting, attacking its theoretical basis and denying that an 'imitative art' could have any moral function.<sup>232</sup> Haydon, already piqued by Knight's dismissive initial

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<sup>230</sup> [Knight], 'Northcote's *Life of Reynolds*', p.279. He was forgetting, or more likely ignoring, Turner, who was by then an established Academician and enormously successful painter.

<sup>231</sup> An obvious example of Haydon's anti-academicism is his Lecture XIII, entitled 'On academies of art (more particularly the Royal Academy); and their pernicious effect on the genius of Europe'. In it he accused academies of being 'inimical to the advancement of the people, -

1. Because it is their acknowledged principle that the art is a thing they have a right to keep to themselves!
2. From their opposing the advance of artists, by denying them the just privileges which other bodies grant.
3. I accuse them of not only wishing to keep back the nation, but of the selfish desire to mislead their taste, by sanctioning the publication of the infamous *Catalogue Raisonne*, in which all the greatest names were abused; and by which the liberal patrons were disgusted.
4. I accuse them of hating distinguished talent, by forcing Reynolds to resign, expelling Berry, and degrading Wilkie and Martin.
5. Of detesting high art, and of a mean fear of its ultimate triumph, by chilling the government, and never as a body having come forward to influence the government to assist it.
6. By their always giving portraits the best situations in their annual show, and never prominently bestowing rank on historical pictures by good places, unless till forced by shame and reproaches'.

<sup>232</sup> [Knight], 'Works and life of Barry', p. 320.

reaction to the Elgin Marbles, wrote under the pseudonym "An English student" a long letter criticising the connoisseur's views on Barry and history painting that was published in the *Examiner* on 26 January, 2 and 9 February 1812, 'To the Critic on Barry's works in the *Edinburgh Review*, August 1810'. He was also incensed by the connoisseur's evident love of Dutch painting and his insistence that painting was essentially the depiction of visible appearances; in his *Diary*, Haydon had vituperated in several occasions this preference for what he saw as a petty, insignificant genre of art, asking himself what connoisseurs admired in pictures: Was it the character, or the mind?

No, the Dutch part, the touching, the knives, the pewter plates, and tin saucepans - this is all they comprehend - this is what they look for, and this is what they see ... Poor Painting, poor Painting, you may talk till you are hoarse of the effect of Public works - But the Nobility of England will take more delight in brass saucepans.<sup>233</sup>

Further stoking the conflict, Leigh Hunt criticised the British Institution in the *Examiner* for not awarding the historical painting premium to his friend Haydon's *Macbeth*, arguing that Knight had influenced the other Directors against the painter.<sup>234</sup>

Knight first expressed doubts regarding the authenticity of the Parthenon marbles recently imported into England by Lord Elgin in 1806 - without even having seen them. Haydon reported of Knight that he had said: 'You have lost your labour, my Lord Elgin. Your marbles are overrated: they are not Greek: they are

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<sup>233</sup> Haydon, *Diary*, vol. III, pp. 5-6 (23 July 1808).

<sup>234</sup> 'Royal Academy', *The Examiner*, 14 and 21 June 1812.

Roman of the time of Hadrian'.<sup>235</sup> The sculptures had been generally acclaimed by artists such as Flaxman, Farington and West. Haydon was one of their most enthusiastic admirers; he exclaimed, upon seeing them, that he felt 'as if a divine truth had blasted inwardly upon my mind and I knew they would at last rouse the art of Europe from its slumber in the darkness'<sup>236</sup> (fig. 30). Lord Elgin continued bringing specimens from Athens, although the Government demurred in acquiring them, and finally did so only after eminent critics and artists such as the Italian sculptor Antonio Canova showed their enthusiasm about such splendid works. The Committee to evaluate and decide upon the eventual purchase of the Marbles was set up in 1816; after the vehement praise of the artists that were called to testify, Knight's evaluation came across as cold and condescending, arguing that 'a great part of the sculptures were but Roman copies, although his evidence on the subject was unreliable. Messmann maintains that Knight's adverse criticism might have been excited by resentment towards what he felt as the artists encroaching upon the connoisseurs' territory; Haydon saw it as a dispute between artists and connoisseurs.<sup>237</sup> By then Knight had been object of ridicule in the first *Catalogue Raisonné*, and his articles published in the *Edinburgh Review* had earned him a place

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<sup>235</sup> Haydon, 'Lecture XIII', *Lectures on painting and design*, pp. 215-6. Nicholas Penny points out that Haydon was reporting at second hand an event which had taken place nearly thirty-five years before (Penny, 'Richard Payne Knight: a brief life', n83); however, Knight was known to utter these blunt and provocative judgments. At a dinner at Townley's, he said that 'the Cartoons at Windsor are not original, that the Cartoon at badminton is not original ... Knight said the Raphael at Trumbulls sale He admired much, *that is original*.' Farington, *Diary*, 5 March 1797.

<sup>236</sup> Haydon, *Autobiography*, p. 66.

<sup>237</sup> Haydon, *Diary*, vol. II, p. 521. For accounts of the Elgin Marbles episode, see Messmann, *Richard Payne Knight*, pp. 148-155; Christopher Hitchens, *The Elgin Marbles* (London: Verso, 1988), and William St Clair, *Lord Elgin and the Marbles* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967).

in the hearts of the majority of English artists as one of the most despised connoisseurs of the time; Lawrence told Farington about Knight's loss of credibility, adding that he 'had long known Paine [sic] Knight's ignorance of Art; but He talked people into an opinion of His judgment: it is now on record'.<sup>238</sup> Farington equally recorded Lawrence's report of Knight's evidence before the Elgin Marbles committee in his *Diary* with malevolent glee at seeing their ideas about the connoisseur confirmed:

We looked over part of the evidence and were much pleased with the concurrence of opinion shewn by Artists who gave evidence ... It was gratifying to us to see that Mr. Payne Knight had so fully and publicly committed Himself in the opinion He gave of the Elgin Marbles, the best of which He called only Sculpture of the *Second rate*. Thus will the judgment & ignorance of this presumptuous Connoisseur be recorded.<sup>239</sup>

Knight's most vociferous opponent was, not surprisingly, Haydon. Believing that because of Knight's negative evaluation the Government would fail to acquire the Marbles, Haydon first ranted about this dreadful prospect in his *Diary*:

Why does not Payne Knight put forth his reasons for doubting the originality of the Elgin Marbles? Shall a mere connoisseur's opinion be put against the opinion of an Artist? Shall the idle, superficial, conceited, vain glance of a dilettante be of more value than the deep investigating principles & practiced search of the Artist? Posh! Shall a dabbler in Gypsum grounds & a learned bungler of Pliny, shall a secret sneerer of the Art in the Edinburgh Review, & a pretended public Patroniser tell me they are not pure? What does all this prove? Why, what all artists knew long since, that Mr. P. Knight knows nothing of Art, either from feeling or practice.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 16 July 1815.

<sup>239</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 10 April 1816.

<sup>240</sup> Haydon, *Diary*, vol. VII, pp. 433-4 (6 May 1815).



A few days later he went on, bemoaning the damage that dilettanti and amateurs had caused to the art:

Connoisseurs never existed in finest periods of Art. They are beings who rise like flies from carrion, in the decay & rottenness of its works. To know one Master's touch, or another Master's peculiarity, instead of to feel a beauty or recognize an expression, are the great points & criteria of a Man's capability. They are curses to living Artists because their very origin & nature instigates them to value only the dead. Poor Painters & Poets are the beings who are supposed to be the mere mechanism of these creatures' thoughts.

And yet the direction of the public taste and the direction of the native genius in Art is to be left not to those who have spent their lives in the study, but to those who take it up for their amusement to fill an idle day and afford chatter for dinner.

And then, almost prophetically, he admonished Knight:

Remember, Mr. Payne Knight, the fame of the Elgin marbles will encrease with our knowledge and treble with time. Remember that when all thy works are sunk into oblivion ... thou will be only recollected by thy presumption in disbelieving their beauty ... Either you do see the beauties of these exquisite works or you do not. If you do not, you are to be pitied, but cease at once to undervalue what you do not feel - but if you do, & affirm you do not ... you deserve to be detested by all, and you have my detestation from the depths of my soul.<sup>241</sup>

In March 1816, before the Committee gave its final verdict on the Marbles, Haydon jumped the gun and published in the *Examiner* a long diatribe against Knight entitled *On the judgment of connoisseurs being preferred to that of professional men*, the product of his bitter ruminations on the issue of the Elgin Marbles. The *Quarterly Review* had already published in January that year a criticism of Knight's stance,<sup>242</sup> but Haydon's fiery eloquence was unmatched.

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<sup>241</sup> Haydon, *Diary*, vol. VII, pp. 440-2 (13 May 1815).

<sup>242</sup> 'Lord Elgin's collection of sculptured marbles', *Quarterly Review*, vol. XIV, pp. 5345 (January 1816).

In no other profession is the opinion of the man, who has studied it for his amusement, preferred to that of him who has devoted his soul to excel in it. No man will trust his limb to a connoisseur in surgery. No minister would ask a connoisseur in war how a campaign is to be considered. No nobleman would be satisfied with the opinion of a connoisseur in law on disputed property. And why should a connoisseur of an Art, more exclusively than any other without the reach of common acquirement, be preferred to the professional man? What reason can be given, why the Painter, the Sculptor, and the Architect, should not be exclusively believed most adequate to decide on what they best understand, as well as the Surgeon, the Lawyer, and the General? I have been roused to these reflections, from fearing that the opinion of Mr. Payne Knight, and other connoisseurs, may influence the estimation of the Elgin Marbles. Surely the Committee will never select this gentleman as one to estimate the beauty of these beautiful works of Art.<sup>243</sup>

The report of the Select Committee appeared in April, ignoring Knight's opinion and recommending that the marbles be acquired by Government; the purchase was approved in July.<sup>244</sup> It was also the same year that the second *Catalogue Raisonné* was published. Although he would continue to practise as a connoisseur, Knight's reputation suffered a blow from which it would not recover.

Knight was often criticised for his contradictions as much as for his controversial manner. The fact that he spoke openly against history painting and the institutionalisation of the arts and patronage, at the same time that he was a Director of the British Institution, which gave out premiums to the best contemporary efforts in the grand style, might seem as an irreconcilable paradox, were it not for the fact that the Institution remained a *private* society, not a state-controlled one. The Governors and Directors were private individuals; their

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<sup>243</sup> 'On the judgment of connoisseurs being preferred to that of professional men', in *The Examiner*, 17 March 1816, p. 163.

<sup>244</sup> Messmann, *Richard Payne Knight*, pp. 152-5.

patronage, which could be labelled "collective private", was not the state funding that artists called for.

As for Knight's insistence on nature being the proper source of inspiration for an artist, which apparently contradicted his affiliation with an institution that through the British School encouraged the copying of Old Masters, it ought to be remarked that the concept of nature that Knight was referring to was not the same as Constable's, for instance. Nature, for Knight, must have meant yet another set of arbitrary rules, as it did for Beaumont (see above, pp. 232-3), which he wished be imposed. And this paradigm was the style of the Northern masters, which contravened orthodox academic dictum. Knight preferred Dutch and Flemish painting because of their emphasis on the imitation of visible appearances; the depiction of reality as it was perceived by the eye, not generalised by considerations of an ideal nature. Consequently with his opposition to intellectual artists, Knight did not appreciate as much the example of painters such as Michelangelo, with their stressing of the cerebral component of art, which would, in his opinion, only distract painters from their proper activity.<sup>245</sup>

Knight's fall from a position of power and influence to widespread discredit, owed in no small measure to his confrontations with a group of artists intent on defending their hard-won authority, reflects the evolution of the figure of the connoisseur during the transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. Interestingly, one of Knight's most provocative arguments - that artists ought to

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<sup>245</sup> Knight maintained that British artists made a mistake in attempting to follow Michelangelo, since there was no commercial demand for that sort of painting in Britain. [Knight], 'Northcote's *Life of Reynolds*', p. 282.

paint, not write – might be seen as having been appropriated by one painter whose works were, for once, far more eloquent than his words: J.M.W. Turner.

## PART III

### 'WHITE PAINTERS' VERSUS 'BLACK MASTERS'

Wilkie used to relate an anecdote, that while he was one of the hangers of the pictures, he carried a copy of *The woman taken in adultery*, by Rembrandt, and put it up against the works on the walls of the Academy; there was a general shout of triumph in favour of lights – one cried out 'Away with the black masters!' Another said, 'It looks like a hole on the wall'; but after listening to their congratulations in praise of their own style, Wilkie quietly observed, 'If we are on the right road, then the greatest masters of the Italian and British Schools have all been wrong'.<sup>1</sup>

The pedagogical attitude of societies and individuals such as the British Institution and Sir George Beaumont stood in the way of the artists' claims for authority. The position that the latter had elected for themselves of arbiters of taste, educators of an artistic elite and of a new public that would appreciate the art they created, was endangered by the pretensions of the connoisseurs to dictate the rules to determine what was good art, what was the proper public for it, and to assert their own right to appoint both. As we have seen in the preceding chapters, by the first decades of the nineteenth century the main weapon of the artists, the Royal Academy, had lost some of its former prestige and power. Benjamin West, the President that had succeeded Reynolds, did not have the weight of authority of Sir Joshua, and his tenure was riddled with scandals and rumours of cabals and conspiracies within the Academy that were well publicised in the press and via pamphlets, and which did not do any good to the Academy's public image. Moreover, due to the social and political

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<sup>1</sup> John Burnet, *Turner and his works* (London, 1852), p.61. Quoted by Redgrave, *A century of British painters*, p. 262.

circumstances, as has been charted in Part I, the tide in art theory seemed to be turning against academic dogma.

As we have seen, none of the theoretical works written by Academicians, neither the lectures by its Professors such as Henry Fuseli, John Opie or James Barry, nor the reflections of Prince Hoare or Martin Archer Shee, could match the widespread approval and importance of Reynolds's *Discourses* on art theory. In fact, most writings by Academicians at the time were fundamentally respectful reworkings of the theory underlying the *Discourses*, which was already losing currency by the time of their author's death. Theory was not the artists' forte. They were not adept at building the intricate theoretical structures they needed to support their claims in a world where the ideological constructs of Reynolds were no longer valid. Despite the advances in social prestige gained by artists, thanks for the most part to the Royal Academy, only a minority of those were articulate in writing, and in a relevant enough position to make their views known. It is the case, for instance, of Haydon, passionate about art and a better writer than a painter, whose reputation and brusque manners probably ruined most of the good connections he might have had to propagate his views on art and artists. These, published mainly in the pages of the *Champion* and the *Examiner*, were often regarded as the rants of a painter embittered because of his own lack of success. One cannot help but think how differently he might have fared if he had followed the route of Hazlitt, who had early on in his career left

the paintbrush for the pen.<sup>2</sup> Theory was the tool of the connoisseurs, as was demonstrated in the writings of Richard Payne Knight and Uvedale Price, among others, and it was bound to betray the artists who attempted to use it for their own purposes. Another device had to be found.

Wilkie's anecdote reveals how, at one point in the early nineteenth century, the general trend in art turned against tradition: artists stopped listening to the academic admonitions to imitate the examples of the past, and instead began to paint in a new style characterised by lighter hues and broader brushwork; painterly technique gained a new relevance. The quote also indicates to which extent the animosity between artists and connoisseurs was related to practice, and vice versa: as connoisseurs such as Beaumont advised painters to study the Old Masters, artists aware of their own hard-won status and authority rejected the admonition and strove to attain independence from the past. This was attempted, particularly in the case of Turner and his followers, through an idiosyncratic, unmistakable handling of technique which some denounced as manner, and others hailed as unique English genius.

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<sup>2</sup> Curiously, after Hazlitt sat to Haydon for a head, and they discussed past and present art (Hazlitt told Haydon that he had nothing to do with the present time, and his business was with what had been done, to which Haydon replied 'if you have nothing to do with the present time, why attack it?'), the painter reflected in his diary: 'The success of painting is to Hazlitt a sore affair after his own failure'. *Neglected genius: the diaries of Benjamin Robert Haydon 1808-1846*, ed. by Jolliffe, p. 49 (6 May 1817).

## Chapter 5

### Theory and practice

Theory supplies our minds with the principles of science, from which rules are deduced for our future practice; and indeed the latter [practice] must be considered as immediately succeeding the former [theory] by natural connexion and certain consequence, rather than as distinct and independent of theory.<sup>3</sup>

In Academic theory, according to Reynolds's doctrine, which as we have seen followed classical dogmas, the material aspects of art – the practice of painting – came second to its theoretical side. Reynolds said in his 'Fourth Discourse' that 'the powers exerted in the mechanical part of the Art have been called *the language of Painters*; but we may say, that it is but poor eloquence which only shews that the orator can talk'.<sup>4</sup> This meant that the formal content of a work of art should not be given importance in itself; it was the idea behind it that mattered, not the execution of the idea. This key notion in Reynolds's ideology would have significant consequences in the formulations of art theory after his death.

Northcote, Reynolds's pupil, had acknowledged the importance of theory in his master's own practice and in the ideas that he passed on to the Academy:

It is the *mental* power, after all, and not *executive* power, that must occupy the first place in our minds when we consider the reputation of any

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<sup>3</sup> Flaxman, 'Introductory Lecture'. *Lectures on Sculpture*, p. 19. London, 1865 ed.

<sup>4</sup> Reynolds, 'Discourse IV', p.64.



painter... 'Tis the mental, and not the executive, part of his work, upon which the reputation of Sir Joshua Reynolds chiefly rests.<sup>5</sup>

The prestige of an artist was measured not only by his practical prowess, his dexterity with materials and techniques, but more importantly by his ability to abstract and theorize, to put forward intellectual explanations of his art. Reynolds insisted on the importance of this aspect of the painter's profession, and the annual delivery of his *Discourses*, which contained his own ideology, remained, during the first decades of the Academy's existence, one of the keystones of the Academic educational programme. Later in the nineteenth century, Leslie regarded Reynolds's *Discourses*, 'with all their faults', as one of the most valuable contributions to the criticism of the Fine Arts at a time when there was not much discussion on art theory.<sup>6</sup>

Technical training was not provided at the Royal Academy Schools beyond drawing (from antique casts, first, and the living model, once the student was adept at the former); the Schools of Painting were founded in 1816, after the example set by the British Institution with its British School had proved a success. Design, *disegno*, which comprised draughtsmanship, awareness of proportions and perspective as well as general composition, was regarded as the intellectual component of art, and duly stressed in teaching. The Professors at the Academy emphasized its importance: John Opie declared in his first Lecture that 'design or drawing is undoubtedly the most important [branch of the art]<sup>7</sup>; and

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<sup>5</sup> Northcote, *Conversations of James Northcote with James Ward*, pp.57-58.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Robert Leslie and Thomas Taylor, *Life and times of Sir Joshua Reynolds, with notices of some of his contemporaries* (London: John Murray, 1865), vol.II, pp.639-40.

<sup>7</sup> Opie, *Lectures on Painting delivered at the RA*, London 1809.

Flaxman contributed to the exalted status of the mental discipline of design in his lectures:

The arts of design... extend their relations and use through the whole circle of knowledge; they embody ideas, demonstrate the affections and passions; they exhibit the human figure in the highest state of conceivable perfection, and in all of its varieties and gradations... Their superior concerns appeal to the intellect and the reason, by the representation of superior natures, divine doctrines and history, the perpetuation of noble arts, and assisting in the elevation of our minds towards the excellence for which they were originally intended.<sup>8</sup>

Neglect of sound technique was a characteristic of Reynolds, whose pictures famously faded and cracked during his lifetime; he shrugged off comments about the impermanence of his works with replies such as the oft-quoted answer he gave to Beaumont's concern for the tendency to crack of a particular medium: 'All good pictures crack'.<sup>9</sup> Reynolds's carelessness about materials and procedures was transmitted, along with the rest of his doctrine on art, to his followers. Northcote seems to have been aware of this:

Sir Joshua ... glazed too much, and I cannot agree with such a method, for pictures done in this way will not last ... I saw the mischief that Sir Joshua's method produced, though his things were so beautiful when newly done; I saw they would not last, and I think he must have seen it himself.

Interestingly, Northcote drew a correspondence between Reynolds's apparent disregard for technique (which in fact seems to have been rather a passion for experimenting born out of his conflicting love of painting technique

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<sup>8</sup> Flaxman, 'Lecture I', *Lectures on Sculpture* (London, 1865 edn.), p.32. For the debates between partisans of drawing and colour, see Jacqueline Lichtenstein, *The eloquence of colour. Rhetoric and painting in the French classical age*, transl. E. McVeigh (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: University of California, 1993), esp. pp. 158 and 179.

<sup>9</sup> Leslie and Taylor, *Life and times of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, pp.112-113.

and his own invectives against indulging in it) and his attitude to celebrity and prestige:

I have wondered exceedingly at his proceedings in this respect and have sometimes fancied that he must have preferred present, to posthumous, fame ... Who is to say that the man is a fool who prefers making a strong impression on his contemporaries while he is there to enjoy it, to the being admired by posterity, when he himself is totally out of the reach of either their praise or censure?

And then he added, almost as excusing Reynolds:

However, he probably thought that they [the paintings] would last as long as they would be wanted, or cared for.<sup>10</sup>

Following Reynolds's dictum, student painters were left to their own devices when it came to technical instruction; the existing treatises by artists that dealt with the "kitchen" of art: basic knowledge such as mixing of pigments, preparation of supports or application of paint, and so forth, were ignored at the Academy. The professorship of Chemistry would not be founded until 1871; and interest in backing painting techniques with a sound scientific base would not be evident until around mid-century, when the publication of the colourman George Field's *Chromotography* and of studies by the Society of Arts would make available important information about the adequacy and permanence of methods and materials.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Conversations of James Northcote R.A. with James Ward on art and artists*, pp.110-111. Reynolds's technical notes were mostly recorded in account-ledgers now in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, and can be found transcribed in Helene Dubois, 'Aspects of Sir Joshua Reynolds's painting technique: a study of the primary sources with reference to the examination of paintings' (unpublished thesis, Hamilton Kerr Institute, 1992-3).

<sup>11</sup> Gage, 'Magilphs and Mysteries', pp.38-41, p.38.

The most widely quoted, and, it seems, popular technical treatise at the turn of the century was Thomas Bardwell's *Practice of painting and perspective made easy*, published in 1756. Another of these technical books, published in 1787, had a very eloquent title that suited the current trends perfectly: *An essay on the mechanic of oil colours, considered under these heads, Oils, Varnishes, and Pigments, with respect to their durability, transparency, and force, in which is communicated some valuable secrets, particularly, a method of preparing the oils, so as to give them a strong drying quality, perfectly limpid, and colourless...*<sup>12</sup>

Despite having witnessed from first hand the problems of a lack of sound technique in the work of his master, Northcote disdained such books thus:

'There are many treatises', remarked Ward, 'which give directions for painting the flesh, and some of them I have read; indeed, I went to the trouble of copying out Bardwell's Treatise on Oil-Painting.'

'Yes, I am aware there are many such treatises', continued Northcote, 'and they may be useful to a certain extent when a young man is commencing and knows nothing; but they are most of them written by inferior painters, the more successful ones having neither the time nor the inclination, and they will do little for you...'<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Bardwell, *The practice of painting and perspective made easy. In which is contained, the art of painting in oil, with the method of dead colouring; second painting; third or last painting; painting backgrounds...* (London, 1756); and W. Williams, *An essay on the mechanic of oil colours...* (Bath, 1787). For these and other treatises see: Leslie Carlyle, 'A critical analysis of artists' handbooks, manuals and treatises on oil painting published in Britain between 1800-1900: with reference to selected eighteenth century sources' (PhD dissertation, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, 1991); 'The artist's anticipation of change as discussed in British nineteenth-century instruction books on oil painting', in *Appearance, opinion, change: evaluating the look of paintings* (UKIC, 1990), pp. 62-67; M. Kirby Talley and K. Groen, 'Thomas Bardwell and his Practice of Painting', *Studies in Conservation*, 20, pp. 44-108 (1975); and M. Kirby Talley, 'Thomas Bardwell of Bungay, artist and author, 1704-1767', *Walpole Society*, 47 (1976-8), 1978, pp. 91-163.

<sup>13</sup> *Conversations of James Northcote R.A. with James Ward on art and artists*, pp.99-100.

Technique was not seen fit to be taught at the Academy, it was supposed to be learnt by aspiring painters with time and practice. That had been the role of the traditional studio system, where apprentices learnt their trade from their masters, established artists themselves. After the gradual disintegration of the workshop tradition, and before they were taught at art schools, later in the nineteenth century, student artists had nowhere to turn to for technical instruction. Therefore, the decades roughly between 1750 and 1850 were a time of experimentation, during which many new media and pigments appeared for the first time.<sup>14</sup> Painting methods, which used to be learnt in an empirical manner, transmitted from master to apprentice, were often secret recipes. Lacking the studio tradition, young artists used unorthodox methods, in many cases experimenting with old and new materials, or ways of using them. This was often the subject of conversations between painters. For example, Augustus Wall Callcott wrote down several of these conversations in his journals: how 'wax, Canada balsam and turpentine', added to oil, 'adds a degree of hardness to it'; and in the midst of a discussion of Reynolds's practice, he recorded a hopeful hint for the age-old conundrum of how to incorporate wax in a water-based medium:

Hoppner said he once had a [?recipe?] for mixing water and wax which was done by some means by melting gum sandrack [sandaraca] with the

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<sup>14</sup> Leslie Carlyle and Anna Southall, 'No short mechanic road to fame: the implications of certain artists' materials for the durability of British painting, 1770-1840', in *Robert Vernon's gift - British art for the nation 1847*, ed. by Robin Hamlyn (London: Tate Gallery, 1993), pp. 21-6.

other two things but for want of knowing the first proportions of the different ingredients never could succeed in accomplishing the difficulty.<sup>15</sup>

Ozias Humphrey copied seventeenth-century recipes and methods in his Memorandum Book<sup>16</sup>, and Farington recorded several instances of artists passing on “secrets” to each other. During an evening at the Academy Club, there was a discussion on the techniques of the Old Masters, during which West saw fit to share some of his knowledge on the matter: he commented on how Vandewelde ‘glazed a sized white ground with brown pink and ivory black, or with vandyke brown and blue, which served for middle tints, then outlined and laid in respective colours thin and so went on to finishing’. West also spoke about painters who used middle tints to give a whole painting a general tone which was appropriate to the subject; and about others who, like Bourgeois, painted directly on the canvas ‘as bought’.<sup>17</sup> This kind of unofficial discussion of technique seems, as we might expect, to have been quite common.

One of the occasions in which the exchange of technical gossip took place in the early nineteenth century was the period between the submission of a painting for exhibiting at the Academy and the first public viewing, during which the academicians were allowed to retouch and give their works a final glaze. This practice was instituted formally in 1809, although it had been taking

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<sup>15</sup> A.W. Callcott, ‘Journals’, July 1805. The latter quote is from Thursday, July 18. Reynolds was famous for using wax in his paintings, but not in the ancient technique of encaustic, which involves heating the wax, but attempting to emulsify it with oil, which did not have good results. Charles Lock Eastlake, *Methods and materials of painting of the great schools and masters*, 2 vols. (Mineola, NY : Dover Publications, 2001), p. 538.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Memorandum Book of Ozias Humphrey’. British Museum MS add 22950, 1777-1795. See M. Kirby Talley Jr., *Portrait painting in England: studies in the technical literature before 1700* (London: Paul Mellon Centre for studies in British Art, 1981).

<sup>17</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 3 February 1797.

place casually for some time.<sup>18</sup> They were called 'Varnishing Days' and were officially three, although they could be extended up to five, and were restricted to members of the Academy only. That led to further accusations of exclusivism from other exhibitors.<sup>19</sup> The Varnishing Days had an atmosphere of jolly conviviality; colleagues working under the same roof, exchanging comments, advice and sometimes even materials. Turner supported the Varnishing Days enthusiastically and made good use of them, especially from the 1820s onwards, when he would add glazes and scumbles in a sort of *avant-la-lettre* display of performance art in order to transform canvases that seemed little more than sketches into finished pictures. However, the most famous anecdotes regarding his quasi-magical creations during the Varnishing Days refer to his later career, as is the case of this famous account:

It was quite necessary [for Turner] to make the best of his time, as the picture when sent in was a mere dab of several colours, and 'without form and void', like chaos before the creation ... Such a magician, performing his incantations in public, was an object of interest and attraction. Etty was working at his side and every now and then a word and a quiet laugh emanated and passed between the two great painters ... All lookers-on were amused by the figure Turner exhibited in himself, and the process he was pursuing with his picture. A small box of colours, a few very small brushes, and a vial or two, were at his feet, very inconveniently placed; but his short figure, stooping, enabled him to reach what he wanted very readily. Leaning forward and sideways over to the right, the left hand metal button of his blue coat rose six inches higher than the right, and his head buried in his shoulders and held down, presented an aspect curious to all beholders, who whispered their remarks to each other, and quietly laughed to themselves. In one part of the mysterious proceedings Turner, who worked almost entirely with his palette knife, was observed to be rolling and spreading a lump of half-transparent stuff over his picture, the

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<sup>18</sup> Hutchison, *The history of the Royal Academy 1768-1968*, p. 87.

<sup>19</sup> The *Morning Chronicle* condemned the Varnishing Days as pernicious, to the non-members because they could not enjoy the privilege, and to academicians, because they were encouraged to send their pictures in a slovenly, unfinished state and then gain advantage over other paintings. Quoted by Whitley, *Art in England 1800-1820*, pp. 103-4.

size of a finger in length and thickness. As Callcott was looking on I ventured to say to him, 'What is that he is plastering his picture with?' to which inquiry it was replied, 'I should be sorry to be the man to ask him' ... Presently the work was finished: Turner gathered his tools together, put them into and shut up the box, and then, with his face still turned to the wall, and at the same distance from it, went sideling off, without speaking a word to anybody ... All looked with a half-wondering smile, and Maclise, who stood near, remarked, 'There, that's masterly, he does not stop to look at his work; he *knows* it is done, and he is off'.<sup>20</sup>

The Redgraves acclaimed the Varnishing Days as occasions during which 'when painting was going on in common, much of precept, much of practice, and much of common experience, were interchanged'. Students got advice from older academicians, and everybody shared opinions and suggestions with one another. It was one of the very few occasions when such a peer-to-peer interaction between artists took place. From a conservative point of view, however, the Varnishing Days were also evidence of how independent and uncontrollable artistic practice was becoming.

By interrupting the studio tradition and stressing instead the importance of the higher, intellectual spheres of art, the Royal Academy spawned a generation of painters who had little sound knowledge about the scientific principles behind practice, but who were curiously enthusiastic about experimenting with it – often with dire consequences. Certainly, as Rica Jones has claimed, the absence of an authoritative and unified source for technical training also allowed for an extraordinary amount of freedom; and the many different individual techniques are one of the most important factors in the development of a distinct British School. In the case of painters such as Constable or Turner, this freedom would

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<sup>20</sup> E.V. Ripplingille, *The Art Journal* (1860), p. 100. Quoted by A.J. Finberg, *The life of J.M.W. Turner, R.A.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961 (2nd edn.; 1st edn. 1939)), pp. 351-2.



prove an advantage; but in some cases it produced unmitigated disasters, particularly from a conservatorial point of view.<sup>21</sup> It seems ironic, as Carlyle and Southall point out, that some of the paintings that have survived in best conditions were not those done in the timeless style of history painting, but those inspired by the less lofty Northern school.<sup>22</sup>

From their mid-nineteenth-century perspective, the Redgraves commented on the neglect of the traditional practice with ambivalence:

The English School is constituted on the system of individual independence; each artist, after having learnt the mere technical elements, the handicraft of his art, practises it almost irrespective of the rules and traditions of his predecessors. In England, the *atelier* system of the Continent – a system where the pupil enters upon all the knowledge of his master and follows all the traditions of the school – is all but unknown; while even our academic system leaves the student, after he has obtained a command of the language of his art, quite free as to his mode of using it, and has the merit of forming artists of varied originality, because untrammelled by rules and systems; ... it has also the fault of leaving the rising body ignorant of any general code of law or precedent to guide them in their practice.<sup>23</sup>

Young artists were therefore left to experiment and reach their own conclusions on painting technique; but that was a lengthy process, and it is not surprising that discussions on the subject were ubiquitous and artists took every chance to exchange practical information. Nonetheless, these conversations did not take place among artists only, or within the orthodox academic environment. Thanks to the advent of art criticism in the press, and the growing presence of art

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<sup>21</sup> Rica Jones, 'The artist's training and techniques', in *Manners and morals. Hogarth and British painting 1700-1760* (London: Tate Gallery, 1987), p.27.

<sup>22</sup> Carlyle and Southall, 'No short mechanic road to fame', p. 21.

<sup>23</sup> Redgrave, *A century of British painters*, p. 264.

in the cultural life of the nation, more people became aware of painting technique, which gradually lost some of its mystique as an obscure art relegated to painters' workshops. Soon, topics such as brushwork, painterly effects, aerial perspective, and the use of certain pigments or others, began to form part of the discourse of laymen as well as artists and connoisseurs. Many writers (the figure of the professional journalist was beginning to emerge then) adopted the vocabulary of art and included descriptions of painting technique in their exhibition reviews, in some occasions praising the use of particular techniques by the artists, in others lamenting their abuse. The *St. James's Chronicle* reviewed thus a landscape by Farington, which had been painted following Provis's Venetian method:

This is a landscape in the new style; which may be of more service to this gentleman than most other artists, as it may take him off the method of plaistering like a trowel. In the new method he has succeeded tolerably; and if the objects had not been so strong and liney, (*as the Artists call it*) this would have been a very good picture.<sup>24</sup> [my emphasis]

Sometimes the public was blamed for demanding sensational techniques; a danger that Reynolds had already warned about in his *Discourses*: '[The artist] must not be tempted out of the right path by any allurements of popularity, which always accompanies the lower styles of painting.'<sup>25</sup>

As the Artist paints for reward, we wish that the remuneration should show from wisdom and not folly. The public taste is so thoroughly depraved that ... no effort that is natural or classical is well received by the spectator or audience; and the professors of either art [painting and music] are compelled to tread every institute of high authority beneath their feet,

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<sup>24</sup> *St. James's Chronicle*, 9 May 1797. Quoted by Farington, *Diary*, 10 December 1797. Provis's "Venetian" method is discussed below, p. 277 ff.

<sup>25</sup> Reynolds, 'Discourse V', p.90.

and become absurd and extravagant in compliment to the vitiated manners of the age in which we live: the Public seem preposterously eager to be surprized, and that it appears is best effected by what is termed *an abrupt opposition of Tint and Manner*, hence our paintings are fraught with every glaring colour.<sup>26</sup>

The same review, a little further, praised Turner's handling of the sea in his work exhibited that year at the Academy, *Fishermen coming ashore at sunset, previous to a gale*, as particularly adroit; not smooth, but rough and proper for the treatment of such a changing element.

A letter by an "Apelles Symbollicus" (the use of the name of an almost mythical Greek artist is significant) to the *St. James's Chronicle* described, in a humorous tone, the multitude filling the exhibition room at the Royal Academy; as he could not see the pictures, he studied the fashionable crowd and compared the ladies to works of art; some were Venetian Venuses; a young heiress was a charming landscape, admired by critics who liked extensive prospects; young girls were compared to unfinished sketches. This curious article proves not only how popular the exhibitions were (the crowds prevented the critic from actually seeing the works on display), but also the pervasiveness of art and the language of art criticism.<sup>27</sup>

The use of technical terms soon became fashionable even among those who did not possess the necessary knowledge to utilise them properly. In 1845, *Punch* published a humorous piece of advice to would-be art critics, stating that 'nothing can be finer than the exhibition of the Royal Academy, except the

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<sup>26</sup> *Morning Post*, 2 May 1797, 'Royal Academy'.

<sup>27</sup> *St. James's Chronicle*, 'Royal Academy', 1800. RA press cuttings, vol. II, p.30

articles upon it in the newspapers', and recommending, among others, the following measures aimed at enabling anyone to pass off as a knowledgeable art reviewer:

IV. Painting is a mystery. The language of pictorial criticism, like its subject, should be mysterious and unintelligible to the vulgar.

VI. Never use the word *picture*; say *canvas*; it looks technical. Never speak of a picture being *painted*; say rather *studied* or *handled*. The following terms are indispensable, and may be used pretty much at random; *chiaroscuro*, *texture*, *pearly greys*, *foxy browns*, *cool greens*, *breadth*, *handling*, *medium*, *vehicle*.<sup>28</sup>

It would seem that, much in the same way as practical interests co-existed with the notion of a disinterested, civically and morally useful art, there was a sort of undercurrent of technical interest beneath the official, academic stance that asserted the primacy of theory. In fact, it is tempting to trace an analogy between the preoccupation with technique and materials and the down-to-earth, almost vulgar market mechanics of the art trade. Both were materialistic aspects that according to traditional academic ideology artists ought to relegate to a second plane, behind intellectual considerations; especially if, as was the case at the Academy, prestige was at stake and artists were defending their status based on the argument that art engaged the higher faculties of the mind, not the senses.

But that ideal often broke down to reveal the inner workings of the institution and the materialistic interests of its members, for instance when petty scandals and rivalries were divulged outside the Academy's walls. One of the most famous and significant was the so-called "Provis scandal", a hoax

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<sup>28</sup> *Punch*, vol. VII, p.247, 1845. Quoted in *The early nineteenth century*, ed. by Denvir, pp. 86-88.

perpetrated in the last years of the eighteenth century on the Academicians who wished to imitate the superb colouring and effects of the great Venetian Painters. They were willing to believe in the existence of a 'Venetian Secret', that is, the condensation of the technique of painters such as Titian, Veronese and Tintoretto into concrete methods and materials unknown outside Venice: a series of technical shortcuts aimed at achieving the rich appearance of Venetian paintings. The Academicians' reactions to this apparently wondrous discovery, crucially at a time when accurate technical information was not readily available, were a clear example of the troubled relationship of the Academy with painterly technique.

[Reynolds] believed as confidently in the *Venetian secret* as every alchemist did in the *philosopher's stone*; and so intense was his love of colour, that he would always hazard the durability of his works rather than give up any chance of attaining its truth and beauty.<sup>29</sup>

In the hierarchical structure of classical art, Venetian painting had been regarded traditionally as the 'Ornamental School'; together with North European (Dutch and Flemish) art, it was deemed less worthy than the Tuscan or Roman Schools, which were stronger in the intellectual content of art. Reynolds had said of Venetian painting in his 'Fourth Discourse':

The value and rank of every art is in proportion to the mental labour employed in it, or the mental pleasure produced by it ... This exertion of mind ... makes the great distinction between the Roman and Venetian schools.

And later on, quoting *Macbeth*:

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<sup>29</sup> Leslie and Taylor, *Life and times of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, vol. I, p. 112.

If we compare the quietness and chastity of the Bolognese pencil to the bustle and tumult that fills every part of a Venetian picture ... their boasted art will appear ... *a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing*.<sup>30</sup>

However much they were denigrated in theory, in practice the Venetians were admired and imitated, even by Reynolds himself, who was seen by some of his followers as a clear instance of a Venetian-like colourist. John Opie said in one of his *Lectures on Painting at the Academy* (which proves that by 1809 his was quite an orthodox opinion) that Reynolds was 'the slave and master of colouring, to gain which he almost lost himself, though sedulously devoted to it in practice, seems, in his writings, to consider it as rather detrimental, if not incompatible with sentiment and the grand style of art'.<sup>31</sup>

One of the reasons why Venetian painting was disapproved of was that it, unlike other schools, did not go to great lengths to hide the effort that was involved in it. Painters prized hidden labour, because it gave an impression of ease and mastery of the art, and also because it was related to *sprezzatura*, a Renaissance concept which translates as "ease", and refers to a style of painting that seemed natural and spontaneous. The artists who followed Academic theory were expected to comply with certain conventions, one of which was the painstaking hiding of labour. In practical terms this means the suppression of all mannerisms, for instance by making brushstrokes invisible, or by producing smooth, almost enamel-like surfaces. Venetian painting was disregarded in academic theory because of its mannerisms and gaudy displays of technical skill,

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<sup>30</sup> Reynolds, 'Discourse IV', pp. 57 and 64. However, his stance evolved with time, and in 'Discourse XI' he would acknowledge Titian's genius.

<sup>31</sup> Opie, 'Lecture IV', p. 314.

which were considered undignified. Even worse, virtuoso displays of technique were tempting for young artists who might fall for the charms of this seductive manner, much in the same way as innocent young men might be lured by brightly painted courtesans. Shee warned artists in his *Elements of art*:

Let not ... the palette tempt your hand,  
Tho' glittering all its gaudy stores expand;  
The harlot hues from chaster beauties lure  
The dazzled sense, and drawing is the cure.<sup>32</sup>

By insisting on the prevalence of chaste design over gorgeous colour, the academicians that followed Reynolds were denying evidence that pointed out towards the English taste for colour. Clinging to the traditional paradigms, Fuseli argued that colour and light alone only made for mannered painting; Opie lamented the fact that English painters, who never were good draughtsmen, were 'devoted to the charms of colour and effect'.<sup>33</sup> A review of Sandby's works in 1795 put forward the traditional identification between colour and artifice, Frenchness and dissolute morals; its use of language is illuminating, and it serves as an eloquent example of the worries surrounding the character of the English school of art:

There is a taste spreading abroad for gaudy hues, glittering effects and mechanical fopperies dazzling to weak-sighted connoisseurs and unfledged students - with the meretricious ornaments of a courtesan, they lure the idle and inexperienced, while unobtrusive modesty has no attraction. If this extravagant perversion of all taste is not checked and exposed - if we are not brought back from the delusive mazes of eccentric art, into the plain, but unfrequented road of nature, the worst consequences may be prophesied to the Arts. We shall quickly be precipitated from the eminence to which we have attained, and degenerate

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<sup>32</sup> Shee, *Elements of art*, p. 273.

<sup>33</sup> Fuseli, 'Lecture VII' ; Opie, 'Lecture I', p.34.

into all the vices of French frippery and affectation, to the utter exclusion of Nature, Simplicity and Truth.<sup>34</sup>

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the increasing flamboyance of English painting was seen as a cause of concern. Bold, painterly techniques were highly personal, almost like a fingerprint of the artist, a characteristic that defied academic dogma. Writers on art such as the fervently traditional artist Edward Dayes argued that successful art ought to depict Nature without a perceptible manner; generalisation was prized above all considerations of individuality.<sup>35</sup> The use of showy techniques was criticised from certain conservative quarters because it was seen as a sort of honey trap for an uneducated public in search of sensual pleasures; the critique of mannered, gaudy painting affected both the public and the painters who produced it.<sup>36</sup>

Another aspect of Academic theory was, obviously, the notion that art could be taught, which was after all the *raison d'être* of such institutions. Learned gentlemen artists acquired their elevated status through the Academy, where their profession is taught. Academies followed a set course of instruction, aimed to educate future artists in the uses of their profession, and also to perpetuate academic ideology.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, academic ideology could hardly warm to a Romantic notion of innate genius which shunned all training.

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<sup>34</sup> 'Royal Academy', *Morning Post*, 4 June 1795.

<sup>35</sup> Kriz has dealt with these issues in *The idea of the English landscape painter*, pp. 6, 27-30.

<sup>36</sup> For instance, John Taylor in the *True Briton*, 22 May 1807. Quoted by Kriz, *The idea of the English landscape painter*, pp. 51-2. For the identification of slovenly skills with slovenly morals, see Smiles, "'Splashers", "Scrawlers" and "Plasterers"".

<sup>37</sup> And to some extent they still do. Between 1989 and 1995, my own training as an artist at the Facultad de Bellas Artes de San Fernando in Madrid, Spain, followed a traditional



The principle that art can be taught, that artists are made through hard work and theoretical instruction, not born, was related to the belief in recipes, magic formulas, which came also from a lack of proper technical training. The traditional atelier system which was in place prior to the establishment of artistic academies encouraged secretiveness and the transmission of methods and recipes by word-of-mouth; for instance, Ozias Humphry's notebooks of technical gossip. Northcote and Leslie reported how tight-lipped Reynolds was in matters of technique, especially with his pupils; he did have reasons to hide his unorthodox experiments, which often had disastrous consequences. He confided his methods and recipes to his notebooks, written in a mix of English and Italian, possibly with a view to baffle prying eyes.<sup>38</sup> For instance, he wrote of *A beggar boy and his sister*, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1775: 'Aug. 26 1774. White, asphalt. verm. minio principalm. e giallo di Napoli, ni nero ni turchino. Regazzo con sorella, glaze con asphaltum e lacca'.<sup>39</sup>

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academic curriculum which included drawing from antique casts and afterwards from the live model, anatomy, perspective and aesthetics. Although the syllabus has been modernised in recent years, the academic structure of the teaching is still evident.

<sup>38</sup> Northcote, *The life of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, 2 vols. (London, 1818; revised and augmented 2nd edn. of his *Memoirs of Sir Joshua Reynolds of 1813-15*), vol. II, pp. 20-1. Eastlake believed that Reynolds's obscure notes were indeed designed to conceal his methods from his attendants: Eastlake, *Methods and materials of painting*, p. 539. However, M. Kirby Talley argued that Reynolds's practice of writing down technical annotations in Italian was for the benefit of one of his pupils, Giuseppe Marchi, who apparently had access to the master's secrets. Talley, "'All good pictures crack": Sir Joshua Reynolds's practice and studio', in Nicholas Penny, *Reynolds* (exh. cat.) (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1986), pp. 55-70, p. 57.

<sup>39</sup> Eastlake, *Methods and materials of painting*, p. 542. Asphaltum, or bitumen, when used in excess or mixed in inappropriate proportions with other materials, is one of the most dangerous substances a painter can use, as far as the painting's conservation is concerned. A natural hydrocarbon, asphaltum takes a very long time to dry, causing problems from accumulation of surface dust to shrinkage and cracks. However, its rich golden brown colour was very appreciated, for it toned a picture easily, giving it a mellow, almost Old-Masterish appearance. In 1835 George Field, the colourmaker, noted that despite its

In any case, the theories the Academy observed were, as has been pointed out, increasingly out of step with the modern world. The fascination of the Royal Academicians with Venetian art, which under any definition of the terms can be regarded as more Romantic than Classic, could be read as a sign of the changing times. Venetian painting, with its luxurious, dazzling colour and expressive technique, was attractive to painters as well as the public for several reasons. One that springs to mind is its dangerousness and its feminine characteristics. From the sixteenth century onwards, Venice had been anthropomorphized and depicted as a wanton woman, fond of luxury and sensuality; the emphasis on the senses was crucial for the image of Venice in Europe. Venetian colour was said to be brilliant but shallow, and words such as 'cosmetic', 'alluring', and 'meretricious' were often used to describe it.<sup>40</sup>

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destructiveness, many painters used it on account of its delightful hue and transparency. George Field, *Chromatography; or, a treatise on colours and pigments and their powers in painting* (c.1835), p. 161. Quoted by Carlyle and Southall, 'No short mechanic road to fame', p. 21. See also R. Harley, *Artists' pigments c.1600-1835* (London: Butterworths, 1982 (2nd edn.)).

<sup>40</sup> For the sensual imagery of Venice see: J.B. Bullen, 'A clash of discourses: Venetian painting in England 1750-1850', *Word and Image*, vol. VIII, no. 2 (April-June 1992), pp. 113-23; Mary Rogers, 'Reading the female body in Venetian Renaissance art', in *New interpretations of Venetian Renaissance painting*, ed. by Francis Ames-Lewis (London: Birkbeck College, University of London, 1994), pp. 77-90; David Rosand, *Myths of Venice: the figuration of a state* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); and Richard Sennett, *Flesh and stone: the body and the city in Western civilization* (London: Faber, 1994).

For Venetian painting, especially the debates between the defenders of colour versus design, see: Moshe Barasch, *Light and color in the Italian Renaissance theory of art* (New York: New York University Press, 1978), esp. chp. 3; David Rosand, *Painting in cinquecento Venice: Titian, Veronese, Tintoretto* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), pp. 15-25; John Gage, *Colour and culture: practice and meaning from antiquity to abstraction* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1993), esp. chp.7; and Philip Sohm, *Pittoresco: Marco Boschini, his critics and their critiques of painterly brushwork in seventeenth and eighteenth century Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

Another attractive aspect of Venetian colour to the British mindset was that it could be adopted as an appropriate predecessor of the English School. The concept of Englishness was being redefined at the time, and it was done in part by establishing specular antagonisms with Europe in general, and with France in particular. Once French painting was divested of its Rococo connotations of feminine intimacy and foppish, gaudy colour, it became characterised by the austere linearity of post-Revolutionary French painting, exemplified by David and his followers and which could be seen to descend directly from the severe Central Italian schools, by way of seventeenth-century Classicism – exactly the origins of the Academic style that Reynolds had tried, unsuccessfully, to graft into British art. The dry historical manner of the Neo-Classical French School had for many uncomfortable Republican and revolutionary connotations. Therefore, it is not surprising that one of the aims of the aesthetic discourse of the time was to transform colour from a superfluous, Frenchified accessory into one of the defining characteristics of the British School.<sup>41</sup>

There is ample evidence of the fascination of the Academicians with Venetian painting, and at the same time of their love of technical secrets: many instances show them using recipes for nostrums, megilps, etc. in order to attain the same results as the Venetians. The most notorious example of this was the “Provis scandal” that rocked the London art establishment in the last years of the eighteenth century.

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<sup>41</sup> For the definition of colour as a characteristic of the English school, as opposed to the French school, see Kriz, *The idea of the English landscape painter*, esp. chapters 2 and 5; and ‘French glitter or English nature? Representing Englishness in landscape painting, in *Art in bourgeois society, 1790-1850*, ed. by Hemingway and Vaughan, pp. 63-83.

In late 1795, a gentleman called Provis and his daughter approached the President of the Academy, West, and several other academicians, with what was supposedly an authentic recipe for painting in the style of the Venetian School found in a manuscript. The artists were enthralled. Joseph Farington, the Royal Academician, mentioned in his *Diary* the following year that a certain Venetian Secret of colouring had been communicated to West.<sup>42</sup> On 6 January 1797 'Provis's secret of the Venetian colouring was talked of' at the Academy Club. Provis had applied to Richard Cosway, the painter, in search of support, and other painters as well; Rigaud had seen some specimens, and it was to him that Provis told how he had discovered the recipe in a book which a certain Captain Morley had brought from Italy. Cosway directed Provis to Benjamin West, the Academy President, but this proved to be a fatal move as West, cunningly, tried to pass off the method as his own discovery, and intended to keep the secret to himself, instead of sharing it with his fellow academicians, which, naturally, enraged them. They rightly feared that West would try to use this method for producing paintings of Venetian quality for his own advantage, something that even Provis himself suspected.<sup>43</sup> Farington recorded that 'The general sentiment ... was that West was bound to propose the discovery as soon as He had made trial of it and not keep it back under any pretences'.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 14 December 1796. Provis was said to be 'sweeper to St. James's Chapel', and his daughter, who was said to paint 'a little', was known to Opie.

<sup>43</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 6 January 1797 ff. Farington's *Diary* is the best source for the Venetian Secret scandal. See also Gage, 'Magilphs and Mysteries'; and Eric McCauley Lee, 'Titianus Redivivus': Titian in British art theory, criticism, and practice, 1768-1830' (PhD thesis, Yale University, 1997).

<sup>44</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 6 January 1797.

West proposed to paint 'a large Historical picture, - and a landscape also, with the vehicle discovered, - all for the Exhibition'. He also painted using the process a portrait of his sons, and a *Cupid stung by a bee* (fig. 31), which Farington thought was better in colouring than West's previous works.<sup>45</sup> After experimenting under Miss Provis's supervision, West thought the process excellent; as he told Farington, he 'saw that it consisted in two points, a want of knowledge of which had puzzled him and all other imitators of the Venetian Colouring'. Both he and Sir Joshua had tried wax and other media without success.<sup>46</sup> He was so enthusiastic that he proclaimed that 'a new Epocha in the Art would be formed by the discovery'.<sup>47</sup>

Many painters, after having attended practical demonstrations by Mary Anne, Provis's daughter (also named 'Anne Jemima' elsewhere), were dissatisfied with the method; Smirke, for instance, doubted that the process would be of much value to him, and Stothard proclaimed it was only a glazing system, and that he had his own method for painting imitations of Rubens.<sup>48</sup> Beechy and Farington cattily observed that West's samples lost their strength when seen from up close, not because the method was faulty, but because it might be the fault of the artist.<sup>49</sup> Opie was dissatisfied too; he had already experimented with painting with white on a dark ground, glazing the white with

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<sup>45</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 18 January 1797.

<sup>46</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 17 January 1797.

<sup>47</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 17, 18 and 25 January 1797.

<sup>48</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 13 and 16 January 1797. Stothard used burnt bone instead of asphaltum as a warm ground, which must have been more stable too.

<sup>49</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 6 January 1797.

colour afterwards.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, the process was generally accepted as authentic and valuable, and it was arranged for Provis to sell it by subscription, receiving 10 guineas from each subscriber, who should keep the method secret until Provis had collected 600 guineas. Even then, it was agreed that the secret could not be passed on to any foreigner.<sup>51</sup> It was also proposed that students should not use the process, so as not to discriminate against those who couldn't afford it. Farington acquired the method from Provis, who told him that Franciscus Junius's 1638 treatise mentioned the method.<sup>52</sup> Farington made a copy of it, now preserved at the Royal Academy library, entitled *System of painting according to the several great Italian schools*.

The method basically consisted of painting with white on a dark, unprimed and therefore very absorbent ground, and then glazing in successive layers to build up the body of the painting. This resulted on flesh looking grey, as Dance reported to Farington. Linseed oil, the medium with which the pigments were to be mixed, was 'purified to a state like water', instead of thickened as was usual. And last but not least, the manuscript contained the recipe for the famous 'Titian shade', a cool dark mixture of pigments for the shadows; Reynolds had believed that Titian had used a cool tint scumbled over warm flesh tones in order to achieve a greyish, neutral tone.<sup>53</sup> But the mixture recommended by Provis could

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<sup>50</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 30 January 1797.

<sup>51</sup> *Monthly Magazine*, n.d.a. 'Whitley Papers', p. 1608.

<sup>52</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 13 February 1797.

<sup>53</sup> *Conversations of James Northcote with James Ward*, p. 100.

not possibly be a genuine sixteenth-century recipe, as it incorporated eighteenth-century inventions such as Prussian blue.<sup>54</sup>

The excitement about this phenomenal discovery soon leaked outside the Royal Academy, and that is when the trouble began. Farington mentioned how Paul Sandby had made 'a humorous song on the Committee appointed to examine Miss Provis's secret'.<sup>55</sup> The speculation, jealousies and general scepticism reached a peak at that year's Exhibition, in which several "Venetian" paintings were exhibited by West, Tresham, Smirke, Stothard and Westall. The critics received these paintings poorly, the reviewer for the *Observer* noting that the effects of the process made oil paintings resemble 'the chalky and cold tints of fresco and that gaudy glare and flimsy nothingness of fan painting'.<sup>56</sup>

With the exception of Knight, the connoisseurs were reported to generally oppose the Venetian process, or at least not to have been enthusiastic about it.<sup>57</sup> Knight wished that 'a subscription might have been made to reward Mr & Miss Provis and that the process shd. be made known to the world. - If so, though no Artist, He would readily subscribe Ten guineas'.<sup>58</sup> Beaumont was hesitant about it since the beginning, telling Farington that he did not want to try the method until he had finished the paintings he had begun, for fear of becoming disgusted

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<sup>54</sup> Whitley, *Artists and their friends in England*, vol. II, p. 213.

<sup>55</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 3 March 1797.

<sup>56</sup> *Observer*, 7 May 1797.

<sup>57</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 1 and 20 May 1797.

<sup>58</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 11 March 1797.

with them. He must have tried the method and not found it to his liking, because he declared that a white ground was better.<sup>59</sup>

Opie eventually arrived at the conclusion that the Venetian secret, as well as all other methods and processes that purportedly allowed for easy imitation of the appearance of works of the Ancients, were but 'nostrums for producing fine pictures without the help of science, genius, taste, or industry', and therefore young artists ought to be discouraged from using them.<sup>60</sup> Even West complained about the lack of success the "Venetian" pictures had had; after the failure of the Provis method paintings at the Exhibition, he seemed to suffer from sour grapes and stated that Provis's grounds were 'too cold and purple', and later on grumbled about the Committee which had examined the process, saying that 'He knew the *Black Ground* would not do'.<sup>61</sup>

But the worst was to come. In November that year, Gillray published his *Titianus Redivivus, or – the Seven Wise Men consulting the new Venetian Oracle, - or a scene in ye Academic grove no. 1*, a caricature which lampooned the whole affair (fig. 32). It depicted a group of artists studiously following Miss Provis's instructions, in a vain attempt to paint like their admired Old Masters. Sitting in the front row of a throng of painters, the Academicians who bought the process, the 'Seven wise men' of the title, are shown holding up canvases with their names and most conspicuous characteristic written upon them; from left to right,

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<sup>59</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 16 February, 3 and 2 May 1797. Paradoxically, the use of white grounds was one of the characteristics that made Beaumont decry Turner and his circle, as we shall see in the following chapter.

<sup>60</sup> Opie, 'Lecture IV', p. 145 (9 March 1807)

<sup>61</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 6 June and 17 July 1797.



there are 'Rigaudian harmony', 'Smirking humour', 'Stothardian originality', 'Hopnerian truth', 'Westalian sublimity', 'Opiean delicacy' and 'Faringtonian taste'. The speech bubbles above them reveal their hopes for what the Secret would help them achieve: Farington asks himself 'Will this Secret make me paint like Claude? Will it make a Dunce, a colourist at once?'; Hoppner, 'As I in Reynolds style my works begin, won't Titian's finish, hoist on me the grin?'; Stothard, 'Will it on White Grounds equal shine? For when I Trace from Ancient works divine I use no other'; etc. In the case of Opie and Farington, Gillray drew their caricatures with wit and accuracy. Behind the Academicians there is a throng of indistinct ape-like figures, all bearing palettes, who crowd together to climb on to a rainbow on which Miss Provis stands painting a picture of a hoary old man using her method of white on a black ground. A trio of multi-coloured classical figures, probably nymphs or muses, hold the train of Miss Provis's dress, which resembles a peacock's tail, in a reference to gaudy colouring. To her left, a winged donkey, each of its feathers inscribed with the name of a periodical, drinks from a pot of paint. Underneath this scene, several flatulent *putti* puff away, their wings bearing the names of connoisseurs, one of them labelled 'Ventus Beaumontisus'. In the foreground, standing by a statue of Apollo, a monkey-like figure leans on a ledger inscribed 'List of subscribers to the Venetian humbug at ten g[uineas] each dupe', and soils a clutch of paintings by artists who had refused to buy the secret: Fuseli, Beechey, Louthembourg, Cosway, Sandby, Bartolozzi, Rooker and Turner. Close to it, Reynolds, who had died five years earlier, rises from the grave, ear-trumpet in hand, to admonish the painters:

Black Spirits and White, Blue Spirits and Grey,

Mingle, mingle, mingle! – you that Mingle may.

In the right foreground, three darkened figures attempt to sneak away: to the extreme right, West, clearly recognisable in the print and bearing a painter's palette, takes a finger to his lips and tells Boydell 'Charming secret Friend, for thee to dash out another gallery with! – but I'm off!!', to which Boydell, who carries a folder that reads 'Shakespeare', looks bewildered and replies 'How! – What! – another Gallery? – Mr. President! I'd see them all starve first, the Villains! O my Money! My Money!!!'. Above the whole scene, a phoenix bearing a scroll inscribed 'Venetian manuscript' bursts into flame, filling the sky with rays of light and clouds, while meteors shoot out of the sky and fall on a crumbling Royal Academy building.

The following year, James Barry, the history painter, wrote a letter to the Dilettanti Society about the whole issue, in which he said that 'such a concurrence of ridiculous circumstances, of so many, such gross absurdities, and such busy industrious folly, in contriving for the publicity, and exposure of a quacking disgraceful imposture is, I believe, unparalleled in the history of the art'.<sup>62</sup> Barry was one of those not duped by the Provis method; perhaps his staunch devotion to the Grand Style and consequent disregard for the ornamental Venetian School made him suspicious of a method that promised to attain the same results. As he had said to Reynolds in a letter of 1769, 'such people as ours who are floating about after Magilphs and mysteries ... are very little likely to satisfy themselves with that saying of Annibal [Carracci]'s, "Buon

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<sup>62</sup> Barry, *A letter to the Dilettanti Society respecting the obtention of certain matters essentially necessary for the improvement of public taste, and for accomplishing the original views of the Royal Academy of Great Britain* (London, 1798; 2nd edn., 1799).

disegno e colorito di fango”<sup>63</sup>. Magilph (also written megilp or meguilp) is a term for a gelatinous painting medium made of mastic resin dissolved in turpentine and linseed oil, which gives an enamel-like finish and allows for impasto-building, but can also be applied as a glaze if desired. It is a delightful medium to paint with, and enjoyed much popularity in the nineteenth century, but it becomes brittle and yellow with age, and unless applied in the proper sequence along with other materials such as oil, it often reacts badly with them; the Redgraves explained that it cracks when varnished, and described the damage caused by the use of megilp in paintings by Wilkie.<sup>64</sup> There were endless recipes for megilp, each a zealously guarded secret, which allowed for several truly disastrous combinations.<sup>65</sup> In that sense, megilp works as a perfect illustration of the temptations and perils of an improper use of technique.

In 1798 there were no “Venetian” paintings at the Royal Academy exhibition. But surprisingly, the Provis scandal did not stop Academicians from being preoccupied with technical secrets. In the early nineteenth century, several artists, among them John Singleton Copley, claimed to have found the key to the Venetian style.<sup>66</sup> Williams, an Irish portrait painter, was reported in 1801 as

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<sup>63</sup> Barry, *Works*, vol. I, p. 106.

<sup>64</sup> Redgrave, *A century of British painters*, p. 310.

<sup>65</sup> Carlyle and Southall, ‘No short mechanic road to fame’, pp. 24-5. A thorough technical study of megilp can be found in Joyce H. Townsend, Leslie Carlyle, Aviva Burnstock, Marianne Odlyha and Jaap J. Boon, ‘Nineteenth-century paint media: the formulation and properties of megilp’, in *Painting techniques: history, materials and studio practice*, ed. by Ashok Roy and Perry Smith (IIC, 1998), pp. 205-9; see also Townsend, ‘Painting techniques and materials of Turner and other British artists 1775-1875’, in *Historical painting techniques, materials and studio practice* (pre-prints of a symposium held at the University of Leiden, 1995), p. 182.

<sup>66</sup> Whitley, *Artists and their friends in England*, vol. II, p. 213.

having his mind 'full of the Venetian process'.<sup>67</sup> Absorbent grounds continued to be used, by both artists who had supported Provis and those who had received the secret with scepticism, such as Turner.<sup>68</sup> Not until the publication, around the middle of the century, of scientifically and historically researched technical treatises, such as Mary Merrifield's *Original treatises dating from the twelfth to the eighteenth centuries on the arts of painting* of 1849, and Charles Eastlake's *Materials for a history of oil painting* of 1847, would the belief in magical recipes and methods die out.

The Venetian Secret scandal highlighted one of the Academy's most obvious contradictions: its ambiguous attitude towards the material aspects of art, as well as its belief that art could be reduced to and contained within a set of rules. Technique was not simply a skill that could be purchased, and art could not be distilled into a handful of rules or a formula for painting. The episode also marked the beginning of a sea change in the evaluation of the Northern schools in England. By the 1830s, the Reynoldsian distinction between the ornamental and the grand style did no longer hold, and the general consensus seemed to be that the strength of the English School lay mainly in colour. What had been a style born of the pressures of a very concrete market situation was eventually accepted as genuinely British: colouristic landscape painting had the potential to represent Englishness in a way that austere grand style had failed to achieve.

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<sup>67</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 19 January and 26 February 1801.

<sup>68</sup> He used 'absorbing grounds prepared by Grandi and afterwards pumised [sanded with a pumice stone for smoothness] by Himself. - It absorbs Oil even at the fourth time of painting over. When finished it requires three or four times going over with mastic varnish to make the colour bear out. - He uses no oil but Linseed oil. - By this process He thinks He gets air and avoids any *horny* appearance.' Farington, *Diary*, 13 February 1802.

Lawrence addressed his fellow academicians in 1829, optimistic at the progress achieved by the English school, which had combined successfully the excellencies of line and composition with those of colour and execution.<sup>69</sup>

Reynolds had been wrong in assuming that England might have more to do with Rome than with Venice. The rejection of the idea of Venetian painting as a sort of second-class school in academic hierarchy indicated a willingness to let go of the classical pan-European academic paradigm. Adopting the Venetians as the true forefathers of English painters amounted to a statement of independence from the Neoclassical ideology of Reynolds. The Enlightened, traditional theoretical foundations of Royal Academy, as argued in Part I of this dissertation, were beginning to crumble. The Provis scandal was one of the things that made the public realise that the Academy was fallible, and begin to pay attention to other rival ventures, such as the British Institution, as was charted in Part II.

At the same time, the growing interest in technique in and outside the Academy was indicative of the emergence of a new way to produce and receive art. The material aspects of a work of art, as opposed to its subject matter, acquired an importance that had not been recognised since Hogarth had defended the independence of painting from other forms of culture, and the

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<sup>69</sup> Thomas Lawrence, 'Address', *Lawrence Papers*, LAW/6, V, p. 5. Quoted by Funnell, 'Richard Payne Knight: aspects of aesthetics and art criticism in late eighteenth-nineteenth century England', p. 182.

dignity of art based on its own rules which, much later in the century, would be summarised in the term 'art for art's sake'.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> See above, n66.

## Chapter 6

### Turner the over-turner

A certain artist has so much debauched the taste of the young artists in this country by the empirical novelty of his style of painting that a humorous critic gave him the title of 'over-Turner'.<sup>71</sup>

Despite its formal allegiance to classical values such as Ideal Beauty and the hierarchy of genres, Reynolds's ideological programme subverted the traditional status quo whereby liberal art was the province of a select few by virtue of their social position. According to his ideas, anybody with the proper training, which involved learning to distinguish the beauties in Nature through the study of the masters of the past, could aspire to create high art and become part of the grand tradition of Western art. Through that programme of learning, the Royal Academy would enable its members to achieve a professional status as practitioners of a liberal art – a position that had been previously unavailable to artists.

Turner fulfilled that ideal. He followed Reynolds's precept, stated at the end of his 'Discourse VI', to:

Study therefore the great works of the great masters, for ever. Study as nearly as you can, in the order, in the manner, and on the principles, on which they studied. Study nature attentively, but always with those masters in your company; consider them as models which you are to imitate, and at the same time as rivals with whom you are to contend.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> *True Briton*, 16 May 1803. A few days before the same journal had condemned Turner's *Holy Family* as a 'barbarous and clumsy imitation' of the Old Masters (6 May 1803).

<sup>72</sup> Reynolds, 'Discourse VI', p. 113.

Turner established a sort of dialogue with the Old Masters, in that he did not limit himself to copying or borrowing slavishly from them: he attempted to understand the style of those painters he admired, and produced as a result pictures that in many instances worked as pendants of those masterpieces of the past. The best example of this is the pairing of his own *Dido building Carthage* with Claude's *Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba*, which he specified in his will ought to hang together as a condition for it to be bequeathed to the National Gallery.<sup>73</sup> (figs. 33, 34)

He regarded himself as a true son of the Royal Academy; being of humble origins, he owed much of his prestige to his position as an Academician, as he acknowledged in his first Lecture as Professor of Perspective, during which he also paid his compliments to Reynolds's merits.<sup>74</sup> Hence his comment on hearing the news of Haydon's suicide:

Maclise first heard of it at the Athenaeum club, and seeing Turner reading a newspaper he went to him and said:

'I have just heard of Haydon's suicide. Is it not awful?'

Turner without looking up from his paper, said:

'Why did he stab his mother?'

'Great Heaven!' said Maclise, 'You don't mean - '

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<sup>73</sup> His first will actually specified that *Dido building Carthage* and the *Decline of the Carthaginian empire* would be bequeathed 'provided the above pictures are deemed worthy to be and are placed by the side of Claude's *Seaport* [*Seaport with the embarkation of the Queen of Sheba*] and *Mill* [*Landscape with the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah*] that is to hang on the same line height from the ground and continue in perpetuity to hang and if not I request they are declined to be accepted'. Later on he substituted *Sun rising through vapour* for the *Decline*. Finberg, *The life of J.M.W. Turner*, pp. 330-1. Turner's bequest was honoured and today the four pictures hang together in Room 15 of the National Gallery.

<sup>74</sup> John Taylor, in the *Sun*, 7 January 1811.



'Yes, he stabbed his mother.'

No explanation could be obtained from Turner, but he alluded, no doubt, to Haydon's attacks on the Academy, to which he owed his education and which were, indeed, the cause of his ruin.<sup>75</sup>

Turner's personal interpretation of Reynolds's ideology earned him his fiercest enemy: Sir George Beaumont, who as we have seen in chapter 4.1 was considered by many, including himself, to be the champion of Reynoldsian classicism, albeit interpreted from the point of view of his own aristocratic values. Beaumont saw in Turner's practice a perversion of the artistic principles he believed to be true; and in the painter's growing success, probably a threat to his own standing as connoisseur. Alarmed at the painter's influence on younger artists, Beaumont carried out a defamation campaign aimed at belittling Turner's prestige and steering back public taste into appreciation for what he regarded as proper art.

In the second decade of the nineteenth century, Beaumont's dislike for Turner's works crystallised into positive antipathy. George Jones, friend of Turner's, recorded in his *Recollections* that 'both [Turner and Chantrey] have excited much jealousy... without provocation, also some disparagement from individuals even when those distinguished men ceased to be'.<sup>76</sup> Beaumont's main target was the unusual lightness in the works of Turner and his followers, the high key in which they were executed, which to his eyes seemed harsh and

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<sup>75</sup> W.P. Frith, *My autobiography and reminiscences*, 2 vols., p. 235. Quoted by John McCoubrey, 'War and peace in 1842: Turner, Haydon and Wilkie', *Turner Studies*, vol. IV, no. 2 (Winter 1984), pp. 2-7. *Turner Studies* is one of the best sources for specialist articles on every aspect of the painter's life and oeuvre. The periodical ran from 1981 to 1990.

<sup>76</sup> 'Recollections of George W. Jones', Ashmolean Print Room, p. 1.

gaudy. Sir George Beaumont called the group of artists around Turner the 'White Painters', a pejorative term intended to mark them out as uneducated and coarse of execution because their notorious use of bright colour was directly in opposition to the subdued technique of his favourite artists. The first mention of the epithet was in 1806, when Beaumont objected to the 'white look' of Callcott's Academy exhibits that year, *A calm, with figures shrimping*, and *A sea-coast, with figures bargaining for fish*.<sup>77</sup>

By 1812, during his quarrel with Haydon over the latter's painting of *Macbeth*, Beaumont's judgment about Turner was set; he believed that the painter's influence had been harmful and misleading to others, and that while some of his pictures had been promising, he had fallen into an inconsistent and slovenly manner. Beaumont believed that Turner's attempts to use watercolour techniques in oil painting were one of the most pernicious characteristics of his style.<sup>78</sup> In 1813, the barrage of criticism had become so intense that Callcott decided not to exhibit at the Academy that year, alleging that he had not sold a painting in the three previous years because of Beaumont's malicious remarks to his fellow patrons, and that Turner's sales had also been affected by the same negative propaganda.<sup>79</sup> Wilkie, supporting Beaumont's arguments, wrote a letter to the connoisseur blaming the decline in colouring to the raised key of the

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<sup>77</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 13 April 1806.

<sup>78</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 12 October 1812.

<sup>79</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 8 April 1813.

painters led by Turner, the 'White School', because the light coming from such pictures had a chilly effect.<sup>80</sup>

The 'whiteness' Beaumont objected to made reference, mainly, to the use of white grounds instead of coloured ones, as was usual at the time, as well as to new, brighter pigments being available, and to a generally heightened tonal scale. English grounds in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century landscape painting seem generally to have been warm- and low-toned, in opposition to common Continental practice, which, following Claude, ironically, made use of light grounds.<sup>81</sup> Possibly influenced by his own practice of watercolour painting – which he had exercised for some ten years before beginning to paint in oils – and the curiosity about technical experiments common to most painters of the time, Turner started using white grounds for his oil paintings around the turn of the century. His preference for absorbent surfaces and his ability in achieving optical mixes like green out of ochre and blue were also derived from his work in watercolours.<sup>82</sup>

This cross-fertilization between techniques led some observers to believe that Turner actually mixed watercolours and oils in the same work in several

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<sup>80</sup> Letter from Wilkie to Beaumont, 14 February 1823. Allan Cunningham, *The life of Sir David Wilkie* (London, 1843), vol. II, p. 98.

<sup>81</sup> Gage, *Colour in Turner: poetry and truth*, p. 30. For an early nineteenth-century view on Claude's white grounds see W. Buchanan, *Memoirs of painting* (1824), vol. I, pp. 110, 343–4. Wright of Derby was one exception (Gainsborough used grey and blue backgrounds sometimes): the luminosity in some of his pictures comes from the use of a white ground. Townsend, 'Painting techniques and materials of Turner and other British artists 1775–1875', p. 176; and Rica Jones, 'Wright of Derby's techniques of painting', in *Wright of Derby*, ed. by Judy Egerton (exh. cat.) (London: Tate Gallery, 1990), pp. 263–72.

<sup>82</sup> Townsend, 'Painting techniques and materials of Turner and other British artists 1775–1875', p. 176; and *Turner's painting techniques*, p. 37.

instances.<sup>83</sup> However, whereas it is true that he used modified oil media for painting, modern analyses have yielded no evidence of the mixing of watercolour glazes over oil layers, save in *Apollo and Daphne*, where there are layers of pigment bound with aqueous media (glue or egg) sealed with varnish.<sup>84</sup>

Technically, a white ground reflects more light than a coloured one. This is true especially in watercolour painting, because the paint itself consists of transparent washes of colour. Nevertheless, oils also possess a degree of transparency and allow light reflected from the ground to shine through, in a similar effect to a backlit sign. Painted on a white ground or priming, colours are purer, brighter and, in contrast with those of older works, which have mellowed with time, may even look garish. The advantage of coloured grounds, used by the majority of painters up until 1820, was that they infused the whole work with a general tone, making it easier to achieve a harmonious whole. The most usual colours were pink, red, russet and chocolate, all warm tonalities; grey, which tended to give a cool hue, was unpopular for that very reason.<sup>85</sup>

Beaumont was an advocate of the rich, mellow tones of Old Masters, and preferred contemporary artists which painted in the same muted hues, such as Wilkie. His taste favoured painting which relied in rich harmonies of low-key

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<sup>83</sup> C.F. Bell, *A list of the works contributed to public exhibitions by J.M.W. Turner, R.A.* (London, 1901), pp. 67-8.

<sup>84</sup> Townsend, 'The materials and techniques of J.M.W. Turner, RA 1775-1851', pp. 194-5. The appearance of "water droplets in oil" and "islands" of some paintings can be explained by Turner's practice of applying oil paint over partially-dried layers, and of interspersing pure oil glazes with modified oil layers without a coat of varnish acting as a separator. This accounts for the flaking between layers without recurring to blaming watercolours.

<sup>85</sup> Anna Southall, 'Turner's contemporaries: their materials, practices and opinions', in *Turner's painting techniques in context*, ed. by Townsend and others, pp. 12-20, p. 13.

colour, in which contrasts of hue were not great, and the overall balance of tone gave a sense of serenity. What he perhaps was not aware of was the fact that much of this mellowness in the works he admired was due to the aging of pigments, media and varnishes which affects all oil paintings. The oil that binds oil paint oxidises and yellows with age; some pigments darken, others lose opacity, revealing a dark ground underneath; and protective layers and glazes rich in varnish can also alter with age, in most cases turning yellow, although loss of transparency is not uncommon either. All of those effects, which are natural and to a certain extent unavoidable part of the ageing process of a work of art, can be grouped under the umbrella term of patina. Patina, combined with accumulation of grease, dirt, smoke, and careless conservation and/or restoration ("refreshing" a faded painting with a new coat of varnish was a common practice that had only short-term results and in the long term proved even more problematic), gave as a result pictures that ranged in mellowness from a general amber-like tonality to an almost opaque tarry brown.<sup>86</sup>

Haydon, who despite his fiery temper was quite prudent with his technique, criticised in harrowing anthropomorphic terms the treatment pictures got in the

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<sup>86</sup> The subjects of patina and ageing are treated exhaustively in conservation literature, even a summary of which would exceed the scope of this dissertation. As a general introduction, however, Cesare Brandi's *Teoria del restauro* (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1963), particularly chapters 4 and 5, and his article 'The cleaning of pictures in relation to patina, varnish and glazes', *Burlington Magazine*, vol. XCI (July 1949), as well as Neil McLaren and Anthony Werner, 'Some factual observations about varnishes and glazes', *Burlington Magazine*, vol. XCII (July 1950), and Ernst H. Gombrich, 'Dark varnishes: variations on a theme from Pliny', *Burlington Magazine*, vol. CIV (February 1962), are very informative. More focused on specific causes and consequences of ageing in British painting are: Leslie Carlyle, 'The anticipation of change as discussed in British nineteenth century instruction books on oil painting', in *Appearance, opinion, change: evaluating the look of paintings* (UKIC and AAH, 1990), pp. 62-7; and Joyce Townsend, 'The materials and techniques of J.M.W. Turner, RA 1775-1851' (PhD thesis, Courtauld Institute, 1992), especially chapter 8.

hands of careless restorers and picture dealers who darkened them on purpose to suit the debased taste of connoisseurs:

They may talk as they please of the sufferings of humanity, but there is nothing so excites my sympathy as the helpless sufferings of a fine old oil picture of a great genius. Unable to speak or remonstrate, touching all hearts by its dumb beauty, appealing to all sympathies by its silent splendour, laid on it back in spite of its lustrous and pathetic looks, taken out of its frame, stripped of its splendid encasement, fixed to its rack to be scraped, skinned, burnt, and then varnished in mockery of its tortures, its lost purity, its beautiful harmony, and hung up again, castrated and unmanned, for living envy to chuckle over, while the shade of the mighty dead is allowed to visit and rest about his former glory, as a pang for sins not yet atoned for.<sup>87</sup>

Neither Beaumont nor his ideological master, Reynolds, realised that the rich tones of Old Master works were quite unattainable in freshly painted surfaces, although Constable was aware of this and tried to warn the connoisseur.<sup>88</sup> Reynolds strove all his life trying to find the secret recipes that the ancients had used to give their works their rich appearance, seeking to emulate the effects, not to follow their patient technique. In this quest he destroyed some paintings he had bought, stripping them layer after layer in search of those elusive technical secrets, and condemned to premature destruction some that he had made himself through his careless experimenting.<sup>89</sup> The cracks he saw in those works, though, were not due to the painters' experimenting with pigments

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<sup>87</sup> Haydon, *Diary*, 16 November 1844.

<sup>88</sup> C.R. Leslie, *Memoirs of Constable*, pp. 99-100. See Carlyle, 'The anticipation of change as discussed in British nineteenth century instruction books on oil painting' for a survey of the perception of the changes in painting in the nineteenth century.

<sup>89</sup> Rica Jones, 'The artist's training and techniques', pp. 26-7. See also Redgrave, *A century of British painters*, p. 57; the chapter devoted to Reynolds expands on his unorthodox technique. Northcote remembered 'a fine picture of Parmegiano, that I bought by his order at a sale, which he rubbed and scoured down to the very panel on which it had been painted, so that at last nothing remained of the picture'; Northcote, *Life of Reynolds*, vol. II, p. 22.

or media, as was in his case; in the majority of cases, when the technique was sound, cracks were an effect of time. This desire to emulate the appearance of Old Master paintings led to the use of techniques redolent of falsification, such as using bitumen, a rich, translucent organic brown pigment which used as a glaze gives an overall golden brown tone, but which applied in excess has horrifying consequences. It has a very long drying time, and if used on top of layers of paint it attracts dust and dirt; underneath layers of paint or glazings, it provokes their cracking in wide, unmistakable cracks that are very different from age cracks.<sup>90</sup>

Beaumont's comments touched on several issues. First of all, the use of white grounds, which most authors identified as having been adapted from watercolour painting, regarded as inferior in the academic hierarchy, indicates unwillingness on the part of Turner's critics to allow for a blurring of the boundaries between the different pictorial styles. By employing techniques adopted from an inferior genre, Turner was seen by Beaumont and his circle to have endangered the status of high art. The other issue at stake was the showiness of Turner's effects, as opposed to hidden labour, which was a characteristic of classical painting. Turner's handling was evident in all but his earliest works; close inspection of the pictures shows the rich array of techniques used by the painter, from juxtaposition of differently coloured brushstrokes to achieve optical mixes, to texturised scumbles and sculpted paint which caught the light in different ways and gave the pictures a certain three-dimensional

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<sup>90</sup> For asphaltum, its use and effects see Carlyle and Southall, 'No short mechanic road to fame', pp. 21-3. Technical books such as Eastlake's *Methods and materials of painting of the great schools and masters* and A.P. Laurie's *The pigments and mediums of the old masters* (London: Macmillan, 1914) devote sections to it.

quality. All this focus on the material body of the picture, argued Turner's critics, distracted the viewer from the idea behind the work.

As we saw in Part II, Beaumont was not alone in believing that Turner's idiosyncratic style was endangering the dignity of the British School of painting. The critic for the *Literary Gazette* expressed the same fear that Turner was leading other artists astray with his disregard for chaste, subdued colouring: 'the powerful attraction of colours ... is the vice of our modern school'.<sup>91</sup> In the early decades of the nineteenth century, derogatory reviews of Turner's works alternated with those which approved of his works. In 1801, Turner was regarded by a reviewer as 'a very powerful artist', but

his desire of giving a *free touch* to the objects he represents, betrays him into *carelessness* and *obscurity* ... This negligence appear like *affectation* rather than *grandeur*, and his colouring generally exhibits a *sandy*, or *gravelly brown*, that makes his pictures ... appear as if they had been *scorched*.<sup>92</sup>

His indistinct draughtsmanship also attracted some negative comments, particularly from conservative quarters which upheld the notion that design was superior to colour. The *Examiner* said of *The unpaid bill* that the figures were wretchedly drawn, but that 'for a picture of colouring and effect it is... inestimable'.<sup>93</sup> Some reviewers even attempted to correct his practice, as the critic for *La Belle Assemblée* seemed to be doing when he wrote that

it was manifestly Mr. Turner's design to express the peculiar hue and pellucidness of objects seen through a medium of air, in other words to

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<sup>91</sup> *Literary Gazette*, 1823 (on the occasion of the opening of the Society of Water-Colour Painters exhibition).

<sup>92</sup> *Porcupine*, 1801, 'Royal Academy'.

<sup>93</sup> 'Royal Academy', *Examiner*, 15 May 1808.



express the clearness of atmosphere. To effect this purpose it was necessary to select those dark material objects which serve as a foil to aerial light and to produce atmosphere by their contrast. Mr. Turner has neglected to use these foils and has thus made a confusion between aerial light and the appropriate gloom of objects. Failing in this forcible opposition, without which a painter can never express atmosphere, the appearance of the picture is that of a mere flimsy daubing without substance or distinction, without either shape or colour. A man of Mr. Turner's experience should have understood better the principles of his art.<sup>94</sup>

However, as has been pointed out above, with the realisation that colour was the determining characteristic of the English school, and that the eminence of the latter could hinge on its uniqueness rather than on its similarities with other European schools of art, Turner was hailed as the paragon of English genius.<sup>95</sup>

Turner is perhaps the first artist in the world in this powerful and brilliant style; no man has ever thrown such masses of colour upon paper ... The art itself is par excellence English, no continental pencil can come near the force, freedom and nature of our professor, and as such ... there is patriotic spirit displayed in its patronage.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> *La Belle Assemblée*, 1810. Quoted in Butlin, Luther and Warrell, *Turner at Petworth* (Tate Gallery, 1989), p.31.

<sup>95</sup> For the characterisation of the English school as colouristic, and particularly of landscape painting as the paramount instance of English artistic genius, see Kriz, *The idea of the English landscape painter*; and 'French glitter or English nature? Representing Englishness in landscape painting, c.1790-1820, in *Art in bourgeois society*, pp 63-83. See also Kathleen Nicholson, 'Turner, poetry and the transformation of history painting', *Arts Magazine*, LVI (1982), pp. 92-7; and 'Naturalizing time / temporalizing nature: Turner's transformation of landscape painting', in *Glorious nature: British landscape painting 1750-1850*, ed. by Katharine Baetjer, pp. 31-46, for Turner's role in the elevation of landscape painting as a genre.

<sup>96</sup> 'Mr. Fawkes's pictures', *London Chronicle*, 10 April 1819, p. 347. The same review was reprinted as 'Mr Fawkes's collection of watercolour drawings' in the *Champion*, 2 May 1819, p. 284. Walter Fawkes was one of Turner's most important patrons up to his death in 1825, as well as a close friend; the painter visited his residence at Farnley Hall annually. Fawkes began purchasing works from exhibitions, but the later commissioned works acquired a personal character as the friendship between patron and painter advanced. For Turner's patrons see Gage, *J.M.W. Turner - 'a wonderful range of mind'* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), chapter 6, pp. 156-70; M. Butlin, M. Luther and I. Wallace, *Turner at Petworth: painter and patron* (London: Tate Gallery, 1989); Patrick

Some of the more enthusiastic reviews placed Turner above not only his contemporaries, but also the great masters of the past: 'In comparison with the productions of his hands', said the *Repository of the Fine Arts* in 1809, 'not all the painters of the present day but all the boasted names to which the collectors bow – sink into nothing'.<sup>97</sup> Between 1810 and 1830 he painted and exhibited some of his most successful works, such as *Dido and Aeneas* (1814) (fig. 35), *Dido building Carthage* (1815) (fig. 33), *The bay of Baiae, with Apollo and the Sibyl* (1823) (fig. 36), *Regulus* (1828), and *Ulysses deriding Polyphemus* (1829) (fig. 47), all of which garnered him a reputation for genius.

Nevertheless, from the late 1820s onwards Turner came under heavy criticism, and his painting technique was the main focus of the attacks. His first visit to Italy in 1819 had had the effect of confirming his preference for an overall light tonality, which had already earned him and those around him the epithet of 'White Painters'. His use in his works from that time of bright colours, especially yellow, which critics referred to as jaundice or yellow fever, was however based on careful consideration of chromatic contrasts and balances.<sup>98</sup> But critics such as Robert Hunt, who wrote kind reviews of Turner's works in the *Examiner* during that decade as long as the painter kept himself to the Grand Style, opposed his innovative technique. He still had followers, but the daring technical prowess of

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Youngblood, "'That house of art": Turner at Petworth', *Turner Studies*, vol. II, no. 2 (1983), pp. 16-33; and Selby Whittingham, 'A most liberal patron: Sir John Fleming Leicester Bart., first Baron de Tabley, 1762-1827', *Turner Studies*, vol. VI, no. 2 (1986).

<sup>97</sup> *Repository of the Fine Arts*, v. I, p. 490 (1809).

<sup>98</sup> For a thorough analysis of Turner's theories about and use of colour see: Gage, *Colour in Turner*.

his mature style confused most reviewers, who, like John Bull, preferred Turner's earlier, more conventional approach.

When we look back at the works of Turner of some twenty or twenty five years standing and see nature in all her truthfulness glowing under his powerful hand, it makes us as sick as she looks in his pictures now to see so needless a falling off.<sup>99</sup>

Even among those who praised Turner's efforts, the consensus seemed to be that he was still a powerful artist, but – some cautiously suggested, others openly declared – he was going too far in his experimentation with colour and matter:

It seems to us to require very little poetry on the soul, very little reflection on the nature and province of art to bring one's self to regard Mr. Turner's style of drawing as perfectly natural. His grand and general effects, in short, are true, although his details of colour are not exactly such as are every day seen.<sup>100</sup>

Perhaps the most eloquent of such opinions was the one stated by the *Tatler* in 1831, which went so far as to suggest that Turner suffered from an ophthalmic disease in order to justify his 'freaks of colour':

He is by general consent a person of eminence in his line, and in our estimation super-eminent. He has invention, power, experience, and an elevated view of his art beyond any of his contemporaries – very much beyond any English landscape painter whatever. We assert this notwithstanding his wilful, mad, inflamed pictures; notwithstanding his vain contempt for all opinion – notwithstanding, in short, his present disease (ophthalmia or calenture) which leads him into the most marvellous absurdities and audacities of colour that painter ever ventured on ...

Did the reader ever see the early pictures of Turner, or his drawings done in his best time after he had cast off the pettiness of his first style and before he commenced those freaks of colour with which he is now content to amuse the public ... If not he is not acquainted with this extraordinary

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<sup>99</sup> John Bull, 27 May 1827 (Whitley Papers, p. 1532).

<sup>100</sup> *Athenaeum*, 3 June 1829.

artist ... More sublime than Claude, less savage yet grander than Salvator Rosa; and more beautiful, if less simple in his scenes than are the vernal landscapes of Gaspar Poussin: -

'Whate'er Lorraine light touched with soft'ning hue  
Or savage Rosa dashed, or learned Poussin drew'

comes within the compass of his pencil, besides many things which those great men never attempted. Some of his landscapes force Rembrandt upon our thoughts, with no unfortunate comparison.<sup>101</sup>

The apparent lack of finish, particularly in the foregrounds, was one of the most criticised characteristics of Turner's art. When Farington saw his *Battle of Trafalgar, as seen from the mizen starboard, shrouds of the victory*, he said:

It appeared to me to be a very crude, unfinished performance, the figures miserably bad. - His pictures in general invited similar remarks, when the prices he puts upon them are considered, because much more ought to be shown to justify such demands.<sup>102</sup>

Critics seemed to amuse themselves inventing new metaphors for Turner's peculiar surfaces, from Opie's remark that the water in *Boats carrying out anchors and cables to Dutch men of war in 1665* 'looked like a turnpike road over the sea'<sup>103</sup>; to the *Sun* saying of the same picture that 'the Sea seems to have been painted with birch-broom and whitening'.<sup>104</sup> The critic for the same paper said of *Calais pier*:

The sea looks like soap and chalk ... the sky is a heap of marble mountains ... the boards of the pier are well painted; but what an inferior object is that for an artist who has bolder points in view! All the figures are flat and by

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<sup>101</sup> *Tatler*, p. 962 (1831).

<sup>102</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 3 June 1806.

<sup>103</sup> Farington, *Diary*, April 1804.

<sup>104</sup> *The Sun*, 10 May 1804.

no means enlivened by *daubs* of gaudy colour. In short this picture exhibits a waste of ability.<sup>105</sup>

The *New Monthly Magazine* said of *Cologne* and *View of the Forum Romanum* that they looked 'as if they were painted from models of the actual scene cut out of amber', and the *Morning Chronicle* likened *Jessica* to 'a lady jumping out of a mustard-pot'.<sup>106</sup> *Snow storm - steam-boat off a harbour's mouth making signals in shallow water* was famously criticised as nothing but a mass of 'soapsuds and whitewash'.<sup>107</sup> The *Athenaeum* said of the same work: 'This gentleman has, on former occasions, chosen to paint with cream, or chocolate, yolk of egg, or currant jelly, - here he uses his whole array of kitchen stuff'.<sup>108</sup>

As Sam Smiles has demonstrated, this hostile criticism of Turner's broad manner and inventive finish - or, to his critics, his lack thereof - drew a linguistic connection with the painter's behaviour. It was as if the manner in which the painting was executed was related to its author's own manners: an unpolished surface suggested to conservative connoisseurs a parallel want of social polish.<sup>109</sup>

By the decade of 1830 the criticisms were becoming almost slanderous, focusing on the most obvious aspects of Turner's works: his dazzling use of

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<sup>105</sup> The *Sun*, 1803, quoted by Finberg, *The life of J.M.W. Turner*, p. 100.

<sup>106</sup> *New Monthly Magazine*, 'Royal Academy', v. 3 (1826). *Morning Chronicle*, 3 May 1830.

<sup>107</sup> Untraced quote. Butlin and Joll, *The paintings of J.M.W. Turner*, pp. 246-7.

<sup>108</sup> *Athenaeum*, 14 May 1842.

<sup>109</sup> Smiles, "'Splashers", "Scrawlers" and "Plasterers"', pp. 5-7. In this article Smiles sketched the implications of critical hostility towards the new manner of painting, arguing that it had its origins in the blurring of ethics and aesthetics that characterised the eighteenth century. Modern art, he suggested, offered a process; loose, vigorous handling suggested change. This was worrying to connoisseurs with roots in a normative, Enlightened tradition, of which Beaumont was the prime example.

colour. Some reviewers defended his breadth of vision and originality, but the most vociferous critics believed that his talent, 'so mighty and so poetical', was running riot and beyond recall.<sup>110</sup> In 1836 Turner exhibited *Juliet and her nurse* at the Academy together with *Rome, from Mount Aventine* and *Mercury and Argus*. The first painting depicts a Venetian scene: Juliet is shown against the background of St. Mark's, an incongruity, critics hurried to point out, since she ought to be in Verona, not Venice. One of the most vicious invectives against the painting was the one published in *Blackwood's Magazine* by the classical scholar Reverend John Eagles, who called the picture:

A strange jumble - 'confusion worse confounded'. It is neither sunlight, moonlight, nor starlight, nor firelight ... Amidst so many absurdities, we scarcely stop to ask why Juliet and her nurse should be at Venice. For the scene is a composition as from models of different parts of Venice, thrown higgledy-piggledy together, streaked blue and pink and thrown into a flour tub. Poor Juliet has been stepped in treacle to make her look sweet, and we feel apprehensive lest the mealy architecture should stick to her petticoat, and flour it.

Of *Mercury and Argus* he said 'It is perfectly childish. All blood and chalk'.<sup>111</sup> This was the attack that prompted a young John Ruskin to defend Turner in a letter to *Blackwood's*, which would later evolve into his encyclopaedic *Modern Painters*.<sup>112</sup> Burd has linked Eagles's attack in 1836 with Beaumont's criticisms of two decades earlier, arguing that a bigoted and misunderstood loyalty to Reynoldsian tradition was the connexion between the two.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> 'Royal Academy', *Athenaeum*, May 1838.

<sup>111</sup> *Blackwood's Magazine*, XL, pp. 550-1. Quoted by Butlin and Joll, *The paintings of J.M.W. Turner*, pp. 215-9.

<sup>112</sup> Finberg, *The life of J.M.W. Turner*, pp. 363-4.

<sup>113</sup> Burd, 'Background to *Modern painters*', p. 254.

The antagonism between Beaumont and Turner, the clearest example of the fights between 'Black Masters' and 'White painters' of the early nineteenth century, can be read as a late manifestation of the quarrel between Ancients and Moderns that had been taking place in European art world since the Renaissance. Connoisseurs like Beaumont were essentially pessimistic that the new generation of British painters could attain the same level as the Old Masters, particularly if they, like Turner, insisted in painting in a newfangled style which forsook all that had been regarded as natural and proper in classical art. On the other hand, artists, notwithstanding their respect and admiration for their predecessors, were loath to bow to connoisseurial criteria; and felt that in their search for a pictorial language that would accommodate their changing status and ideological stance, the traditional style was not eloquent enough. The times were changing, and in art as in everything else, one can only move forwards, not go back. The pendulum was moving towards a freer handling and an interest in the material qualities of painting per se, and artists like Turner were at the vanguard of this trend.

From our late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century perspective, it is difficult to understand Beaumont's criticisms of Turner's early manner as 'white' or anti-classical. Although some of the pictures from the 1840s that we can see today hanging on the walls of the Clore Gallery often do deserve the epithet, such as *The Sun of Venice going to sea*, exhibited in 1843, or *Sunrise with sea monsters*, of circa 1845, we should not forget that most of those were either sketches or unfinished works, in a state which would be worked on and finished during the Varnishing Days at the Academy; or in any case late productions of Turner's mature and more abstract style. The works which attracted Beaumont's

ire the most, and prompted Hazlitt his evaluation of Turner's oeuvre as 'abstractions of aerial perspective ... pictures of the elements of air, earth and water ... *pictures of nothing, and very like*', were works like *Crossing the brook* or *Frosty morning* (fig. 37), which from our perspective seem to be perfectly classicist efforts to emulate the painters of the past.<sup>114</sup>

So what was it that disgusted Beaumont so much and made him see Turner's painting as radically different from that of his idols Claude and Wilson? There is no single answer to this question. As was pointed out in chapter 4.1, there might have been an element of social clash in the eagerness with which Turner appropriated the patrician idiom on Reynolds's indications, seeing it as a passport to social recognition, and in the hostility Beaumont demonstrated towards Turner. Turner's intellectual blunders - his not always accurate literary quotes, his attempts at writing poetry - indicate the breadth of his interests and the depth of his ambition to acquire a classical culture as much as his shortcomings in achieving it.<sup>115</sup> The inescapable fact that, apart from his theoretical preoccupations, Turner was an astute and successful businessman who earned his livelihood through art, could conceivably have vexed further the baronet. As an amateur painter and connoisseur, Beaumont still harked back to

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<sup>114</sup> 'The artist', wrote Hazlitt, 'delights to go back to the first chaos of the world, or to that state of things when the waters were separated from the dry land, and land from darkness, but as yet no living thing nor tree bearing fruit was seen upon the face of the earth. All is without form and void. Some one said of his landscapes that they were *pictures of nothing, and very like*'. William Hazlitt, 'On the pleasure of painting', *The Round Table* (originally published in *The Examiner*, 1816). *Complete Works*, ed. by Howe, vol. VIII, p. 14.

<sup>115</sup> For Turner's intellectual pursuits see Gage, *J.M.W. Turner - 'a wonderful range of mind'*, especially chapter 8.



the eighteenth-century ideology that proclaimed the disinterestedness of elevated art.

Turner studied assiduously the Old Masters whenever he could. His sketchbooks indicate that by the early nineteenth century he had begun to copy from Titian, Poussin, Rubens, Ruysdael, Domenichino, Vandyke, Raphael, Correggio and Rembrandt. His notes from his 1802 visit to the Louvre include a detailed description and colour analysis of Veronese's *Marriage at Cana*, although of all the Venetians he preferred Tintoretto, who seemed to offer him a solution to the problem of coordinating colour, light and shade in a satisfactory manner.<sup>116</sup> After 1829 he would show an interest in Trecento and Quattrocento painting, particularly in the way those so-called Primitives used pale but brilliant, delicately balanced masses of colour without dark shadows.<sup>117</sup>

Nevertheless, from 1800 onwards the similarities between Turner and the Old Masters he strove to emulate were mainly thematic and compositional, although like many of his contemporaries he was interested in emulating the surface appearance of painters like Rembrandt or the Venetians. His aesthetic and technical innovations, and moreover the fact that he did not seek to hide them, but rather make them the more conspicuous, identify him decidedly as a modern artist. Andrew Wilton has suggested that Turner's unusual techniques must have seemed even more shocking precisely because they were utilized in

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<sup>116</sup> Gage, *Colour in Turner*, pp. 60 and 91. Turner included his analysis of the *Marriage at Cana* in his Fifth Lecture; see Jerrold Ziff, "'Backgrounds, introduction of architecture and landscape': a lecture by J.M.W. Turner", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. XXVI, (1963), pp.124-147, n49.

<sup>117</sup> Gage, *Colour in Turner*, p. 96.

traditional academic subjects; in an eccentric like Blake, for instance, they would have been expected.<sup>118</sup>

Early in his career, Turner showed an interest in the manner of the Dutch school, particularly Rembrandt's strong treatment of chiaroscuro and his richly impasted surfaces. West admired Turner's *Bridgewater Seapiece (Dutch boats in a gale)*, saying that it was 'what Rembrandt thought of but could not do'.<sup>119</sup> His love of thick impasto can also be related with his admiration for the rich facture of Rembrandt's works. In contrast to his later practice, Turner's early works tended to have warm-coloured backgrounds, as can be seen in the darker overall hue of his paintings before 1800. This was also a characteristic of Rembrandt's style.<sup>120</sup> An example of this is *The shipwreck* (fig. 38, and detail, fig. 39), of 1805, which is redolent of other maritime compositions, such as the above mentioned *Bridgewater* or *Calais pier*. *The shipwreck* shares with them the same loose handling of the paint representing the water which was lambasted by the critics for its resemblance to any substance but water.<sup>121</sup>

Turner's style from the first two decades of the nineteenth century was usually associated with Claude. Many works, from *Festival upon the opening of the vintage at Macon*, *Apullia in search of Appulus* (fig. 25), the Carthaginian subjects –

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<sup>118</sup> Andrew Wilton, 'Painting in London in the early nineteenth century', in *London – world city, 1800-1840*, ed. by Celina Fox (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, in association with the Museum of London, 1992), pp. 167-86, p. 176.

<sup>119</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 17 April 1801. See also Michael Kitson, 'Turner and Rembrandt', *Turner Studies*, vol. VIII, no. 1 (1988), pp. 2-19.

<sup>120</sup> Max Doerner, *The materials of the artist and their use in painting, with notes on the techniques of the Old Masters* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1934), pp. 365-73.

<sup>121</sup> For Turner's Dutch style see A.G. H. Bachrach, 'Turner, Ruysdael and the Dutch', *Turner Studies*, vol. I, no. 1 (1981), pp. 19-30.

*Dido building Carthage* and the *Decline of the Carthaginian Empire* (fig 40) – were painted either as pendants or in emulation of works of the French classicist. Other painters he sought to emulate were Poussin (in *The fifth plague of Egypt*), Titian (*Holy Family* and *Venus and Adonis*) and Watteau (*Watteau study by Fresnoy's rules*), as well as British painters such as Wilson, Hogarth, and for a brief period, Gainsborough; Reynolds was, together with Girtin, the only painter Turner explicitly mentioned.<sup>122</sup>

Despite his links with the Old Masters, Turner's technique was certainly novel and idiosyncratic. Gage argues that he might have learnt it from Louthembourg, who was regarded as one of the soundest technicians of his time. However, over time his technique tended to be as eclectic as Reynolds's, since he would apply any combination of painting medium and pigments in order to attain beautiful visual effects, however short-lived.<sup>123</sup>

It is difficult to know what materials Turner used, for he kept few technical notes and did not like being observed at work; the virtuoso displays on varnishing days were most probably intended to be seen as conjuring tricks, rather than practical demonstrations of his technique (fig. 41). However, they were a rich source of information on his manner.<sup>124</sup> Sir John Gilbert saw Turner working on *Regulus* at the Academy, and reported thus on his practice:

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<sup>122</sup> Gage, *J.M.W. Turner – 'a wonderful range of mind'*, chapter 4; see also Andrew Wilton, 'Past and present: Turner and his brother artists', in *Turner*, ed. by Michael Lloyd (exh. cat.) (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 1996), pp. 13-35.

<sup>123</sup> Gage, *Colour in Turner*, p. 29; and Townsend, 'Painting techniques and materials of Turner and other British artists 1775-1875', p. 183.

<sup>124</sup> Townsend, *Turner's painting techniques*, p. 12. For accounts of Turner's painting during the Varnishing Days see Butlin and Joll, *The paintings of J.M.W. Turner*, entries for *Regulus*  
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He was absorbed in his work, did not look about him, but kept on scumbling a lot of white into his picture – nearly all over it ... The picture was a mass of red and yellow of all varieties. Every object was in this fiery state. He had a large palette, nothing in it but a huge lump of flake-white; he had two or three biggish hog tools to work with, and with these he was driving the white into all the hollows, and every part of the surface ... The sun, as I have said, was in the centre; from it were drawn – ruled – lines to mark the rays; these lines were rather strongly marked, I suppose to guide his eye. The picture gradually became wonderfully effective, just the effect of brilliant sunlight absorbing everything and throwing a misty haze over every object. Standing sideways of the canvas, I saw that the sun was a lump of white standing out like the boss on a shield.<sup>125</sup>

Most of the knowledge we have today about his materials and techniques, however, is very recent: it dates from the twentieth century and was attained only through technological advances in methods of examination and analysis.<sup>126</sup>

It is quite certain that Turner based part of his method for painting in oils in his own watercolour practice, the use of transparent washes of colour over a white absorbent ground being the most obvious borrowing. Other similarities between the two techniques were the mixing of layers of brown and blue to achieve an optical green, and the arrangement of the general composition of a picture using thinly applied washes of colour in bold blocks, rather than relying on detailed pencil sketches or underdrawings. This technique would eventually evolve into abstract “colour beginnings” that would dispense with pencil sketch lines altogether.<sup>127</sup> Farington said of Turner that he had ‘no settled process but

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(cat. no. 294), *Helvoetsluys* (cat. no. 345) and *The burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons* (cat. no. 359).

<sup>125</sup> Lionel Cust, ‘The portraits of J.M.W. Turner’, *Magazine of Art*, 1895, pp. 248-9.

<sup>126</sup> See Stephen Hackney and Joyce Townsend, ‘Methods of examination and analysis’, in *Paint and purpose*, pp. 17-24.

<sup>127</sup> Townsend, *Turner’s painting techniques*, pp. 27, 29-30, 37.

drives the colours about till he has expressed the idea in his mind'.<sup>128</sup> This gives us an idea of his free handling technique, much looser than the traditional tinting of drawings with watercolour washes which he must have learnt during his apprenticeship with Dr. Monro.<sup>129</sup>

Turner's method of blocking-in in oils consisted of laying out the general composition with areas of colour using lean paint (thinned with a non-oily solvent such as turpentine). The colours used for blocking-in would be related to the final colour of said areas, which would take into account the interactions of reflected lights and colours from adjacent areas; they would not be patches of local colour that would be later modulated with lighter and darker paint, as was the way with dead colouring, the traditional technique since the seventeenth century.<sup>130</sup>

Figure 42 shows one such composition, *Shipping at the mouth of the Thames*. The colours in the sketch, which would serve as the base for the finished painting, were quite limited: blue for the sky, sea and the sailors' clothes; yellowish ochre for the boats, waves and horizon; mixes of yellow ochre with white for the cream sails, umber and ochre for darker areas of the boats; and

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<sup>128</sup> Farington, *Diary*, 16 November 1799.

<sup>129</sup> For Turner's early work see Eric Shanes, *J.M.W. Turner: the foundations of genius* (exh. cat.) (Cincinnati, Ohio: Taft Museum, 1986). Other works dealing with his use of watercolour are: W.G. Rawlinson, A.J. Finberg and C. Holroyd, *The watercolours of J.M.W. Turner* (London, 1909); Eric Shanes, *Turner's watercolour explorations* (exh. cat.) (London: Tate Gallery, 1997), and *Turner: the great watercolours* (exh. cat.) (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2000).

<sup>130</sup> Jones, 'The artist's training and techniques', pp. 24-5. Dead colouring is an initial painted design, usually executed in monochrome, that indicates areas of light and shade. The main body of the painting would be done on top of this design, using darker and lighter variations of base colours.

other pigments such as reddish ochre for parts of the sailors and dark ochre for the larger ship. Those colours were washed in thinly, with the different areas of pigment interlocking but not overlapping. Then thicker, more opaque paint, in most instances the same pigments from the blocking-in mixed with white, was applied to reinforce areas such as the cream sails, the waves, the larger ship and the blue and white sky. The rest of the sky has a thin scumble of black pigment in white. The composition would have been finished following those blocks of colour as guidelines, either in impasted, opaque swathes, or in successive thin glaze-like layers.<sup>131</sup>

In most landscapes, the white ground was reserved in the initial stages for the brightest lights in the painting, usually rendered pale yellow in the finished work by means of a scumble or glaze of yellow pigment over the blank ground. Other parts of the sky, coloured blue or white with relatively opaque paint, could be glazed down if it resulted too bright. The area allotted to the ground would be washed first with a thin coat of brown pigment, over which successive layers of paint, usually the same pigment as that in the initial lay-in, or mixed with lead white would be gradually built up. The structure of these layers increasingly got more complex from 1810 onwards, and not always followed the traditional rule of fat over lean, resulting in defective cohesion between strata and flaking off.

Turner's rapidity and often unsound methods were known to have caused premature deterioration in many instances. Constable wrote in 1836 that 'some of Turner's best work is swept up off the carpet every morning by the maid and

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<sup>131</sup> Townsend, *Turner's painting techniques*, pp. 28-9.

put in the dust-hole'.<sup>132</sup> Some anecdotes speak of Turner's Reynoldsian disregard for the life of his paintings. Ruskin recorded that a flake of paint 'large as a fourpenny piece' fell off the sky in *Crossing the brook*; when asked how he could look at the picture and see it so injured, the painter replied: 'What does it matter? The only use of the thing is to recall the impression'.<sup>133</sup>

*Crossing the brook* (fig. 27), the painting dismissed by Beaumont for its 'peagreen insipidity', is certainly very green, even today; probably because it was painted using light green colours, especially in the trees of the middle ground, which have not turned brown, as has happened in other works. The sky and background were done with creamy thick paint, with medium impasto that looks flattened now due to lining. The foreground and the trees have thicker impasto.<sup>134</sup>

The technique of reserving the white priming for the luminous areas in the sky can be seen clearly in this picture. The tall trees on the left were painted over the colour beginning layer, so that the part of the trees that extends above the line of the horizon looks lighter than the bottom half, which is painted over the landscape area. This gives a special luminosity to the treetops, which look as if light is shining through the leaves.

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<sup>132</sup> Letter from Constable to Leslie, 1836. *John Constable's correspondence*, ed. by R.B. Beckett (Suffolk Records Society), vol. III, p. 143.

<sup>133</sup> Letter from Ruskin to Charles E. Norton, 7 August 1870. Quoted by Butlin and Joll, *The paintings of J.M.W. Turner*, p. 94. Reynolds shrugged off damage of this kind suffered by his *Nativity*, saying that 'the falling off of the colour must be occasioned by the shaking in the carriage, but as it is now in a state of rest, it will remain as it is forever; what it wants, I will next year go on purpose to mend it'. Quoted by Talley, "'All good pictures crack": Sir Joshua Reynolds's practice and studio', pp. 55-6.

<sup>134</sup> Tate Gallery conservation dossier N00497. Tate Britain, Conservation Department.

Trees, foliage and all the foreground in general in Turner's paintings were made with medium-rich layers, ranging from translucent glazes and scumbles to thin swathes, with different amount of pigment accounting for different opacities; the less pigment in relation to the amount of medium, the more transparent the layer, and consequently the more affected it was by the colour underneath.<sup>135</sup>

The use of layers of modified oil medium (paint vehicle that mixes oil, generally linseed, with other substances that modify its transparency and general appearance, usually wax, megilp or resins) over pure oil medium layers was characteristic of Turner's later technique. He was not unusual in his choice of mediums; many other artists did not limit themselves to pure linseed oil paint, and added to it megilp, mastic and copal varnishes, Canada and copaiba balsams, Venice turpentine, asphaltum, beeswax, gums, size glue, egg, and in some cases even soap. These additives modified the consistency, handling, transparency and drying properties of paint. Wilkie used asphaltum, wax and megilp; Haydon, which disliked the practice, complained that his friend was 'full of wax and Lord knows what ... he has almost tempted me to quack as well as himself, with his wax and megilp'.<sup>136</sup> Callcott was also said to have experimented with unusual mixtures.<sup>137</sup> Modified oil mediums can yellow and darken as much as pure oil paint; darkened and yellowed glazes obscure further shady areas,

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<sup>135</sup> Townsend, 'Turner's oil paintings: changes in appearance', p. 57.

<sup>136</sup> Quoted by Southall, 'Turner's contemporaries: their materials, practices and opinions', p. 16.

<sup>137</sup> See references to Callcott's journal for 1805 in David B. Brown, 'Augustus Wall Callcott RA, 1779-1844' (PhD thesis, University of Leicester, 1978).



make blue look dark green and green look brown.<sup>138</sup> *The Bay of Baiae, with Apollo and the Sibyl* (fig. 36), which was decried when first exhibited in 1823 as 'meretricious attempt at effect', is an example of landscape that looks brown because of this darkening process.<sup>139</sup> Roughly a decade afterwards it was already reported to have mellowed<sup>140</sup>; and after Turner's death, Ruskin and the Redgraves mourned the fading of a large part of its glazes.<sup>141</sup>

An early instance of Turner's personal style of handling which was regarded as unusual and daring at the time it was first exhibited was *The fall of an avalanche in the Grisons* of 1810 (fig. 43). The composition was laid in with broad swathes of dark grey thinned oil paint, and built on with many glazes. The area between the falling rock and the cottage it is crushing (fig. 44) shows a blue-grey glaze brushed over a textured layer of white paint depicting the snow; the rock, on the other hand, was modelled applying thick caramel-coloured impasto with a palette knife over a thinner umber glaze.<sup>142</sup> On the whole, the material is treated almost sculpturally, anticipating much later works in its near abstraction.

A similar focus on texture can be found in an unfinished work of the 1830s, *Waves breaking against the wind* (fig. 45), which not having been exhibited was never varnished during the painter's lifetime, and is therefore interesting because it has preserved most of its original effects. Over an initial blocking-in of

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<sup>138</sup> Townsend, 'Turner's oil paintings: changes in appearance', p. 57.

<sup>139</sup> *The British Press*, 5 May 1823.

<sup>140</sup> *The Spectator*, 26 April 1835.

<sup>141</sup> Tate Gallery conservation dossier N00505. Tate Britain, Conservation Department.

<sup>142</sup> Tate Gallery conservation dossier N00489. Tate Britain, Conservation Department.

warm and cool greys that established the general composition, several consecutive layers of increasingly thick paint were scumbled on to form the waves, the shore and the sky. The relief of the impasto was used in several areas to suggest different effects: in the waves, a brush loaded with dark grey paint was swept across a textured surface so that only the higher ridges of the underlying lighter grey were covered. A detail of the shore shows a thick orange-yellow layer scumbled over purplish brown (fig 46).<sup>143</sup>

Turner's mature style can be exemplified by *Ulysses deriding Polyphemus* (fig. 47), exhibited in 1829 to mixed reviews; some critics resorted to the by then stock refrain of 'colouring run mad' and 'Genius that outrages Nature', whereas others acknowledged that

The colouring may be violent, and 'overstep the modesty of nature' ... but the poetical feeling which pervades the whole composition, the ease and boldness with which the effects are produced, the hardihood which dared to make the attempt, - extort our wonder and applause.<sup>144</sup>

The Redgraves rated it very highly as 'one of Turner's most poetical works', their interest in technique indulged by the lavish facture of the painting:

It is impossible to go beyond the power of colour here achieved; it is on the very verge of extravagance, but yet is in no way gaudy ... The mere handling is a marvel, the ease and freedom of the work, the thick impasto of tints that are heaped on the upper sky, making the lower parts recede in true perspective to the rising sun; the grand way in which the vessel moves

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<sup>143</sup> Townsend, *Turner's painting techniques*, p. 57. Tate Gallery conservation dossier N02881. Tate Britain, Conservation Department.

<sup>144</sup> 'Royal Academy', *The Morning Herald*, 6 May 1829; 'Royal Academy', *The Morning Post*, 29 May 1829; *Athenaeum*, 13 May 1829.

over the 'watery floor', the dream-like poetry of the whole, make up a picture without a parallel in the world of art.<sup>145</sup>

Despite the classical theme, the colouring is decidedly unclassical, not only because of its brightness: it does not follow a formal structure in the shape of a gradation from dark foreground to light, hazy background to suggest space and distance. Here, the middle ground was painted the darkest (Polyphemus's cave, the rocky eyot near the centre and the ships to the right of the canvas), whereas reflected light from the rising sun made its way to the foreground, spilling over the sea and reflecting on the prow and main sail of Ulysses's ship. The rocky cliffs were handled quite smoothly, making the detailed ship stand out; however, the area with thicker impasto is the bright sunrise. The sky at the horizon was underpainted in medium blue, with darker horizontal streaks of blue. The sun is a round patch of pure white impasto, and the sky around it was given the appearance of broken cloud through overlaying of a range of pale cream and yellow ochre in texturised layers. The sail of the boat on the horizon was brushed on fluidly with medium-rich dark umber paint over the rough impasto of the sky, so that the latter's texture, faintly visible, suggested the translucence of sail cloth as opposed to more solid matter (fig. 48).

Turner not only strived to compare himself with the Old Masters; he knew that his art did not exist in a vacuum, and was also keen to engage in competition, friendly or otherwise, with his contemporaries. His rivalry with Constable can be exemplified by a famous anecdote which relates to Turner's stroke of genius when finishing *Helvoetsluys*:

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<sup>145</sup> Redgrave, *A century of British painters*, p. 263.

In 1832 when Constable exhibited his *Opening of Waterloo Bridge* it was placed in the school of painting – one of the small rooms at Somerset House. A sea-piece by Turner was next to it – a grey picture, beautiful and true, but with no positive colour in any part of it. Constable's Waterloo seemed as if painted with liquid gold and silver, and Turner came several times into the room as he was heightening with vermilion and lake the decorations of the city barges. Turner stood behind him, looking from the *Waterloo* to his own picture, and at last brought his palette from the great room where he was touching another picture. And putting a round daub of red lead, somewhat bigger than a shilling on his grey sea, went away without saying a word. The intensity of the red lead, made more vivid by the coolness of his picture, caused even the vermilion and lake of Constable to look weak. 'He has been here', said Constable, 'and fired a gun' ... The great man did not come into the room for a day and a half; and then, in the last moments that were allowed for varnishing, he glazed the scarlet seal he had put on his picture, and shaped it into a buoy.<sup>146</sup>

This was a clear example of Turner's strategy to let his paintings speak, rather than to undertake a written or spoken discussion of his ideas on art. The Redgraves, among others, wrote of his enigmatic, implicit way of giving advice, 'so mysteriously given or expressed that it was hard to comprehend'.<sup>147</sup>

Turner also painted works in competition with Wilkie, to prove that he could master the Scottish painter's reinterpretation of Dutch genre (*Country blacksmith disputing with the butcher upon the price of iron, and the price charged to the butcher for shoeing his poney*, 1807); with Clarkson Stanfield, in the form of an exercise in the style of Canaletto (*Bridge of Sighs, Ducal Palace and Custom-house, Venice: Canaletti painting*, 1833); and Thomas Stothard, who was known for his

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<sup>146</sup> C.R. Leslie, *Autobiographical recollections*, 2 vols. (London, 1860), vol. I, pp. 202-3. See Michael Rosenthal, 'Turner fires a gun', in *Art on the line: the Royal Academy exhibitions at Somerset House, 1780-1836*, pp. 144-55.

<sup>147</sup> Redgrave, *A century of British painters*, p. 257. For Turner's teaching see: Maurice Davies, *Turner as professor: the artist and linear perspective* (exh. cat.) (London: Tate Gallery, 1992); William Whitley, 'Turner as a lecturer', *Burlington Magazine*, vol. XXII (1913). It is a topic generally covered by his biographies, particularly Gage, *J.M.W. Turner; 'A wonderful range of mind'*; and Andrew Wilton, *Turner in his time* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987).

Watteauesque pastiches (*What you will!*, 1821, and *Bocaccio relating the tale of the birdcage*, 1828). Also, in several instances he modified more or less subtly his pictures during Varnishing Days in accordance with works hung nearby, in order to make his stand out, as the above anecdote regarding *Helvoetsluys* demonstrated.<sup>148</sup> Of all the artists in his circle, however, the competition was closest with his friend and fellow Academician Callcott, who from 1806, when Beaumont lumped him and Turner together with the label of 'White Painters', was regarded by most critics as Turner's disciple. However, their relationship was not just one of master and imitator; Callcott often seemed to anticipate Turner's interests, and in one documented instance proved to be the model for the older painter, with his *Entrance to the Pool of London*, painted in 1815. Turner's *Dort, or Dordrecht, packet boat from Rotterdam becalmed*, exhibited in 1818, was widely recognised to have been inspired by Callcott's *Pool of London*.<sup>149</sup> In 1816 the critic for the *Champion* believed that 'Mr. Turner may now take useful lessons from Mr. Callcott, instead of Mr. Callcott from Mr. Turner'; and as late as 1832, when the painting styles of the two artists had diverged, Turner was advised to look at Claude and Callcott for 'truth and purity in landscape'.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Rosenthal, 'Turner fires a gun', pp. 147-8. See also Wilton, 'Past and present: Turner and his brother artists'. For Turner and Wilkie see Pomeroy, 'Collecting the past to create a future: the Old Masters, artists and patrons in early nineteenth century England', pp. 237-8; McCoubrey, 'War and peace in 1842: Turner, Haydon and Wilkie'; and Arthur S. Marks, 'Rivalry at the Royal Academy: Wilkie, Turner and Bird', *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. XX (Fall 1981), pp. 333-362. For Turner and Stanfield, see Wilton, *Turner in his time*, p. 149; and Butlin and Joll, *The paintings of J.M.W. Turner*, entry no. 349.

<sup>149</sup> David Brown, 'Turner and Callcott', *Turner Studies*, vol. I, no. 1, p. 48. See also the catalogue for the 1981 exhibition, *Augustus Wall Callcott* (London: Tate Gallery, 1981); and Kriz, *The idea of the English landscape painter*, pp. 116-9. For Beaumont, Callcott and Turner see Owen and Brown, *Collector of genius*, chapter XI.

<sup>150</sup> *Champion*, 12 May 1816; *Morning Post*, 29 May 1832.

We can see many formal similarities between Callcott and Turner's work in a painting by the former, *Cow Boys* (fig. 50), exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1807 to critical acclaim: the *Star* called it 'one of Mr. Callcott's best pictures, because in it he has trusted more to his own observance of English Nature than to Foreign Works of Art', and Thomson told Farington that it had better colour than Turner's *Sun rising through vapour*.<sup>151</sup> It has a thin white ground, and the paint was applied equally thinly, building up the composition in glazes with opaque highlights, much in the same way as contemporary Turner's works. Some lighter areas in the middle ground, such as the bushes on the right-hand hill, were done with a light scumble on top of a darker layer. The farthest mountain range, painted in pinkish beige, consists of a light-toned scumble over a darker buff area. The brushwork is generally solid, confident but not overtly ostentatious. Its texture can be seen clearly in the sky, the more Turner-esque part, which again is bold and interesting, never dull or repetitive as a perfectly smooth gradation might have been. The blue sky patches were painted first, then scumbled over in white around the edges, giving relief to the clouds. The darker clouds consist of a darker, medium-rich glaze on a lighter, textured paint layer. One gets the impression, as often is with Turner's paintings, that Callcott must have enjoyed painting all the tonal transitions in the sky. By comparison, the foreground is dark and rather dull, perhaps due to the darkened varnish layer. Overall, the picture speaks of a confident painter, economical and efficient, and yet virtuosistic without being showy. The successive diagonals in the

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<sup>151</sup> 'Royal Academy - Exhibition, 1807', *Star*, 22 May 1807; Farington, *Diary*, 31 March and 7 April 1807.

composition give it movement, and yet the general atmosphere is one of serenity, a characteristic of most of Callcott's *oeuvre*.

In any study of Turner's technique and its relevance to the comments it elicited from critics and connoisseurs, it necessarily has to be borne in mind that his paintings are today two centuries old, and have generally mellowed with time. The conservation reports prove that most of his paintings have faded, darkened or become altered to some extent; brilliant as they seem now, they must have been much brighter and colourful in their prime. Ruskin mentioned in more than one occasion the fact that Turner's paintings deteriorated even during his lifetime, and lamented the disappearance of many subtle effects:

The fates by which Turner's later pictures perish are as various as they are cruel; and the greater number, whatever care be taken of them, fade into strange consumption and pallid shadowing of their former selves. Their effects were either attained by so light glazing of one colour over another, that the upper colour, in a year or two, sank entirely into its ground, and was seen no more; or else, by the stirring and kneading together of colours chemically discordant, which gathered into angry spots; or else, by laying on liquid tints with too much vehicle in them, which cracked as they dried; or solid tints, with too little vehicle in them, which dried into powder and fell off; or painting the whole on an ill-prepared canvas, from which the picture peeled like the bark from a birch-tree; or using a wrong white, which turned black; or a wrong red, which turned grey; or a wrong yellow, which turned brown. But, one way or another, all but eight or ten of his later pictures have gone to pieces, or worse than pieces – ghosts, which are supposed to be representations of their living presence.<sup>152</sup>

Therefore, when we try and evaluate contemporary reviews and criticism we must aware that we are not seeing Turner's paintings in the same state that

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<sup>152</sup> J. Ruskin, 'Notes on the Turner Gallery at Marlborough House 1856', 1857. *The complete works of John Ruskin* (library edn.), ed. by E.T. Cook and A. Wedderburn. 39 vols. (London: George Allen, 1903-1912), vol. XIII, pp. 140-1.

he exhibited them.<sup>153</sup> If they look dazzling, sumptuous and colourful today, we can only imagine what they must have looked like to his contemporaries. Their facture was quite unique, as both critics and supporters acknowledged. One could stand in front of a painting by Turner for hours, studying the myriad nooks and crannies, blobs, capricious shapes that paint adopted, moulded by brush and palette knife, and sometimes by the painter's fingers, and marvel at the effect they created when viewed at a distance. It is a very different experience from scrutinizing the minute details in a painting by Wilkie; at close range, Turner's shapes are abstract, they are not made to represent reality in as literal a manner as possible, but to suggest it, so that a conscious interpretative effort is required from the viewer.

In the light of Turner's linguistic shortcomings – both written and spoken, as the audience of his lectures could attest to – one has to wonder whether he was not using his painting as a language. A rich, expressive language which allowed him to assert in no uncertain terms his superiority, and that of his fellow painters, over those who, without possessing command of the language of art, dared to promote their own authority in that field: the connoisseurs.

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<sup>153</sup> See Townsend, 'Turner's oil paintings: changes in appearance', in *Appearance, opinion, change: evaluating the look of paintings*, pp. 53-61, for reasons for the alterations in the aspect of Turner's works.



## Conclusions: Technique as a dialectic tool

The attitude towards methods and materials of Turner and his circle – the ‘White Painters’ – was indicative of the tensions and contradictions both within the Royal Academy and outside it that made the English art world of the early nineteenth century such a dynamic entity. The interest in mixing the lowly practice of watercolour with more elevated academically oil painting particularly shows a willingness to break down the hierarchical barriers between techniques which were as rigid as those between the different genres. The capacity of landscape painting, previously reserved for history painting, to express elevated feelings has been acknowledged by authors such as Kay Dian Kriz, Kathleen Nicholson and Michael Rosenthal; an analogy can be traced between this subversion of academic categories and the use of a technique traditionally regarded as inferior in an elevated context. Besides, much in the same way as certain forms of landscape painting are eloquent about the relations between social classes and the land depicted (since topographical landscapes are but portraits of property), as John Barrell and David Solkin among others have demonstrated, painterly technique can shed light on an artist’s ideological stance.

Rosenthal has drawn attention to Gainsborough’s disregard for the propriety of media, exemplified in the drawings in imitation of oil paintings that he exhibited at the Academy in 1772; his use of very liquid, thinned oil medium, which behaves more like watercolour than pure oil paint, is another instance of his taste for experimentation and for techniques that did not fit squarely in the traditional

categories.<sup>1</sup> However, Gainsborough's ambivalent attitude towards the Academy might possibly makes us wonder whether this particular use of technique was not a direct challenge to academic authority; whereas in Turner's case, the blurring of media and techniques took a different approach, and realised that it might work in favour of the artists' arguments. Wilton has argued that by painting highly finished watercolours, in many cases making them look like oils, and exhibiting them at the Royal Academy, Turner was part - if not the most conspicuous example - of a trend that sought to prove that great art did not have to be constrained by the traditional pigeonholes of technique and genre. In the early nineteenth century, thanks mostly to the efforts of organisations such as the Society of Painters in Water-Colours, established in 1804, watercolour painting acquired a more professional status, as opposed to its earlier classification as a technique appropriate for amateurs only.<sup>2</sup> However, watercolour painting retained its characteristic spontaneity, and it is in that regard that its rise can be read as indicative of the new freedom of the artist to push to the forefront the expression of his own individuality in his art.

As Kriz maintains, painterly techniques, namely the use of high-key colour and other visual effects which accurately depict particular weather and light, were what prompted contemporary critics to identify the works with the painters: this kind of

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<sup>1</sup> Rosenthal, *The art of Thomas Gainsborough: 'a little business for the Eye'*, pp. 249-58. For his painting techniques see also Rica Jones and Martin Postle, 'Gainsborough in his painting room', in *Gainsborough* (exh. cat.), ed. by Michael Rosenthal and Martin Myrone (London: Tate Publishing, 2002), pp. 26-39. Gainsborough's daughter Margaret recalled how 'his colours were very liquid, and if he did not hold the palette right would run over'. John Hayes, *Gainsborough: paintings and drawings* (London, 1975), p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> Wilton, 'Painting in London in the early nineteenth century', pp. 170-1. See also Andrew Wilton and Anne Lyles, *The great age of British watercolour, 1750-1880* (exh. cat.) (London and Munich: Royal Academy of Arts, 1993); and Jane Bayard, *Works of splendor and imagination: the exhibition watercolour 1770-1870* (exh. cat.) (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 1981)

painting style is highly idiosyncratic, whereas a polished finish is harder to identify. As we have seen, history painting followed that convention, according to which the high polish of academic finish, which obeys very strict rules regarding size of brushwork and surface texture, erased personal manner and materiality in order to let the spectator concentrate on the elevated idea put forward by the painting.<sup>3</sup>

Conversely, there is a *joie de peindre* in Turner's works that negates the self-effacing work of academic painting, where all evidence of craftsmanship is painstakingly erased. He revelled in technique, experimented with it, invested it with expression and, aware that he owed much of his reputation – and later in his career, his notoriety – to his technical mastery, he made a conscious display of it at the Academy Varnishing Days. He elevated the material province of art above drudgery, and gave it a magical character that echoed that enjoyed by the Venetians. Public and critics read in it, not only in the subject matter of his pictures, values of imagination and nationalistic pride: Turner was hailed as a uniquely English genius on the strength of the capacity of his idiosyncratic handling and colouring to convey an idea of Englishness.

My own study of paintings by Turner, his contemporaries and some of the Old Masters he emulated has yielded the following conclusions: firstly, that Turner and his followers, such as Callcott, did experiment with technique more than other painters, and that Turner was the most adventurous of the group; Wilkie, for instance, showed a far more traditional manner, which can be partly imputed to Beaumont's tutelage. Secondly, although it seems at first that Beaumont's criticisms

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<sup>3</sup> Kriz, *The idea of the English landscape painter*, pp. 5-6.

were unfounded (I found it difficult at the outset to see what was so objectionable about Turner's Claudean pictures to the baronet, who by all rights ought to have been delighted that the English School had produced a painter who could be rightly compared with Claude), examination of the conservation reports and of the paintings themselves reveals that Turner's paintings have certainly mellowed in their two hundred years of existence. They had done so already by the first third of the twentieth century: Finberg wrote that the descriptive terms in contemporary critical remarks 'have a distinct historical interest, for it is extremely difficult to discover what pictures that were painted more than a hundred years ago looked like when they were first painted; the action of time, and, still more, the activities and skill of restorers and cleaners, tend to obscure individual peculiarities of handling, impasto and tone, and to reduce them all to the same dead level of "old masterish" obscurity and smoothness'.<sup>4</sup> Turner's paintings *were* shockingly bright in his time.

This brings us to an interesting question. Was Turner aware of this irony, and knew that he was leaving works that to future generations would look far more similar to the Old Masters that he aspired to emulate than they did during his lifetime? Some of his comments regarding his lack of concern for the preservation of the appearance of his pictures seem to hint at this. On the other hand, his careless experimentation betrayed a mind focused on the present; he cared most about the impression caused by the pictorial vision on the mind of the spectator. As an eminent painter and Academician, aware of his duty to pass on to his contemporaries and to posterity a series of ideas and values, he entrusted the

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<sup>4</sup> Finberg, *Life of Turner*, p. 126.

implicit message that artists are the ultimate authority in art and dictate the rules, and critics and connoisseurs can only follow, to what he knew was his most eloquent language: his painting technique.

Technique is a dialectic tool: it separates the artist from those who are not, defining an artist as someone who can use technique as opposed to those who theorise about art. A true artist became someone who, rather than being able to convey a complex moral or metaphysical idea through their work, as had been the convention until the late eighteenth century, was a good mechanic who knew how to pummel and ply his materials into the result he wanted without hiding the effort involved, but rather taking pride in it. John Barrell has argued that the theory of painting can be politic; that the theorisation that underlines and regulates artistic practice can, and in fact does, have political implications, and that there is a constant cross-fertilization between the fields of socio-politics and culture. I have examined a place and period where the prominence of theory gave way to practice. As Richard Payne Knight had said, painters had to paint. He thought he was relegating them to the role of mere mechanics, but he did not realise the expressive potential of a technique-conscious painting manner such as Turner's.

Artists proved that there was something that eluded connoisseurs, something that only another artist could understand; a language which could convey their awareness of their own importance and abilities. Painting technique began to be conspicuous, not hidden away in an attempt to bolster the ideas and therefore the liberal status of art. When artists stopped trying to prove that they could be at least as good as connoisseurs, they started cultivating that which made them unique: their own practice, and the delight in their materials and techniques. Decades later

this would be known as “art for art’s sake”, and it is one of the gauges of modernity. Turner and his fellow artists at the Royal Academy were, in that regard, the Moderns prevailing over the Ancients.

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Fig. 1. P. Martini after H. Ramberg, *The exhibition of the Royal Academy in Somerset House in 1787*. 1787. Engraving.

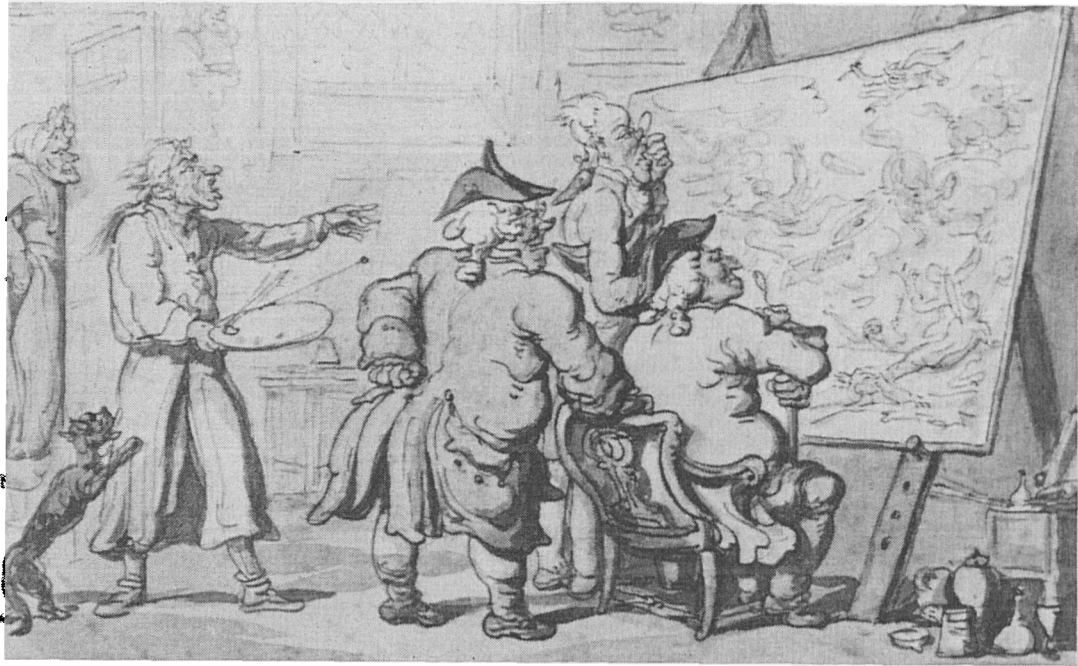


Fig. 2. Thomas Rowlandson, *Connoisseurs in the studio*. c.1800. Pen and watercolour over pencil.

The connoisseurs are characteristically shown studying the picture closely, a reference to both their taste for minute detail and their figurative shortsightedness.



Fig. 3. Richard Cosway, *Charles Townley with a group of connoisseurs*. 1771-5. Oil on canvas.

While the picture is not actually an exaggerated caricature, it is not the depiction of learned gentlemen cultivating their higher mental faculties either, as can be seen from the lecherous attitudes of some of the characters towards the nude female torsos on the right.



Fig. 4. William Hogarth, *Time smoking a picture*. March 1761. Etching and mezzotint.

Time is depicted here covering a painting in patina: smoke, scratches from its scythe, and a large amount of varnish, as indicated by the size of the pot which contains it.





*Could new dumb Faustus, to reform the Age,  
 Conjure up Shakespear's or Ben Johnson's Ghost,  
 They'd blush for shame, to see the English Stage  
 Debauch'd by foolries, at so great a cost.*

*What would their Muses say? should they behold  
 Monsters and Masquerades, where usefull Plays  
 Adorn'd the fruitfull Theatre of old,  
 And Rival Wits contended for the Bays.*

*Price 1 Shilling. 1724*

Fig. 6. William Hogarth, *Masquerades and operas* ('the bad taste of the town'). February 1723-4. Etching, first state.





Fig. 7. William Angus after Daniel Dodd, *Representation of the exhibition of paintings, at Somerset House*. 1784. Engraving.



Fig. 8. Johann Zoffany, *The Academicians of the Royal Academy*. 1771-2. Oil on canvas.



Fig. 9. Henry Singleton, *The Royal Academicians assembled in their Council Chamber, Somerset House, to adjudge the medals to the successful students in Painting, Sculpture, Architecture and Drawing*. 1795. Oil on canvas.



Fig. 10. Joshua Reynolds, *Self portrait in Oxford academic robes*. 1773. Oil on panel. Reynolds depicts himself as a learned gentleman, in a pose consciously evocative of Rembrandt's self-portraits, accompanied by a bust of Michelangelo.



Fig. 11. Benjamin West, *Self-portrait*. 1792. Oil on panel.

As Reynolds had done in his own *Self-portrait* (fig. 10), West included in this painting all the accoutrements of the liberal painter in the highest genre: references to sculpture and literature in the form of books and antique busts.

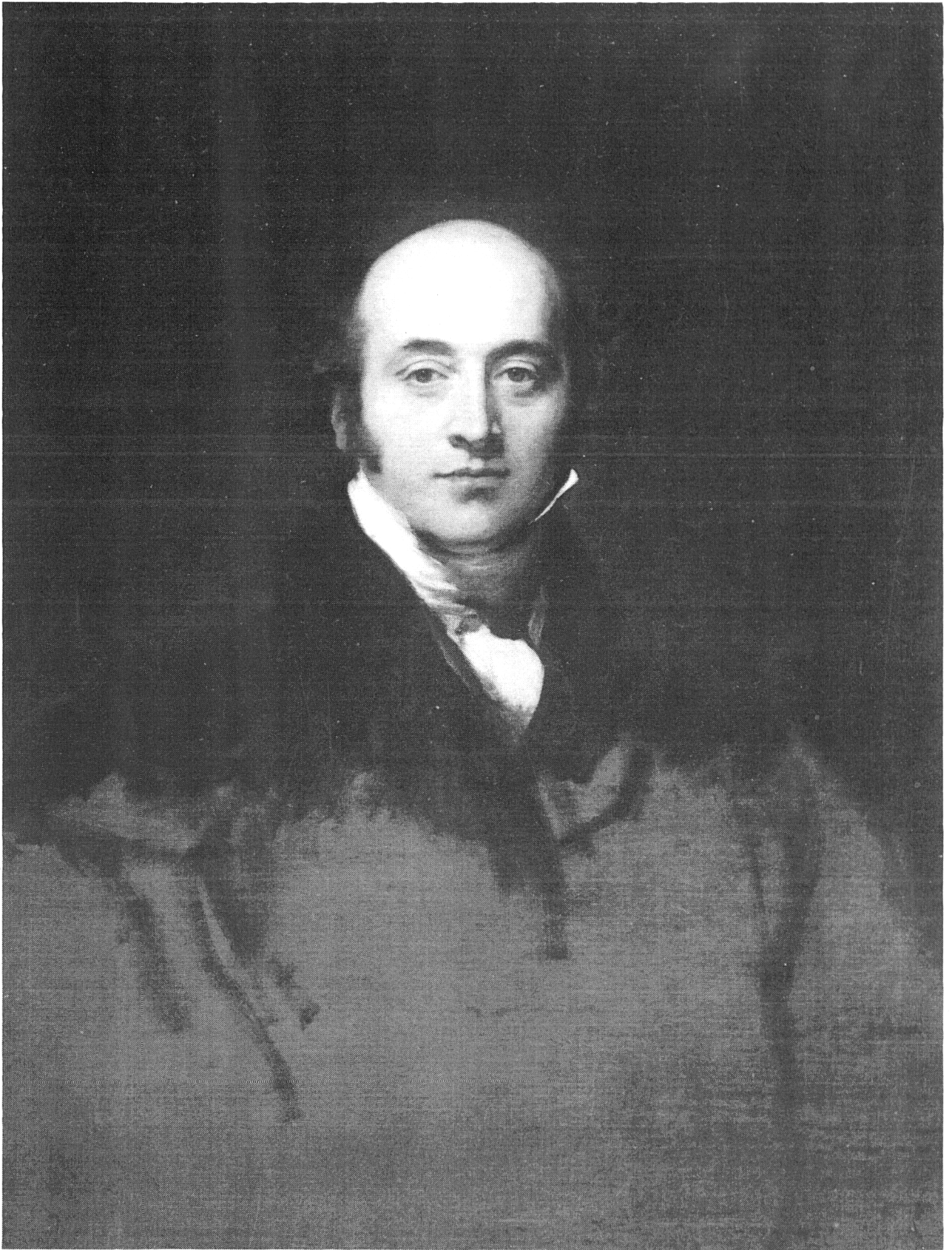


Fig. 12. Thomas Lawrence, *Self-portrait*. c1825. Oil on canvas.

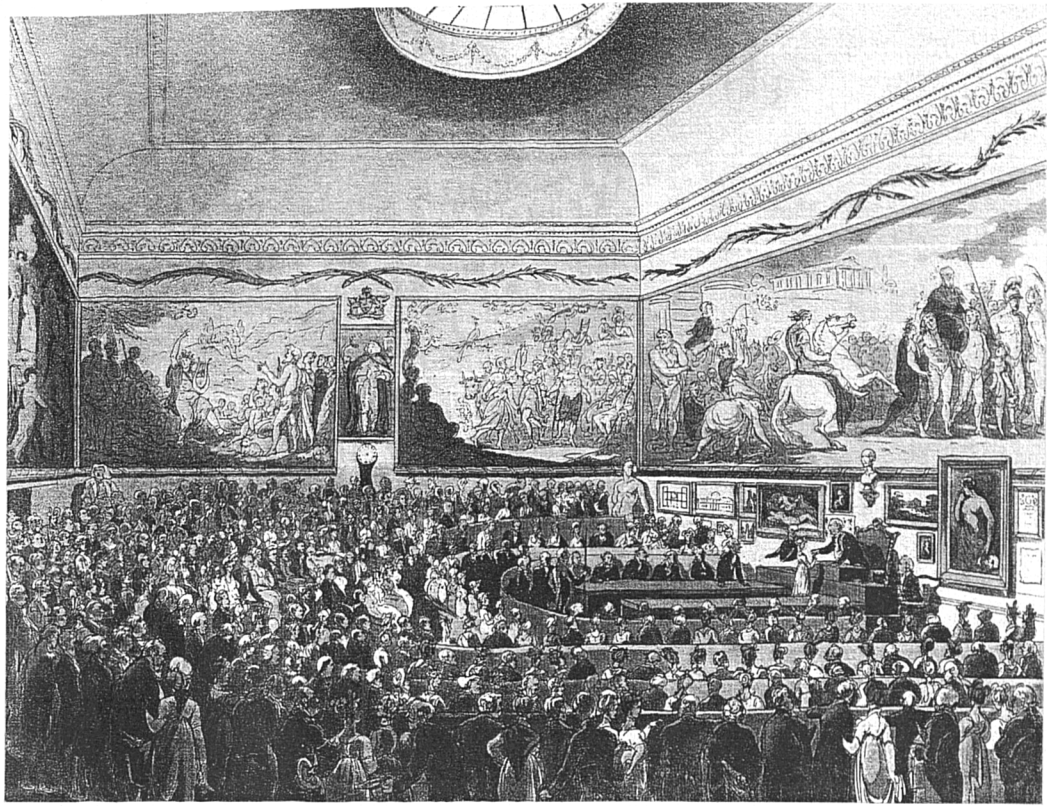


Fig. 13. A.C. Pugin and Thomas Rowlandson, *The Great Room of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts*. 1809. Aquatint.

Barry's grand cycle is shown on the walls of the Great Room.

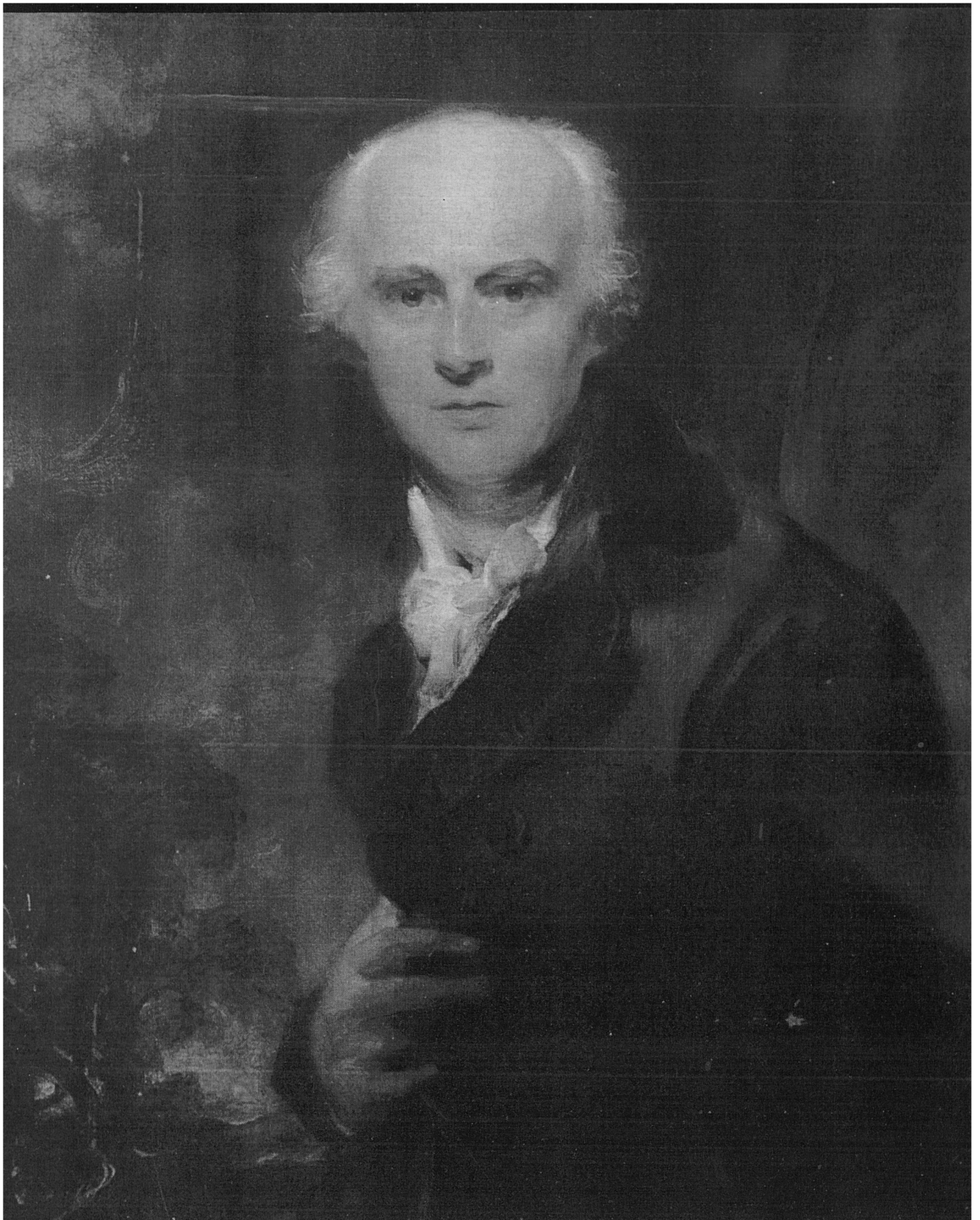


Fig. 14. Thomas Lawrence, *Joseph Farington RA*. 1795. Oil on canvas.



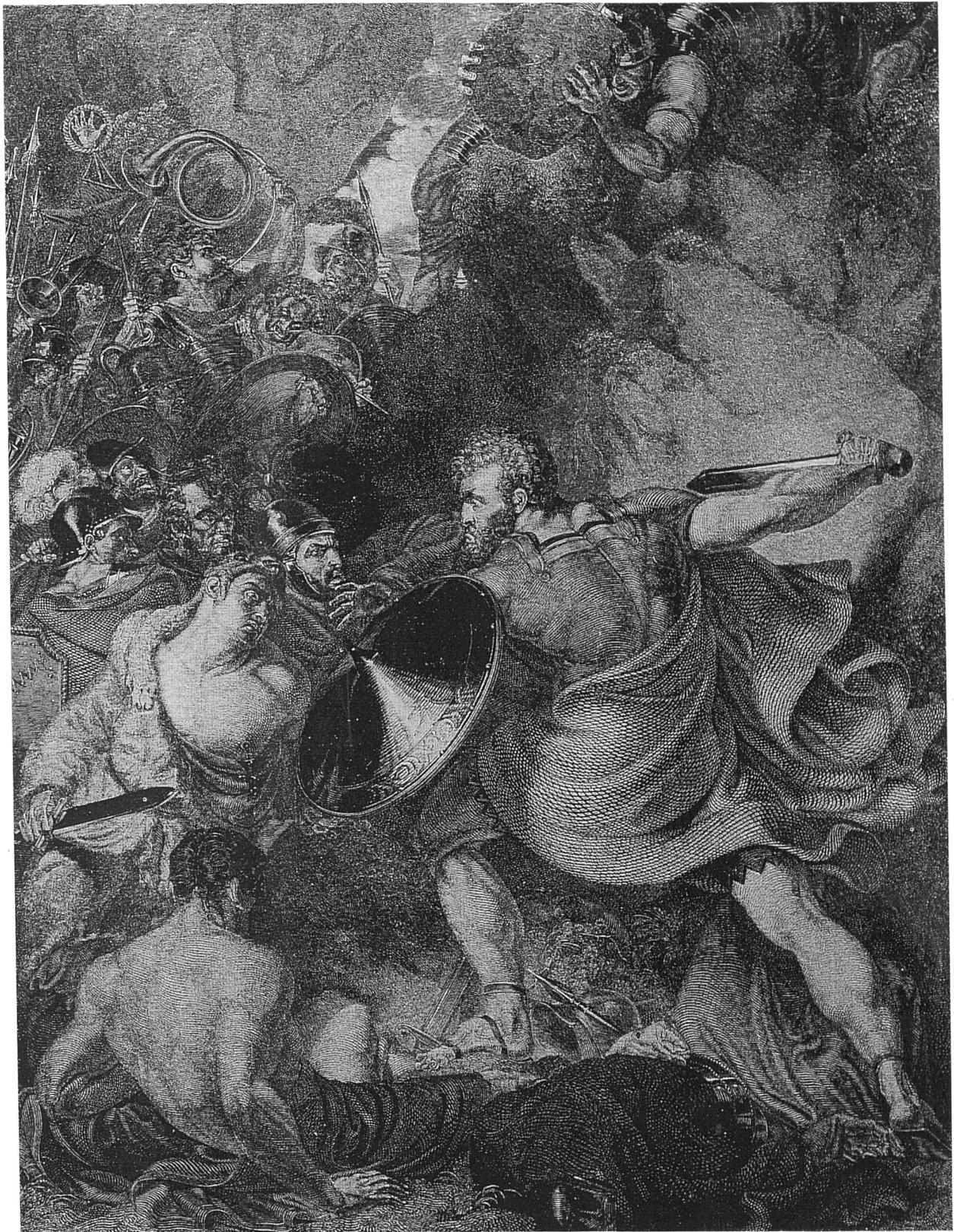


Fig. 15. William Harvey after Benjamin Robert Haydon, *The assassination of Dentatus*. 1821. Wood engraving.

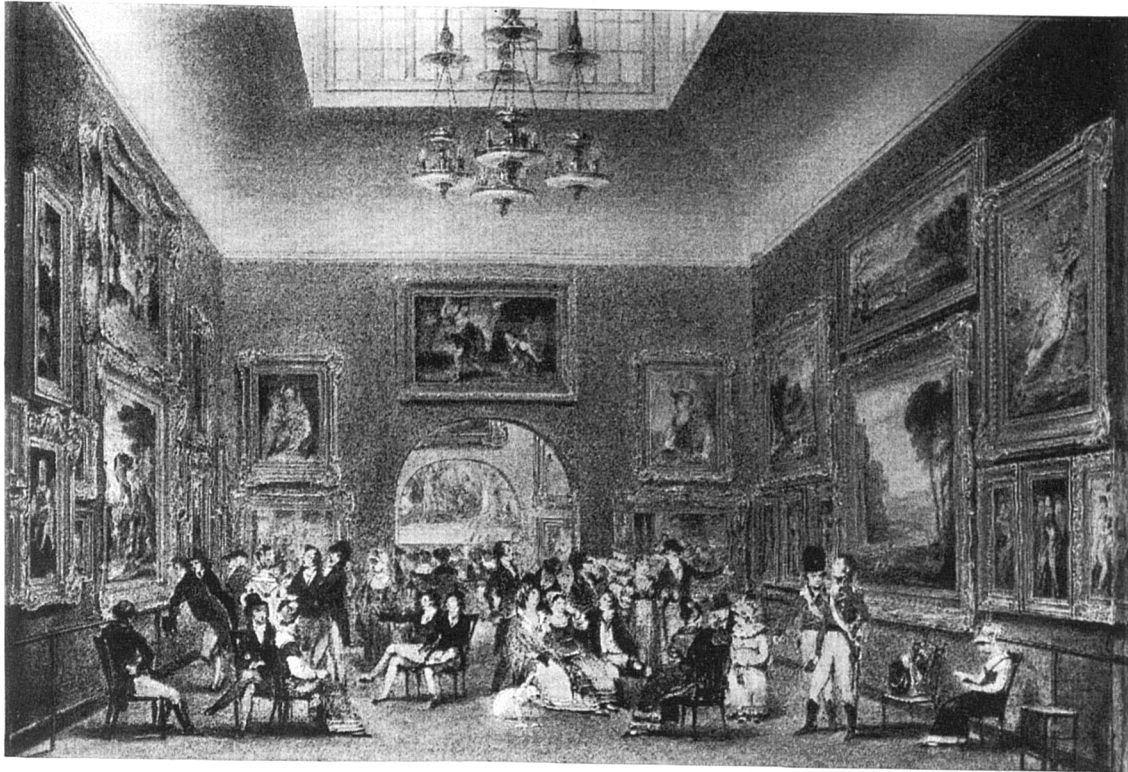


Fig. 16. James Stephanoff, *The British Institution in 1816. 1817*. Pen and watercolour with white heightening.

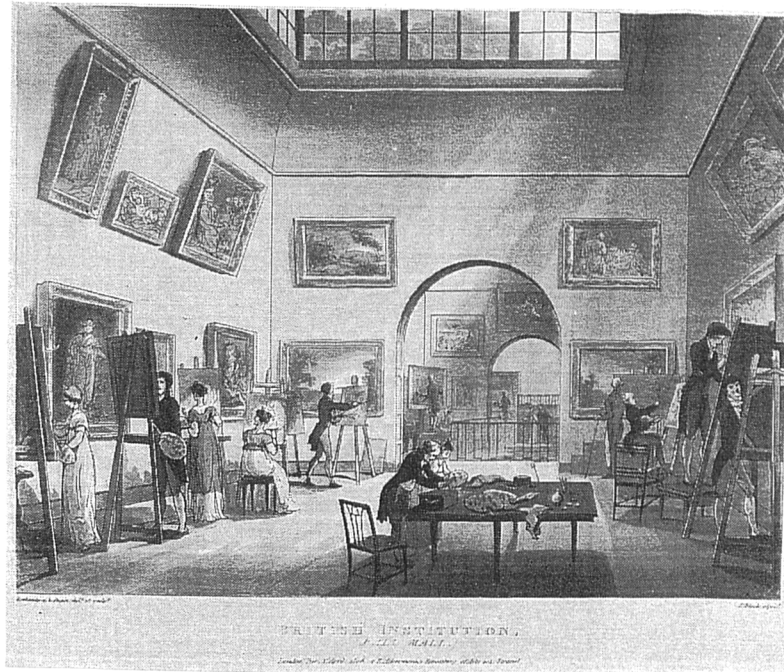


Fig. 17. J. Bluck after Thomas Rowlandson, *The British Institution, Pall Mall*. R. Ackermann, 1 April 1808. Hand coloured aquatint.

The print shows the 'British School' where students could copy from the Old Master paintings in display.



Fig. 18. John Zoffany, *Charles Townley and his friends in the Park Street gallery, Westminster*. 1781-3. Oil on canvas.

An idealised representation of a group of connoisseurs engaged in polite conversation, surrounded by a magnificent collection of sculptures.

A

CATALOGUE RAISONÉE

OF THE

*Pictures now Exhibiting*

AT THE

British Institution,

1815.

Printed with a sincere desire to assist the Noble Directors in turning the Public Attention to those particular Pieces which they have kindly selected with the benevolent intention of affording the most favorable contrast to Modern Art, the Encouragement, of which it is well known, is the sole Aim and Profession of the Institution.

---

The incendiary has just inclosed us the following extract from Bacon's Essays, as there is no better way of catching a Knave than in his own Trap, we shall print his communication, that he may see how little we fear its application.

“ There are some men of wisdom and sufficiency, that do nothing or little very solemnly: “ magno conatu nugas.” It is a ridiculous thing, and fit for a satire to persons of judgment, to see what shifts these formalists have, and what prospectives to make superficies to seem body that hath depth and bulk. Some are so close and reserved as they will not shew their wares but by a dark light\*, and seem always to keep back somewhat; and when they know within themselves they speak of that they do not well know, would nevertheless seem to others to know of that which they may not well speak. Some help themselves with countenance and gesture, and are wise by signs; as Cicero saith of Piso, that when he answered him, he fetched one of his brows up to his forehead, and bent the other down to his chin. Some think to bear it by speaking a great word, and being peremptory; and go on, and take by admittance that which they cannot make good. Some, whatsoever is beyond their reach, will seem to despise or make light of it as impertinent or curious; and so would have their ignorance seem judgment. Some are never without a difference, and commonly by amusing men with a subtilty, blanch the matter. To conclude, there is no decaying merchant, or inward beggar, hath so many tricks to uphold the credit of their wealth, as these empty persons have to maintain the credit of their sufficiency. Seeming wise men may make shift to get opinion; but let no man choose them for employment.”

---

\* The pityful rascal says, he means here particularly to allude to one of the Directors, a *certain Person*, which by a slip of the pen, he has spelt with an A instead of an E, making it Parson, who during the arrangement, had his Rubens up and down a dozen times, and at length placed it in a dark corner, where it now hangs, saying “ It certainly looks best in a *subdued light*.”—Query why?

Fig. 19. Title page of the *Catalogue Raisonné of the works now exhibiting in the British Academy*. London, 1815.



Fig. 20. Joshua Reynolds, *Sir George Beaumont*. 1787. Oil on canvas.



Fig. 21. Constable, *Cenotaph to the memory of Sir Joshua Reynolds*. Erected in the grounds of Coleorton Hall, Leicestershire, by the late Sir George Beaumont. 1836. Oil on canvas.



Fig. 22. David Wilkie, *The blind fiddler*. 1806. Oil on wood.





Fig. 23. Benjamin Robert Haydon, *The judgment of Solomon*. 1812-14. Oil on canvas.



Fig. 24. J.M.W. Turner, 'The amateur artist' (Study for a picture of an artist and his apprentice). c1808. Pen and ink and watercolour.

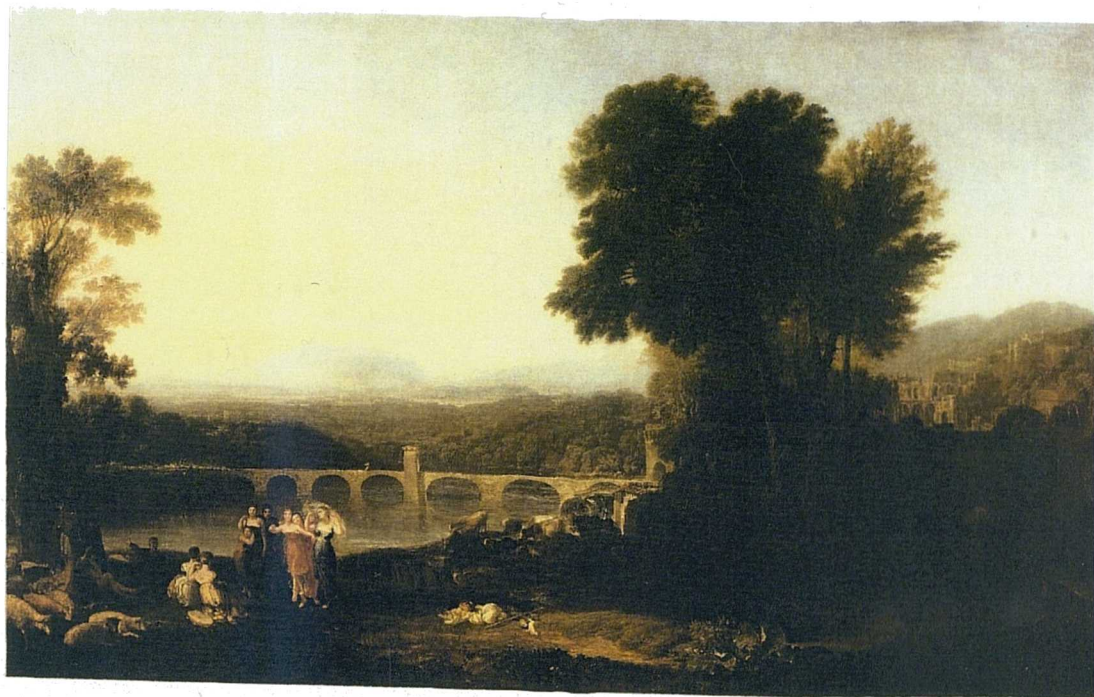


Fig. 25. J.M.W. Turner, *Apulia in search of Appullus vide Ovid*. 1814. Oil on canvas,



Fig. 26. Claude Lorraine, *Jacob with Laban and his daughters*. c1655. Oil on canvas.



Fig. 27. J.M.W. Turner, *Crossing the brook*. Exh. RA 1815. Oil on canvas.



Fig. 28. Thomas Lawrence, *Richard Payne Knight*. Exh. RA 1794. Oil on canvas.



Fig. 29. James Gillray, *The charms of virtue, or a cognoscenti discovering the beauties of an antique terminus*. 1794.

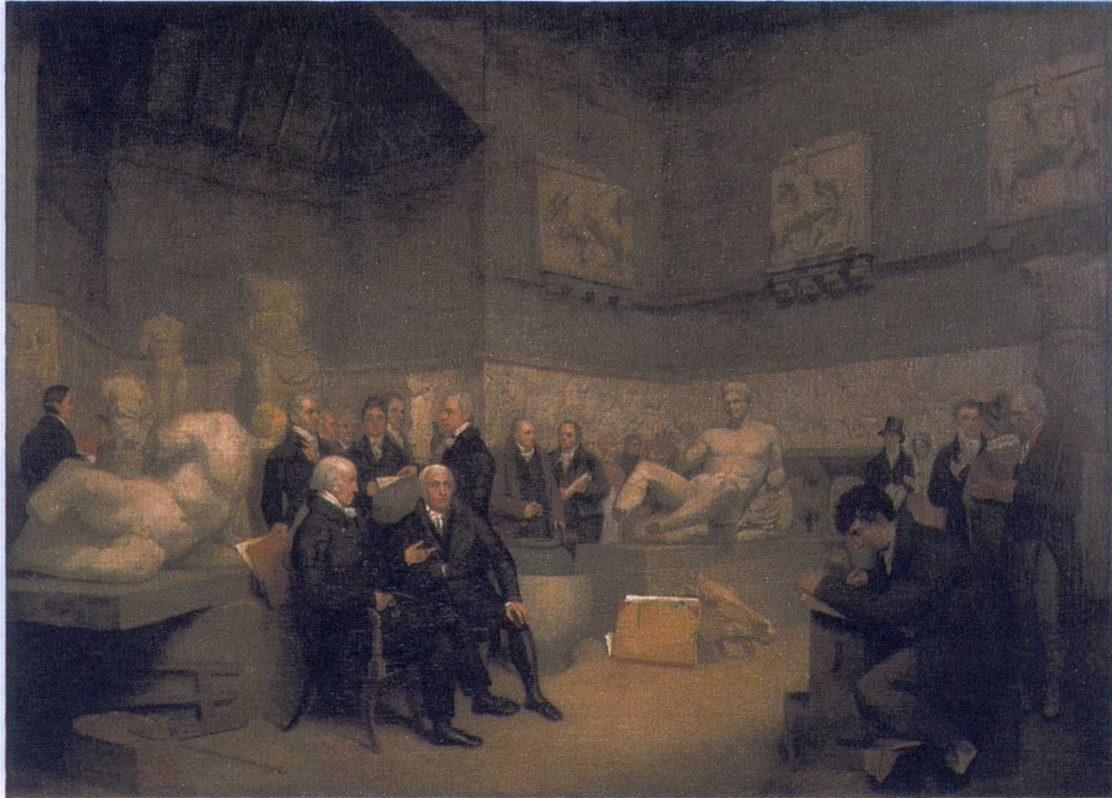


Fig. 30. Archibald Archer, *The temporary Elgin Room*. 1819. Oil on canvas.

Haydon can be seen sketching on the far left; West is shown sitting on the foreground, in profile.



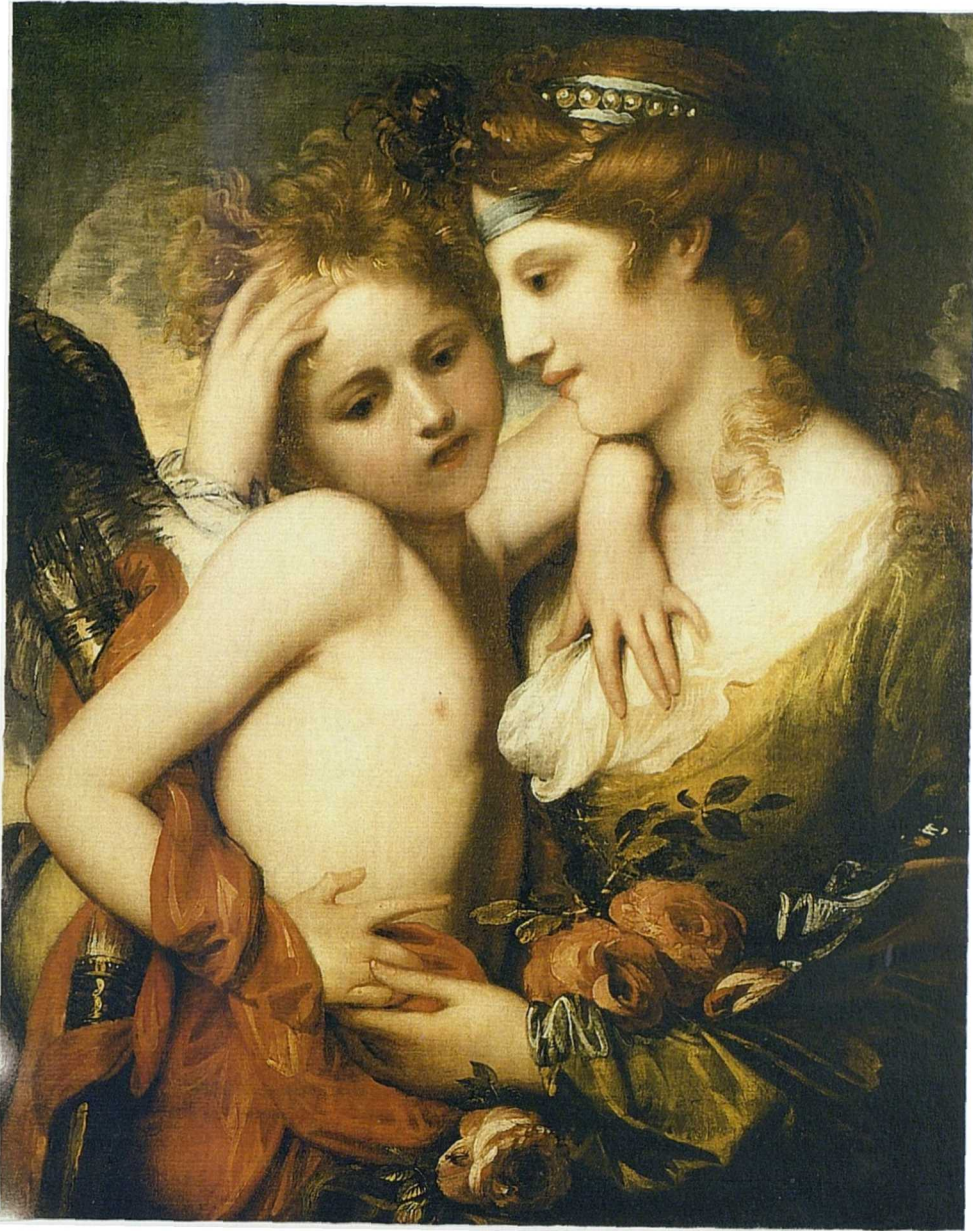


Fig. 31. Benjamin West, *Cupid stung by a bee (Venus comforting Cupid)*. c1797. Oil on canvas.

An example of a picture painted using the 'Venetian process'.



Fig. 32. James Gillray, *Titianus Redivivus; or - The Seven Wise men consulting the new Venetian Oracle, or - a scene in ye Academic grove no. 1.* 1797. Engraving.

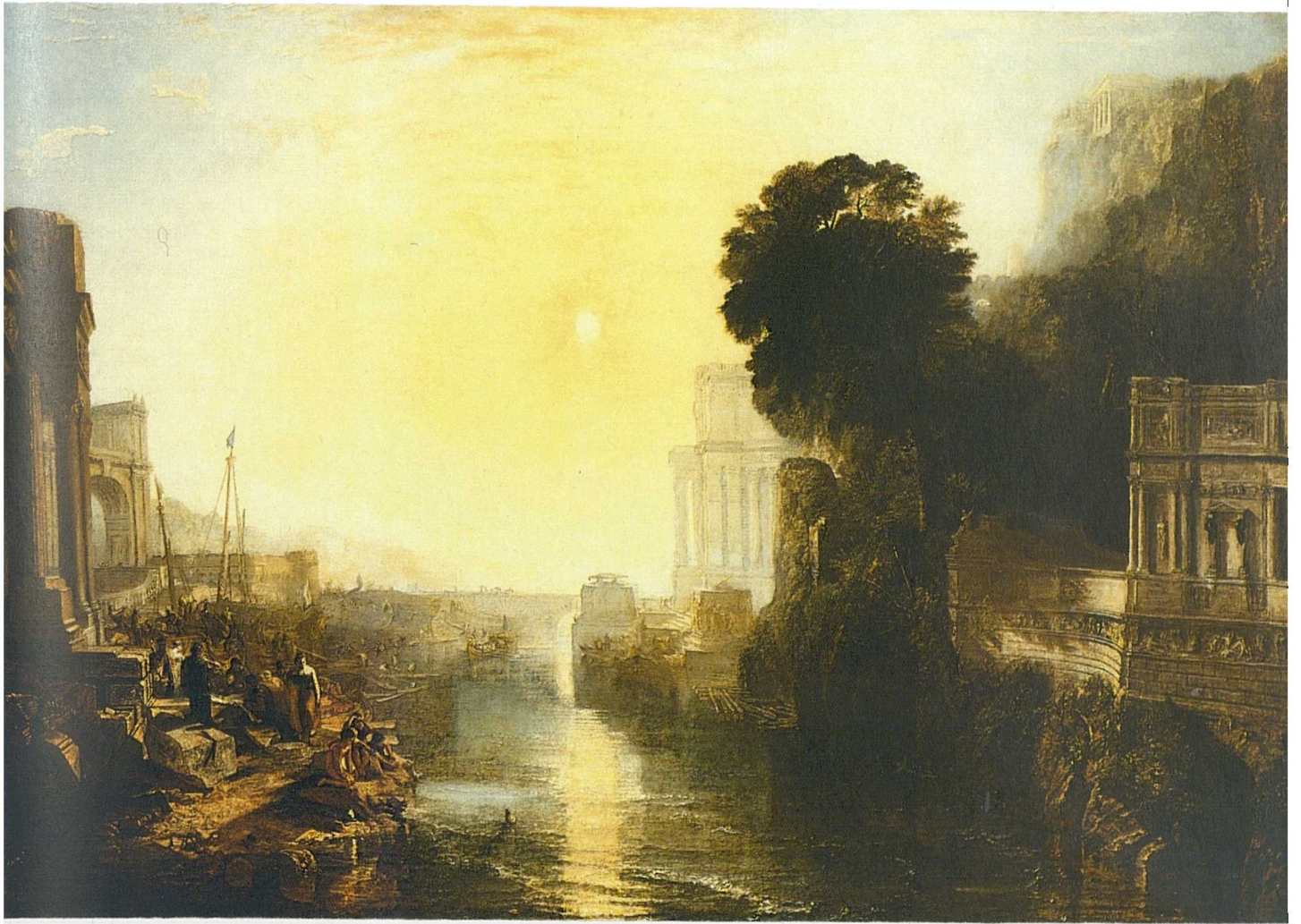


Fig. 33. J.M.W. Turner, *Dido building Carthage; or the Rise of the Carthaginian Empire*. 1815. Oil on canvas.



Fig. 34. Claude Lorrain, *Seaport with the Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba*. 1648. Oil on canvas.

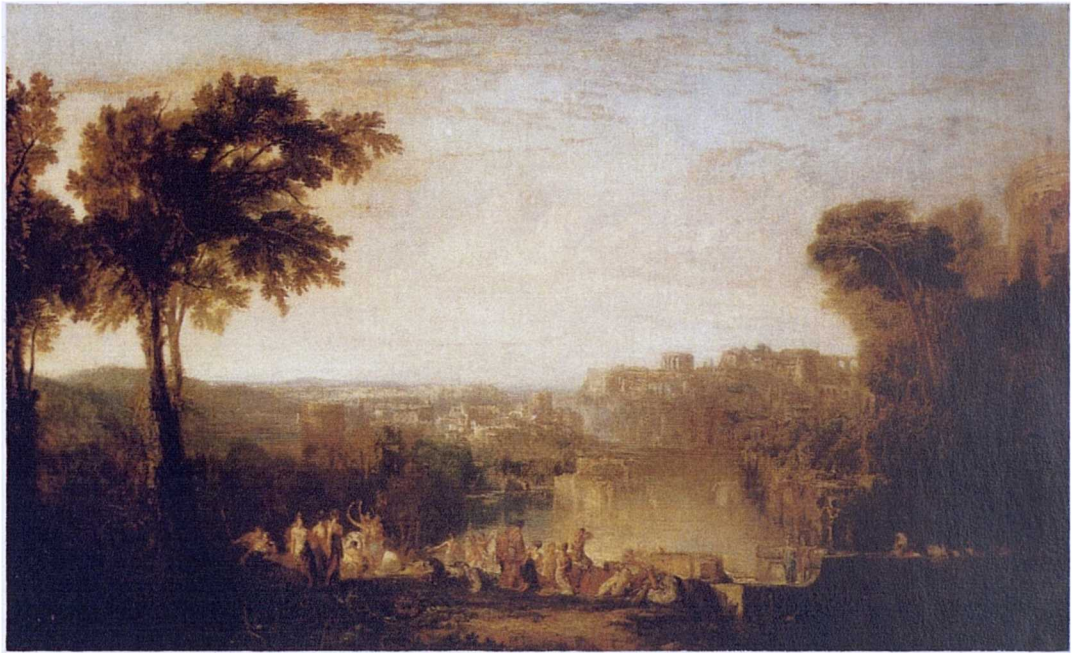


Fig. 35. J.M.W. Turner, *Dido and Aeneas*. Exh. 1814. Oil on canvas.



Fig. 36. J.M.W. Turner, *The Bay of Baiae, with Apollo and the Sibyl*. Exh. 1823. Oil on canvas.



Fig. 37. J.M.W. Turner, *Frosty morning*. Exh. 1813. Oil on canvas.



Fig. 38. J.M.W. Turner, *The shipwreck*. 1805. Oil on canvas, 170.5 x 241.5 cm. London, Tate Gallery.



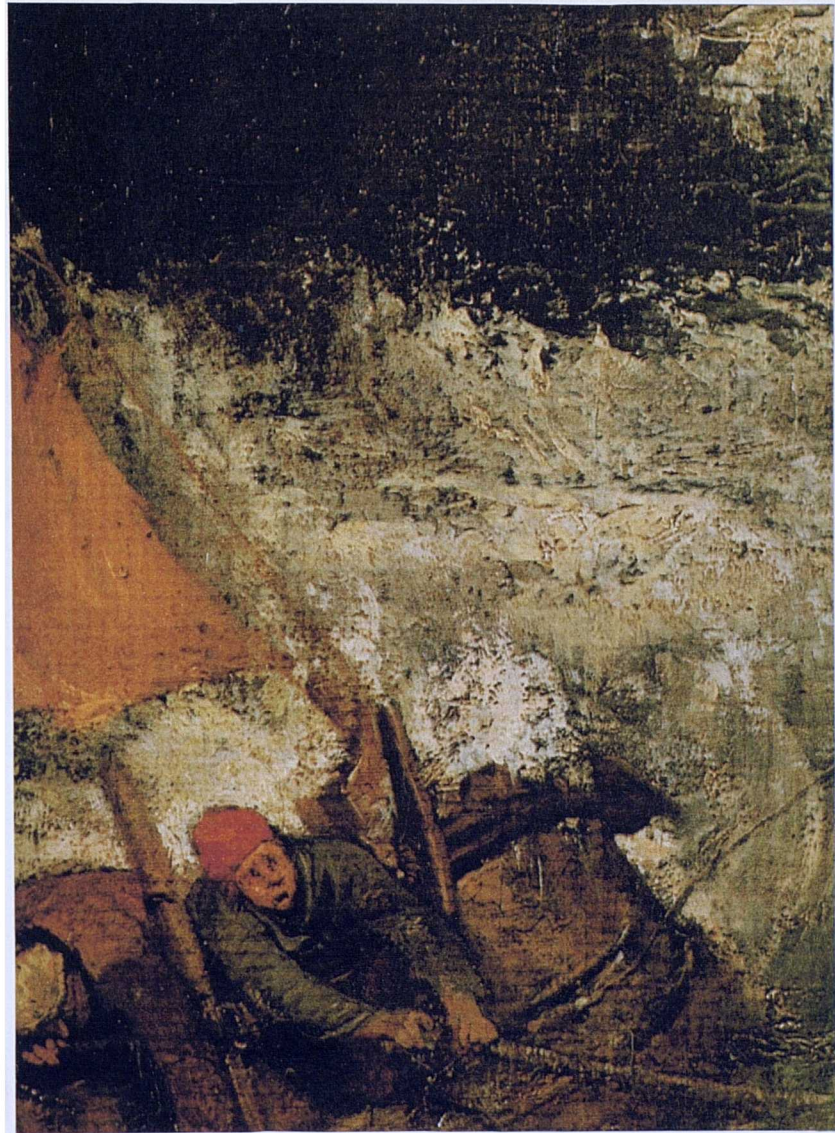


Fig. 39. Detail of fig. 38.



Fig. 40. J.M.W. Turner, *Decline of the Carthaginian Empire*. Exh. 1817. Oil on canvas.

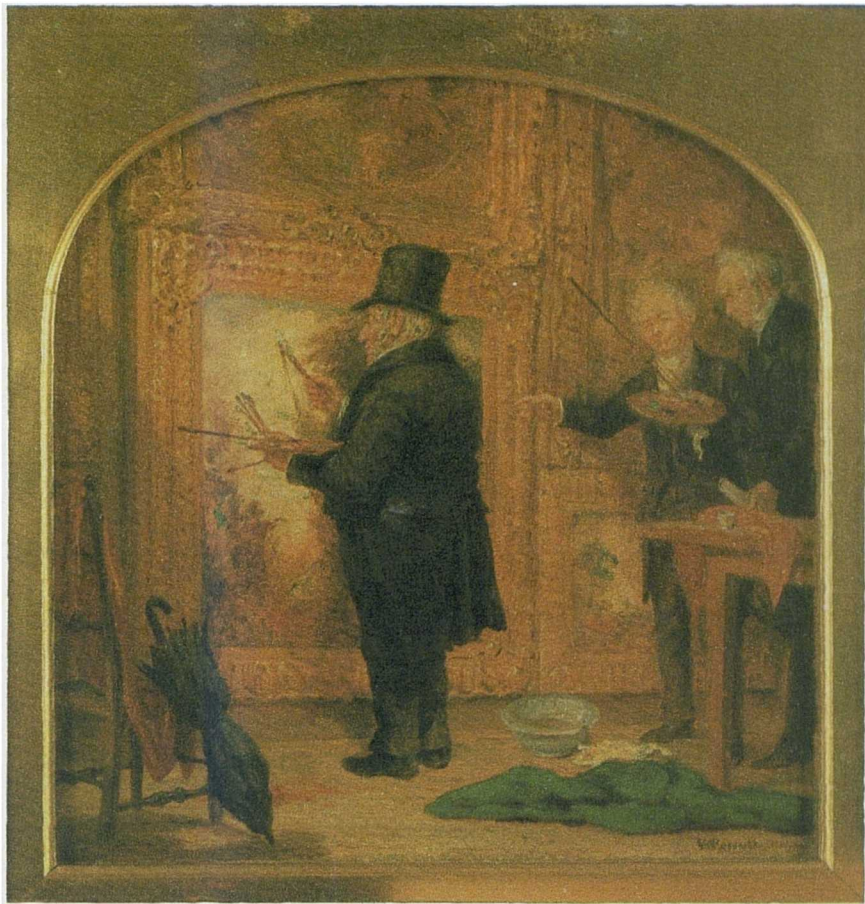


Fig. 41. S.W. Parrott, *Turner on Varnishing Day*. c1846. Oil on canvas.



Fig. 42. J.M.W. Turner, *Shipping at the mouth of the Thames*. c1806-7. Unfinished oil on canvas.



Fig. 43. J.M.W. Turner, *The fall of an avalanche in the Grisons (Cottage destroyed by an avalanche)*. 1810. Oil on canvas.

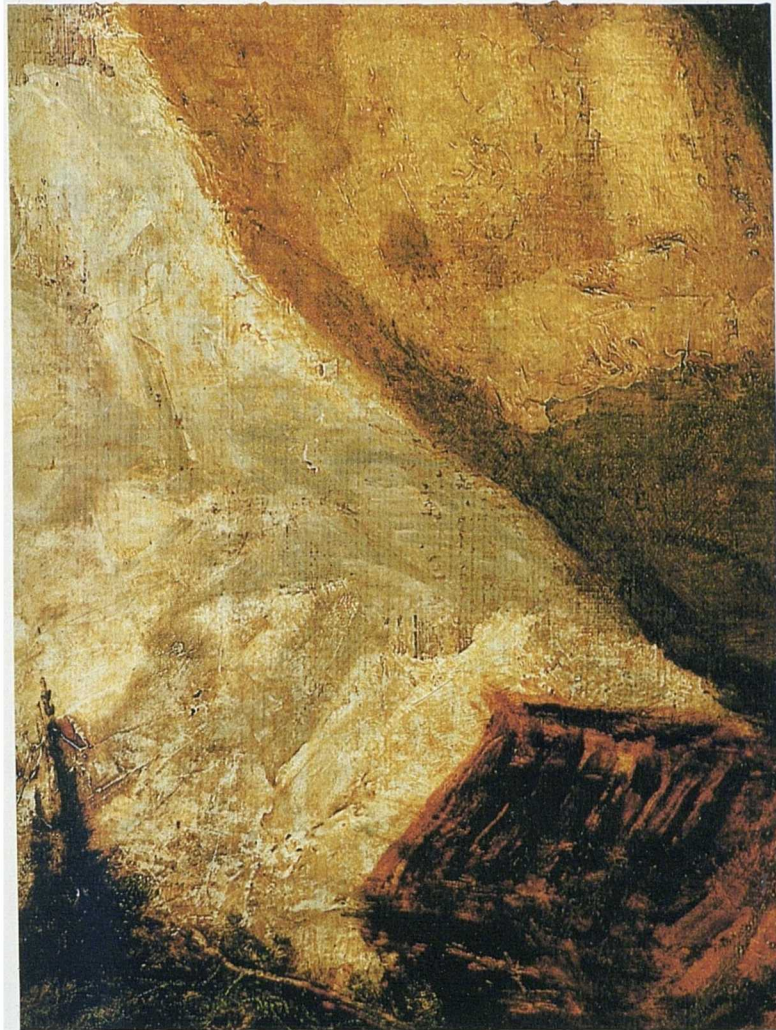


Fig. 44. Detail of fig. 43, showing thick impasto modelled with palette knife and brush.

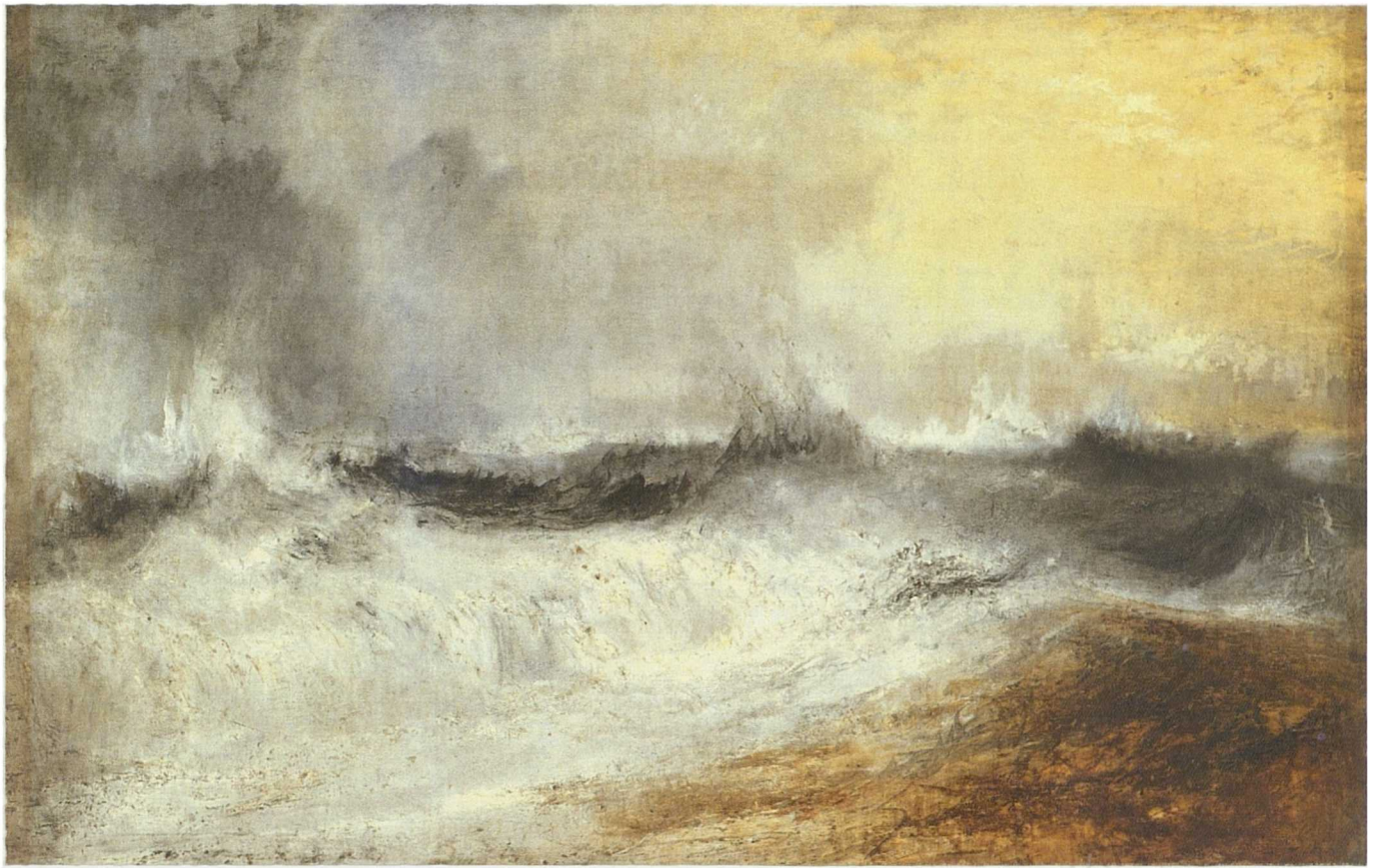


Fig. 45. J.M.W. Turner, *Waves breaking against the wind*. c1835. Unfinished oil on canvas.



Fig. 46. Details of fig. 45.

Top: waves, showing ridges covered in dark grey paint. Bottom: shore, showing paint in relief.





Fig. 47. J.M.W. Turner, *Ulysses deriding Polyphemus - Homer's Odyssey*. 1829. Oil on canvas.

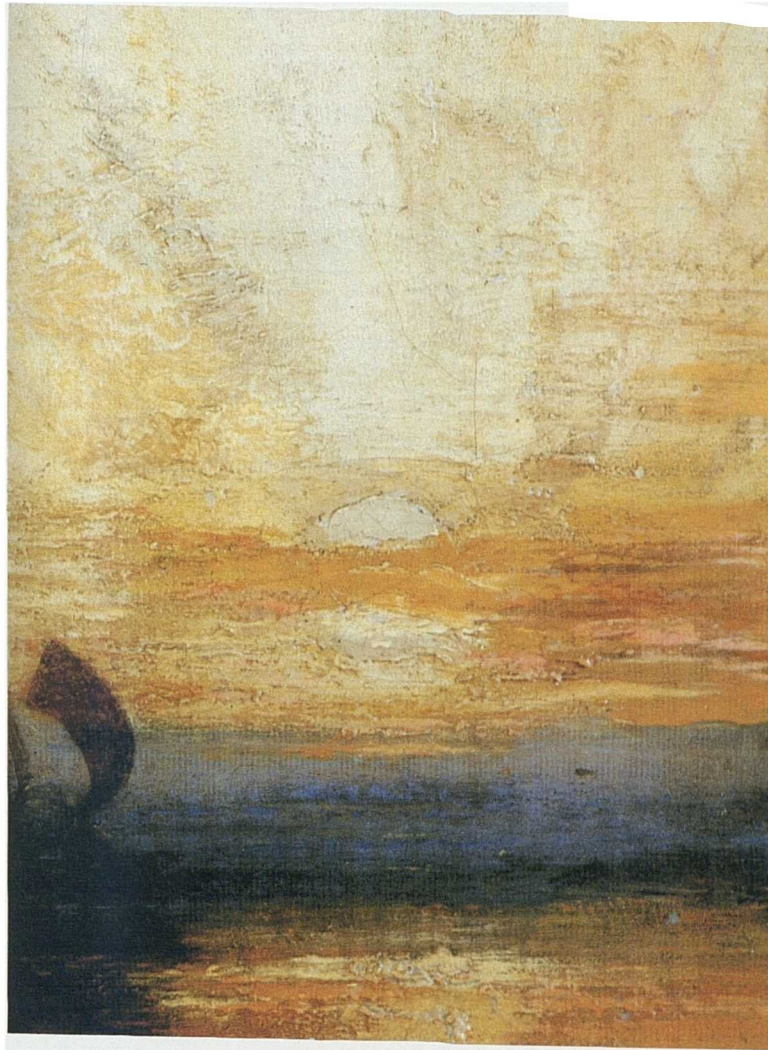


Fig. 48. Detail of fig. 47, showing thick white impasto for the sun.



Fig. 49. J.M.W. Turner, *Bridge of Sighs, Ducal Palace and Custom-House, Venice: Canaletti painting*. Exh. 1833. Oil on wood.



Fig. 50. A.W. Callcott, *Cow boys*. Exh. RA 1807. Oil on canvas.