Civilising Servants

In The National Gallery: A Short History (Frances Lincoln), I recorded how in the 1820s its trustees recognised that its building was inadequate for displaying works of art and that they would have to commission a larger and grander one. In the 1830s, parliament became interested in the issue of the education of public taste and the role that a National Gallery might play in improving the public's knowledge and awareness of the principles of fine art. In 1835, parliament established a committee to look at, and investigate, the processes of training in fine art for the improvement of British manufacture. I discussed how, in 1843, when the first keeper, William Seguier, died, the trustees replaced him with Charles Eastlake, a painter who had spent the 1820s living in Rome.

Eastlake brought with him a much more scholarly and more academic knowledge of the history and study of art than his predecessor.

Henry Cole and Charles Eastlake

In the 1847, Eastlake, fed up with public criticism of his actions as keeper, including his acquisitions and policies of conservation, quit the post, returning only in 1855 as a fully-fledged director. It was only then that he was able to establish its operation on professional lines with an orderly structure, a commitment to the scholarly study of the acquired works of art, a procedure of cataloguing, a description of how the relationship between the director and the trustees was expected to operate and a budget which enabled him to travel to Italy every autumn on purchasing expeditions. Thus he was able to transform the Gallery from an amateurish collection of Old Masters, which betrayed its origins in the Grand Tour taste of its trustees, into one of Europe's greatest, small-scale collections of works of art which were properly illustrative of Western European painting's history.

This transformation happened quickly — in roughly 30 years from 1824, when it was founded, to 1855, when Eastlake was established as its formidable director. In the book, I describe the process of formation of the National Gallery. But I do not stop to record the fact that this was also the period when the National Portrait Gallery was founded, also by parliamentary action. In the NPG's case, this was the result of a very obvious process in the professionalisation of history writing, whereby Thomas Carlyle, researching the actions of the great men of the past, realised that studying them would be greatly enhanced by their images or, as he wrote in a private letter to David Laing in 1854:

Often I have found a Portrait superior in real instruction to half-a-dozen written "Biographies", as Biographies are written; or rather, let me say, I have found that the Portrait was a small lighted candle by which the
Biographies could for the first time be read, and some human interpretation be made of them.

These words led in the space of two years to a series of debates in the House of Lords, led by Lord Stanhope, in which he quoted Eastlake: "Whenever I hear of portraits for sale of historical interest, I cannot help wishing that a gallery could be formed exclusively for authentic likenesses of celebrated individuals, not necessarily with reference to the merit of the works of art. I believe that an extensive gallery of portraits with catalogues containing good and short biographical notices would be useful in many ways and especially as a not unimportant element of education."

By December 1856, an NPG had been established with government funding, a well qualified secretary and keeper, George Scharf, who was then organising the great Manchester exhibition of works of art and who had been a candidate for National Gallery director the previous year. Like Eastlake, Scharf had many of the same attributes of careful and scrupulous scholarship, a meticulous concern for the documentation of works of art and an interest in establishing the new institution on properly scholarly lines.

The 1850s was also the decade of the Great Exhibition, the greatest display of artefacts from all over the world, organised in the space of 18 months in a huge glass temporary palace in Hyde Park. There was massive popular interest in seeing the wonders of the world, and it was also an extraordinary feat of management. The Great Exhibition led to the establishment of a Museum of Manufactures in Marlborough House and, in 1857, to its organisation on a much more permanent footing in South Kensington. This was secured by parliamentary funding and had an able and powerfully engaged director, Henry Cole, who, like Eastlake, had a finger in every pie of arts management. Cole began his professional career in the Public Record Office, working as an assistant to Rowland Hill in the introduction of the Penny Post. He wrote a popular guide to the National Gallery under the pseudonym Felix Summerly, edited *The Journal of Design and Manufactures* and, in 1849, involved himself in the Select Committee Report on the Government Schools of Design. He worked as one of the commissioners under Prince Albert in the organisation of the Great Exhibition before taking up the post of General Superintendent of the Department of Practical Art, newly established under the Board of Trade in 1852. The department administered the Schools of Design and set up "museums, by which all classes might be induced to investigate those common principles of taste which may be traced in the works of excellence of all ages".

This is also the period of the establishment of the Fine Arts Commission, set up in October 1841 under the aegis of the young Prince Albert to supervise issues of public taste and the commissioning of didactic frescoes in the recently completed Palace of Westminster. Peel described its mandate as being "composed of Members of each House of Parliament selected without reference to party distinctions, whose attention has been directed to the Cultivation of the Fine Arts, and including two or three distinguished artists". Eastlake was appointed its first secretary.

These facts are well known to historians of this period, as well as to art historians, and are closely related to the professionalisation of the study of history in the same period, about which much has been written. They are important aspects of the culture of early Victorian England. But what I am not convinced has previously been adequately thought about, or analysed, and certainly not explained, even in spite of a great deal of recent research by a group of younger, mainly Cambridge-based cultural historians, is the extreme rapidity of this transformation, the exact process of the institutionalisation of art.

In the 1820s, the management of culture consisted of not much more than the rather old-fashioned practices of the trustees and staff of the British Museum, who were in charge of a miscellaneous and eclectic set of collections which mingled antiquities with works of natural history and which was only visited by persons "of decent appearance" on three days a week. Then, suddenly, during the 1830s and 1840s, there was a much more energetic determination on the part of parliament, the crown and a small number of public officials, among them Eastlake and Cole, to bring order, system and supervision to the realm of art. It had hitherto been a free market, subject to the vagaries of public taste and the whims of private patronage, with the only public institutions of fine art being organised as an act of free enterprise by groups of private individuals, as happened in the establishment of the British Institution in 1805.

Now the world of fine art, its study and practice, suddenly came within the scope of parliament to organise, finance, supervise and control. The acquisition and display of works of art became much more systematic. Works of art were studied, documented, classified and interpreted in a way that they

had not been before. The teaching of art was subject to an iron discipline in a way that it had not been previously. Art was treated as a didactic instrument to teach the public about British history. Throughout the British Isles and not just in London, there was a belief that art could be managed in the same way as other areas of the public realm.

So then the question is: why did this happen?

First, it is impossible to ignore the role of a small group of highly energetic, well-trained individuals who saw themselves as public servants in a way that did not, I think, exist in the previous generation. Charles Eastlake was trained at the Royal Academy Schools in the early part of the century, but he then lived in Rome during the 1820s, where he came into contact with German artists and art historians. He appears to have absorbed some of the intellectual and moral discipline of his German friends, including J. D. Passavant who wrote a biography of Raphael and Gustav Waagen, the art historian who was appointed director of the Altes Museum in 1832. As a result of living in Italy and travelling on the Continent, Eastlake approached works of art, not simply aesthetically, to be appreciated visually, but as having a history that was susceptible to intellectual study and analysis. In 1840, he published a translation of Goethe's *Theory of Colours*. In 1842, he published a translation of Franz Kugler's *The Italian Schools of Painting*. In 1847, he published his magisterial *Materials for a History of Oil Painting,* which is still in print for the information it supplies about the early history of the materials and techniques of painting, and the following year he published a compilation of articles under the title *Contributions to the Literature of the Fine Arts*. He was a scholar as well as a public official, highly industrious and productive in publishing work alongside his public duties, a model of the high-minded Victorian public servant.

Let us think now about the characteristics of Henry Cole. Educated at Christ's Hospital, he entered public service aged 15 as an assistant to Francis Palgrave, the early student of public records and who was such a significant figure in the establishment of the Public Record Office. Cole seems to have inherited from Palgrave some of his powerful determination to reform public organisations, including, in Cole's case, the postal service, the system of art school teaching, the Royal Society of Arts and the ways in which manufactures and public taste could be improved by their systematic display, first in Marlborough House and, from 1857 onwards, much more ambitiously in the South Kensington Museum (now the V&A). Both Palgrave and Cole, if faced by obstacles, were capable of being pretty bruising in the ways in which they treated colleagues — that was the way they got things done.

George Scharf, who was the key figure in the foundation of the National Portrait Gallery, was perhaps a slightly less bullish public servant. But the range of his intellectual interests was still fairly formidable. He travelled in the 1840s as the official artist on expeditions to study antiquities in Asia Minor and compiled a catalogue of the pictures owned by the Society of Antiquaries. He helped organise the Greek, Roman and Pompeian courts when the Crystal Palace moved to Sydenham, and was appointed as the secretary to the great Art Treasures Exhibition at Manchester. The same year, he became secretary to the NPG trustees when it was established in 1857 in a small, private house in Great George Street, close to the Houses of Parliament.

We have got used in recent years to the idea of the professional bureaucrat as a term of abuse, as if all bureaucrats are intellectually second-rate, interested only in the perpetuation of systems of existing management and not in innovation. But these art bureaucrats of early Victorian England were something else: tirelessly hard-working, writing books in the morning, serving on committees in the afternoon, endlessly networking and socialising in the evening, with a dedicated sense of mission to create and reform institutions of art for the educational benefit of a broad public. And I certainly do not think it is accidental that their activities, their sense of moral purpose, coincided with the reform of the civil service itself, the sweeping away of systems of patronage through the Northcote-Trevelyan Report of 1854. The tidying of procedures, the organisation of systems of public management and the idea of public duty were not confined to art history.

However, I am conscious that as a system of historical explanation, to say that a widespread historical phenomenon such as the institutionalisation of art was the result of the agency of a small number of highly motivated individuals will be viewed by historians as intellectually suspect. There were very obviously wider forces at play.

The first of the wider forces was parliament. It is impossible to ignore the fact that parliament, following a quite heated argument and debate, agreed to the foundation of the National Gallery. It was not just a small group of self-interested individuals who were themselves already deeply involved in the art world, such as George Beaumont and Sir Thomas Lawrence, the then President of the Royal Academy, who led the move to found a National Gallery, but the Prime Minister Lord Liverpool himself, who wrote to the Duchess of Devonshire in support and chose to have himself painted by Sir Thomas Lawrence with the original charter of foundation in his hand. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Frederick Robinson, known as "Prosperity" Robinson, was able to give grants not only for the foundation of the National Gallery, but also towards the new building by Robert Smirke for the British Museum.

And a young backbench MP, George Agar-Ellis, later Lord Dover, combined his service in parliament with trusteeships of both the British Museum and the National Gallery, the formation of a collection of British art and the editing of Horace Walpole's letters.

In the 1830s, after the Great Reform Act, a new class of idealistic and reforming MPs entered parliament, sparking a tremendous amount of involvement in state policy towards the arts. Peel took a close personal interest in the development of a new building for the National Gallery. There was detailed discussion of its design and cost in debates in the House of Commons. In July 1835, parliament established a Select Committee "to inquire into the best means of extending a knowledge of the Arts and Principles of Design among the people (especially the Manufacturing Population) of the Country; also to enquire into the Constitution of the Royal Academy, and the effects produced by it". It asked for evidence to be heard from both Gustav Waagen, who spoke forcefully in favour of wider public access to the arts and to "the employment of artists in public buildings", and from Leo von Klenze, the court architect of Bavarian King Ludwig who designed Munich's Glyptothek and the Alte Pinakothek.

Nor did this level of parliamentary interest in arts policy diminish in the 1840s. The requirements of decorating the Houses of Parliament were what led to the establishment of the Royal Fine Arts Commission. Prince Albert brought a very Germanic view of the importance of the arts to his role as Prince Consort, collecting the works of Winterhalter and Landseer, and acting as chairman of the Royal Fine Arts Commission. Gladstone, in *The State in its Relations to the Church*, wrote how the state was able to offer "to its individual members those humanising influences which are derived from the contemplation of Beauty embodied in the works of the great masters of painting." There were further Select Committees to investigate the possible relocation of the National Gallery. Throughout these discussions and debates there was a keen awareness of the educational benefits of museums and galleries and the improving advantages of wider public access to great works of art, which seems to have spanned the political spectrum. In 1844, Joseph Hume, the radical parliamentarian, was able to boast:


"Study for the Fine Arts Commissioners" (1846), by John Partridge

The notion that the English people were only fit to be trusted in particular places — that museums were only intended for the visits of the rich, and that those collections so calculated to improve the mind, and promote science, should only be open to men of birth and fortune, had wholly gone by.

Although there is a presumption that parliament became much less interventionist during the 1850s, less troubled by the prospect of social subversion, there does not seem to have been much reduction in the cultural activities of the legislature in the establishment of institutions of art. In 1850, another Select Committee was established to decide the fate of the Vernon Collection. Lord John Russell, as Prime Minister, pledged public funds to relocate the Royal Academy into new premises apart from the National Gallery. In 1853, parliament established yet another Select Committee, this time, "To inquire into the management of the National Gallery; also to consider what mode the collective monuments of antiquity and fine art possessed by the nation may be most securely preserved, judiciously augmented, and advantageously exhibited to the public." The Committee took evidence for four months before publishing a more than 1,000-page report. It was parliament, not the trustees, that was responsible for establishing the organisation and management of the National Gallery on a properly professional footing through the issue of a Treasury Minute in March 1855.

So, it was not just the officials who were industrious. They were under the close scrutiny of MPs who took a personal interest in all aspects of arts policy, including the conservation of paintings and — not always helpfully — the price of works of art and the arrangements for their acquisition. The institutionalisation of the arts was not a product of private initiative, but of the application of public policy to the improvement of the lives and welfare of the citizenry. No area of life was now immune from parliamentary action and MPs took a broad view of their responsibilities.

It will be evident throughout this analysis of the institutionalisation of the arts that another motivator of change was competition with, and awareness of, what was happening in Germany. Nation states were in competition in their cultural policy, as they had been on the battlefield. A cartoon published in the 1820s compared the miserable accommodation of the National Gallery with the glories of the Louvre. There was a strong awareness among intellectual leaders of the 1830s when young men inspired by the writings of Coleridge, Kant and Schlegel would go to study in the university of Heidelberg, of what was being achieved in terms of the display of art in both Munich and Berlin. Schinkel's great building for the Altes Museum on the banks of the Spree and von Klenze's purpose-built Alte Pinakothek were the models for what could be achieved through a dynamic policy towards the display of art for public benefit. Younger MPs were aware of, and inspired by, the essentially German idea that cultural institutions could provide an important symbolic value to the effectiveness of the nation state.

My final determinant — but one of which I am less confident in describing — is the culture of utilitarianism. It was the writings of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill that led to the belief in the improving role of art for wider purposes of public education. Parliamentarians such as William Ewart, Benjamin Hawes and Joseph Hume, the so-called Philosophical Radicals, led to the provision of public

institutions of art, under the influence of utilitarian beliefs. They believed that art had a wide social, political and educational value, should be taken away from the clutches of the traditional connoisseurs and used, instead, as an instrument of social amelioration. They suggested the establishment of the Select Committee on Arts and Manufactures in 1835, and introduced the bill that led to the establishment of the Fine Arts Commission and supported the Museums Act in 1845. Cole was influenced by the utilitarians and met Bentham just before his death in 1832. He knew Mill reasonably well (certainly well enough to borrow money from him), became joint proprietor of the *Westminster Review* in 1840 and was quite a close associate of the social reformer Edwin Chadwick. They helped to inspire Cole's belief in the need for a reform of English design. Cole cited Mill when seeking support for his programme of teaching at South Kensington describing him as "the first and most liberal of English writers on political economy":

It is only necessary to refer to his work, where he proves that education is one of those things which it is admissible in principle that a government should provide for the people, and that help in education is help towards doing without help, and is favourable to a spirit of independence.

I have made very little reference to the Royal Academy of Arts, the public institution of which I am the servant, and of what happened to it during this period. Why should this be? The answer is that the Royal Academy offers a very different model to the role of institutionalisation to that which I have described. The Royal Academy is an institution not of the early Victorian period, but classically of the reign of George III. Founded in 1768, it was the result not of parliamentary action, but of the community of artists going privately to the King, and it was he — without the intervention or involvement of parliament — who asked them to draw up a set of rules for their operation and who agreed remarkably generously to pay off any debts it incurred, which he did consistently in the Academy's early years. In the 1830s, parliament was extremely irritated by the independence of the Royal Academy and it was attacked by writers such as George Foggo and the artist Benjamin Robert Haydon, who viewed it as an instrument of private privilege, rather than of public benefit. The Royal Academy was wary of being incorporated into a new government building in Trafalgar Square as part of the National Gallery and felt that it was being co-opted by the state. Parliament asked for information about the finances to be laid before it and Sir Martin Archer Shee, the then president, simply refused. He regarded the Royal Academy as a private institution, which should not necessarily be subject to public regulation. When appearing before the Select Committee, he was sceptical that the creation of better premises for the National Gallery would necessarily produce an improvement in the state of art, describing it thus:

The Royal Academy [is] a much more important institution to the nation than the National Gallery; I look upon it that a garden is of more consequence than a granary; and you may heap up a *hortus-siccus* of art without producing any of the salutary effects which never fail to result from the operations of such a school as the Royal Academy.

In other words, the Royal Academy stuck two fingers up at those who believed in wider public access to the arts and felt that providing better facilities for its study would not necessarily improve its practice. Indeed, there is a case to be made that the process of the institutionalisation of art did greatly increase the public knowledge and interest in art, but did not necessarily improve its creative practice.

As we approach the prospect of a change of government, and as the two parties face the problem of what they are going to do about the arts in an environment of substantially reduced availability of public funding, there may be benefits in looking back at the issues and debates faced by government and the House of Commons in the 1830s and 1840s.

We have had an administration over the last decade whose attitude towards the arts has been essentially utilitarian, sometimes nearly Benthamite in its belief that the essential value of the arts lies in its purposes of social amelioration. But alongside those who espoused these utilitarian beliefs in the

1830s were others who had a stronger and more idealistic belief in the arts as a source of moral and intellectual and, indeed, in many cases, religious uplift — a way of improving society through its culture.

We have in many ways lost the language needed to describe these idealising purposes of art in public discourse. But parliamentarians in the 1830s did not feel so constrained.

They perfectly understood that there were ideas and beliefs derived from the writings of Kant and Coleridge which were capable of providing a source, as well as a language, of public belief. I conclude by suggesting that it may perhaps be helpful nowadays, considering the sometimes arid language of current aesthetic discourse, to go back to those writers and thinkers for whom these issues were a subject of intense public debate and to think, once more, about the emblematic and moral value of arts institutions, instead of just their instrumental purpose.

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