

Looking for Civilisation

Charles Saumarez smith enjoys an exhibition about his illustrious predecessor at the National Gallery

I was initially sceptical of the idea that Tate might do an exhibition on Kenneth Clark, since I so associate him with the history of the National Gallery. I have always assumed that he is of much greater historical interest and significance as an assistant to Bernard Berenson, as the author of a pioneering monograph on the Gothic Revival, as the Director of the National Gallery during the 1930s, responsible for keeping its pictures in this country during the second world war, as a writer on Leonardo and Piero della Francesca, on the nude and landscape, and as a broadcaster on the history of old master paintings than he is as someone who promoted the interests of contemporary artists, many of whom were his friends. However, what comes out of the exhibition is a view that his taste in Old Master paintings was less good than expected (otherwise he would not have bought a Previtali as if it was a Giorgione) and that his taste and interest in modern art was unexpectedly sustained and influential.

This should not surprise anyone at Charleston since the first and perhaps deepest influence on Clark's taste was Roger Fry, more so even than Berenson. He read *Vision and Design* whilst still at Winchester. In his autobiography, *Another Part of the Wood*, he called it 'the finest education in art criticism I ever received'. He was to meet Fry when an undergraduate at Oxford, after attending lectures he gave in February 1923 on Cézanne and Poussin, and he remained in close contact with him throughout his time as Keeper at the Ashmolean during the late 1920s, through the preparation of the great exhibition of Italian Art held at the Royal Academy, to when he took up the post of Director of the National Gallery in 1934, just before Fry's death. Clark saw Fry's last lectures as Slade Professor through the press and wrote an admirable brief introduction to his life and ideas.

Through his friendship with Fry, Clark became friends with a number of others in the Bloomsbury circle, including Clive Bell, who was more Clark's class (Bell was always regarded as too posh by Bloomsbury with his monogrammed leather suitcases and monied Wiltshire background), Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, who Clark described as 'the first of our artist friends'. He commissioned Grant to do a portrait of his wife Jane, wrote an essay about Grant's work in the catalogue of his 1934 exhibition, and later commissioned a painted screen from them, still at Saltwood Castle, and a dinner service of 48 plates depicting famous women.

As the exhibition so clearly demonstrates, Clark's taste extended well beyond Bloomsbury. He bought a number of works from Henry Moore's first exhibition. He supported Victor Pasmore and Graham Bell with stipends (during the war, he used to go drinking with Graham Bell in east end pubs) and he was a great advocate of the work of John Piper and new romanticism. The exhibition even includes a small and exceptionally beautiful Lucian Freud, which was given to Clark in 1951 in exchange for a gift of £500.

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