

Eminences to Emin

Review by Jackie Wullschlager

The Royal Academy's history – and future

The Company of Artists: The Origins of the Royal Academy of Arts in London, by Charles Saumarez Smith, *Modern Art Press/Bloomsbury*, RRP£25, 192 pages

In 2007, art historian [Charles Saumarez Smith](#) resigned as director of London's National Gallery to take up a post as chief executive of a two-century-old private society representing 80 British artists, which stages an annual exhibition, has a small school and – what else? What possible role could such an arcane organisation play in today's global, professionalised, multimillion-pound art world?

Five years into running the Royal Academy, Saumarez Smith pursues this question by doing what he does best: looking at the past. A specialist in 18th-century patrician taste, he has written a slow, lavish, meticulous history of the RA, adding a frank conclusion about the quarrelsome place now, comparing it to both “a bear-pit” and *Lord of the Flies*.

The miracle is that the RA got off the ground at all, never mind became a cornerstone of British cultural life. Art is freewheeling, individualistic; artists are rarely clubbable. Attempts to organise painters' groups in the 18th century ended in factions before a breakaway quartet – American history painter Benjamin West, Swiss goldsmith George Moser, society portraitist Francis Cotes, architect William Chambers – decided to approach King George III as patron of a new society. On December 10 1768, a “clear-minded, remarkably comprehensive” Instrument of Foundation launched the Royal Academy.

Its Enlightenment aims were impeccable: to liberate artists from aristocratic patronage, to promote the idea that art was not a trade but a “noble pursuit” with moral, intellectual purposes, and to exhibit to a wide audience, not just connoisseurs. Before the RA, seeing contemporary painting was impossible “except by making arrangements to visit a nobleman's house and paying a handsome tip to his servants”. After it, “following trends in artistic practice and reading criticism of it in the newspapers was a normal part of the experience of the educated public”.

Today, it is easy to knock the RA: absurdly, Tracey Emin is its professor of drawing; the Summer Exhibition is a byword for the lacklustre and conventional; among 32 painter academicians, only one – David Hockney – is a great artist, a couple (Gary Hume, Jenny Saville) explore possibilities of the genre, most are mediocre or worse.

Saumarez Smith shows intriguingly that this was always so: in 1768 “the line-up was not exactly the crème de la crème and included a surprising number of what can only be described as jobbing artists”. Joshua Reynolds was pressurised into becoming the RA's first president, as “almost everyone liked and admired him” and his seriousness “greatly improved the status of painting”. The era's other outstanding artist, Thomas Gainsborough, “capricious in his manners, and rather fickle and unsteady in his social connections”, never really committed to the Academy. Among a further 34 inaugural academicians, at best three – Johann Zoffany, Angelica Kauffman, Paul Sandby – are remembered. As a bureaucratic institution, the RA had its maverick-thinker detractors from the start – “this man was hired to depress art”, William Blake said of Reynolds. Precisely the organisation's democratic intentions, moreover, soon rebounded in conservatism – the insistence that a general assembly ratify decisions, Saumarez Smith notes wryly, “has normally curbed any enthusiasm for change”.

In a sense the RA is victim to its own success. It professionalised the art world, opened a middle-class consumer base, created the climate where the modern drivers of an artist's career – the commercial

gallery and public art institution – flourish. Artists no longer need the RA. Few leading British painters are academicians: not Cecily Brown, Peter Doig, Frank Auerbach, Leon Kossoff, Paula Rego. Can the RA survive? The pomposity of its annual dinner – trumpeters announcing the arrival of guests bedecked in medals – makes one occasionally hope not. But the brilliance of its ripostes to over-conceptual public museums, notably Tate, through popular shows such as Hockney’s landscapes earlier this year, confirm that it still has a vital public role as an independent body in an increasingly homogenised cultural landscape. Volume 2, please, on how to harness that artistic anarchy for the 21st century.

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