Art for Everyone

Review of *The People's Galleries: Art Museums and Exhibitions in Britain, 1800-1914*, Yale University Press, 2015, by Giles Waterfield

Giles Waterfield left his post as Director of the Dulwich College Picture Gallery in 1996 in order to be able to concentrate on the writing of novels and research, as well as teaching, on the history of museums. He had been a pioneer student of the subject, publishing *Palaces of Art: Art Galleries in Britain 1790-1990* in 1991 and organising the important exhibition *Art Treasures of England: The Regional Collections* at the Royal Academy, in 1998. This brought the attention of government to the plight of the regional museums and led to them being assisted by a national system of grant funding for the first time. His research has now led to the publication of *The People's Galleries: Art Museums and Exhibitions in Britain 1800-1914*, which is a detailed and wide-ranging analysis of the circumstances of foundation and operation of the major regional museums which have been much less well studied than those in London, reflecting the general neglect of their historical importance.

The book opens with a brief and drily pugnacious introduction which describes Waterfield's approach to the subject. He has clearly been much annoyed by the gamut of studies which have appeared since the 1980s inspired by the so-called new museology and which have treated museums as instruments of authority and social control. He views them instead as monuments to Victorian beliefs in civic order and, most especially, public education.

The introduction is followed by a section on the eighteenth-century antecedents of Victorian museums, including a chapter 'Justifying the Museum' on the eighteenth-century literature on the arts and another 'Struggling for a Voice', which documents the many private societies established in cities in the late eighteenth century, including local antiquarian and archaeological societies, literary and philosophical societies, and the Royal Institutions established in Birmingham, Liverpool, Leeds and York. I found this the least convincing part of the book, partly because Waterfield's heart is in the grand civic initiatives of the mid to later nineteenth century and partly because the eighteenth century literature was partial, did not lead to the establishment of art institutions, and was not likely to have inspired those councillors and civic dignitaries who did establish museums in the next century.

The bulk of the book is devoted to a comprehensive and exceptionally well researched analysis of the great museums which were established in towns in England and Scotland in the second half of the nineteenth century. Waterfield is often surprisingly tentative in his celebration of the importance of this phenomenon, commenting, for example, that the buildings are seldom by major architects, quoting two obscure articles by John Summerson which dismiss them as a genre, and always as inclined to point out what these museums did not achieve — poor in their acquisition of Old Masters and modern French art, weak in their representation of sculpture, conservative in their taste for narrative art — as he is to celebrate them. But his admirable choice of illustrations tells another story. In the illustrations, at least as much as in the text, it is obvious how extraordinarily grand and ambitious many of these museums were, many of them, like the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter, the Harris Art Gallery and Museum in Preston, the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool and the Birmingham City Art Gallery, designed with intelligent ostentation, placed in the heart of the city, and bringing art, painting, sometimes music, lectures and culture, much of it through reproductions, to the citizens.

There is much that is unfamiliar in this narrative. In particular, I had not realised, and I am not sure that it is well known in the institutions themselves, that, at least to begin with, their permanent collections were less important than annual exhibitions of the work of local artists, modelled on the annual summer exhibition at the Royal Academy, and temporary exhibitions, drawn from the collections of local landowners or sent out by the circulation department of the Victorian and Albert Museum.

Another issue which emerges is the extent to which museums in the late nineteenth century were able to promote what was essentially a mass culture. The statistics of the number of visitors to the Royal Academy's summer exhibition in the late nineteenth century are remarkable, when more than 300,000 people came to see the annual exhibition every year. These figures are replicated by the visitor

numbers to many exhibitions and newly opened museums: for example, nearly a million people visited the Bethnal Green Museum when it opened in 1872; over a million visited Birmingham City Art Gallery in 1888; 800,000 visited museums in Bradford in 1907; 610,000 visited the Mayer Collection in Liverpool in 1881, more than the entire population of the city.

Why were art galleries such a mass phenomenon in the late nineteenth century in a way that they are not today, except the National Gallery and Tate, more thanks to tourists than the working class ? The answer is partly that there were fewer competing attractions, no football matches, no motor cars, less opportunities for shopping, no cinema or television, such that the art gallery offered a welcome escape from the world of the workplace, a place to learn about art, and to see and enjoy images of landscape and narrative history. There was a much more widely diffused belief, shared by the city authorities, that culture should be made available to, and enjoyed by, the working man. This has often been viewed as patronising. But it is just as patronising to assume that the working man is incapable of enjoying art.

What emerges, above all, is that those in charge of museums in the late nineteenth century paid close attention to what the audience liked, which was mainstream, well painted, often didactic, narrative paintings by modern British artists. This was why the town councillors would organise an annual visit to the Royal Academy summer exhibition in order to select work and why they were less interested in Old Master paintings. It is easy to be snooty about this attitude and to deplore the councillors' philistinism, as twentieth-century curators, influenced by the writing of Roger Fry and Clive Bell, did. But narrative painting in the late nineteenth century was part of the common culture, enjoyed by everyone rather than just the better educated few. What Waterfield's book does, quietly and non-polemically, is to rescue the zeal and enthusiasm of those who opened great civic museums from the condescension of art history.

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