Hungary for Culture

Charles Saumarez Smith takes issue with the line of Brian (Sewell) and looks forward to the Royal Academy's *Treasures from Budapest* exhibition

My article in the last issue of *Finch's Quarterly* about the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition achieved a modest degree of fame by being quoted in Brian Sewell's review of this year's exhibition in the *Evening Standard*:

> *As its chief executive put it in the current edition of a journal of which he is arts editor, the Academy holds "the 18th-century view that the best judges of art are not the critics but the public. Critics may sneer, but the public continues to enjoy the Summer Exhibition precisely because it gives them an opportunity to make up their own minds about what to like."*

Sewell went on to say:

> *The public can make up its mind about fish and chips and jellied eels, but to put it in charge of the kitchens of The Ritz would not be wise. And I am less sure that Charles Saumarez Smith's contempt for critics was widely held anywhere in Europe in the 18th century, the Age of Reason, when the Enlightenment held sway; and even if it were, then the public to which he refers was not the ancestor of some bloke on the Clapham bendy-bus, but an educated gentleman with the benefits of private tutoring, Eton, Oxbridge and the Grand Tour, as ready with a Greek or Latin tag as our beloved Boris Johnson. The chief executive will find little of that background among the old biddies from Berkshire up for the day.*

I know that it is generally regarded as a quick form of suicide for anyone in the arts to quarrel with a critic, most especially Brian Sewell, but the issues that he raises are important ones, particularly as far as the Royal Academy is concerned. So, I am going to use part of my article in this issue to attempt a gentle riposte.

First, I am not so convinced that critics, the idea of art criticism, and the belief that critics were more important than the public as judges of art, were as well established in "the Age of Reason" as Sewell suggests. After all, there were scarcely any independent critics of art, other than Diderot in France, who, in writing about the Salons, may be said to have been the first professional art critic. Certainly, there was precious little newspaper criticism. In England, the best and most cogent writing about art came from the pen of Sir Joshua Reynolds: in other words, it came from within the Royal Academy, rather than being directed as a critique of works of art by independent authorities. (Jonathan Richardson, the previously best-known writer about art, was also a painter). It was not until the writings of Hazlitt in the early-19th century that the profession of art critic was properly

established in Great Britain. So, I am not persuaded that the Age of the Enlightenment can be said to have held the opinion, and the profession, of the critic in as high regard as Sewell suggests.

Second, in looking back at the history of the Royal Academy, it is reasonably clear that it emerged from a context in which artists did want their works to be seen by a much broader public than had been possible in the first half of the 18th century. The whole drive during the 1750s and 1760s with the establishment of, first, the Society of Arts (founded in 1753), then the Society of Artists (founded in 1761), then the Royal Academy (founded in 1768), was to establish places and spaces whereby works of art could be seen by a broad public, rather than just the connoisseurs, dilettanti and private patrons who had previously dominated the art world. Artists were anxious to establish their professional status. Part of their professional status derived from the establishment of a free market for art. So, the suggestion that the only people who enjoyed works of art in the 18th century were those who had benefited from "private tutoring, Eton, Oxbridge and the Grand Tour" is wrong.

Third, I find it odd that Sewell, who has devoted his life to the excoriation of what he normally describes as "the Serota tendency", should be hostile to the open, democratic nature of the Royal Academy. It is surely healthy to have a plurality of spaces in which to view art, including spaces that are in the control of artists themselves, rather than access to art being controlled by only a small number of publicly funded institutions and commercial galleries. Isn't it healthy to be able to see and enjoy the multiplicity of works of art that are displayed in the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition, rather than just the works of a small number of sophisticated operators of the system of public patronage? Modern-day curators are the equivalent of private patrons, like Lord Burlington, who dominated art circles in the early-18th century.

So, the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition did indeed emerge as a vehicle for the wider public enjoyment of works of art in the 1760s. Moreover, if it was valid during the 1760s for major and well-established artists of the day to mount an exhibition in which their works could be seen, enjoyed and purchased, without intermediate selection by the art trade, then doesn't this idea and belief, which originated in the Enlightenment, still have legitimacy today?

In fact, this year's Summer Exhibition has been wonderfully successful: over £1m sales in the first 24 hours; a magnificent opening party, organised, as ever, by Anya Hindmarch and with a small, private dinner afterwards arranged by Nick Jones in the Cast Corridor of the Royal Academy Schools (why is it that more people don't know about the Royal Academy Schools?); the Wollaston Prize, which is worth £25,000, was won by Yinka Shonibare, who was at the same time given an honorary degree by the Royal College of Art; a room of work by younger artists was selected by Fiona Rae; and architecture was given more space in a display overseen by Sir David Chipperfield. My portrait was painted especially for the exhibition by Leonard McComb (I had to sit for it early in the morning in the weeks leading up to the exhibition) and is representative of the magnificent diversity of work

shown. Trained at the Slade in the early 1950s, McComb still produces work of great formal authority, including, in this year's exhibition, the preparatory sketches he did for mosaics in Westminster Cathedral and a rather cerebral, large watercolour sketch of a lady carrying tulips.

Meanwhile, we have been gearing up for our major autumn exhibition, *Treasures from Budapest: European Masterpieces from Leonardo to Schiele*. In the Eighties, there were lots of exhibitions called "Treasures" of this and that, and I think the genre became slightly discredited from the fact that, often, they were touring exhibitions from collections that were wary of sending their real treasures. But in the case of the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest, our colleagues and, most especially, its director, Dr László Baán, have been sensationally generous in allowing us to show so many of their greatest works in London. The curator of the exhibition, Professor David Ekserdjian, tells the story of how, when he was going round the museum making gentle enquiries as to what might be available for loan, he would ask tentatively if the curators would consider lending a Leonardo drawing, and they would respond by suggesting the loan of a Raphael as well.
I first visited the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest in September 1971 and remember very well taking the tram through the grand 19th-century boulevards of Pest to Heroes' Square. I still have a slightly dog-eared catalogue from that visit, and I am looking forward to seeing so many of its treasures again.
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