

Royal Academicians' Asian Excursion

Royal Academy chief executive Charles Saumarez Smith discusses innovative east-meets-west exhibition Encounter: The Royal Academy in Asia, the interplay of art and craft, and the increasing shift of art world focus to the orient.

Christian Barker: The Royal Academy is now home to many modern artists working in an utterly contemporary fashion. Despite this, do you think the perception continues to linger that the RA is all about classic, traditional, figurative painting?

Charles Saumarez Smith: The academy has changed quite radically over the last 15 years, much more than some people — even possibly including some of the academicians — recognise. Consciously or unconsciously, over the last 10 or so years, they've recruited the younger generations, and the younger generations don't want to be perceived as 'establishment', and certainly don't paint in a traditional way. In a funny way, often I think the academy is actually anti-tradition. I can remember Michael Craig-Martin, who is heavily involved in the exhibition we're showing in Singapore, saying, "I thought I'd joined the establishment. And now, I've discovered I've joined the anti-establishment."

CB: Before taking up your position with the RA, you'd held directorships with government-funded institutions — the National Gallery, the National Portrait Gallery. How have you responded to the challenges of running the Royal Academy, which — though many probably don't realise this — is a privately funded entity, relying on donations and commissions from sales of academicians' work?

CSS: It's tougher. Obviously, if I am in a state-funded institution where 80 percent of the money comes from the government in one cheque every year, it's a rather different order of challenge from an institution which has forever been private. I think people at the academy don't necessarily acknowledge the challenges. There's such a pride in the academy being totally private that people think it's straightforward, but it's not straightforward, because think of the amount of private sector funding you have to obtain and you are always running an organisation which has a higher relative risk, and that risk is challenging, is interesting, keeps the adrenaline running, keeps one on one's toes.

CB: The Encounter exhibition you're currently holding in Singapore — and which will subsequently move on to Qatar — is a cultural exercise, but also, as the artworks are for sale, a commercial enterprise partly in support of the Academy. Was coming to Asia, and showcasing not only British but also Asian artists, a conscious attempt to reach out to Asia, and the increasingly affluent Asian buyer?

CSS: I think that the Royal Academy can be perceived, has been perceived, as a very nationalist institution, which is strong in London and in Great Britain but has not traditionally had a very strong international aspect to it. So I think we were sympathetic to the idea of extending our reach, doing something in partnership, working with Asia. We discussed the need for the academy to reach out to new areas, new and less familiar areas, and some people inevitably were less enthusiastic than others. Interestingly, when it's come to it, all of the artists who were invited to participate in the exhibition agreed, including one who was initially rather cautious. Now, that to me is extremely interesting. Now, everyone wants to be involved.

CB: Unsurprising. There seems to be, today, a great rush to cater to the Asian and in particular, the Chinese consumer. What's your understanding, your take on the Chinese market for art — where it is, where it's going, how it's developing?

CSS: I'm not that knowledgeable about what's happening in Shanghai and Beijing. I have been to Beijing, but I don't have a big knowledge of the major collectors in Shanghai and how they operate. I've spent a bit of time over the last two or three years in Hong Kong, and I went last year to the Hong Kong Art Fair, and I was interested to read in the Financial Times some time ago a big feature about the Hong Kong Art Fair having now set up a colloquium seminar for private collectors. It seems to me

pretty obvious that all the galleries are opening up in Hong Kong — White Cube, Gagosian... They wouldn't be opening if there weren't a sense that there were big collectors there who could be able to sustain their operations. From my perspective, there is a shift in the balance in global collecting. I remember when I was at the National Gallery, there was a meeting of my board of trustees and one of the board members who had been at the helm at the Foreign Office said that by 2015 there would be a half-million Chinese visitors in London, and everybody said, 'Ooh, aah, who could have thought?' There were lots of mouth-agape sceptics, but it's changing, it's changing.

CB: Singapore seems, in a way, an odd choice of venue for the Encounter exhibition. Unlike China or Hong Kong — where, as you point out, there's a vibrant art scene — for the past 50 years Singapore has focused almost solely on economic development and rigid study of the sciences, with artistic pursuits seen as relatively trivial in the scheme of things. It's only recently that this has begun to change.

CSS: Well, in a way this is the experiment isn't it? Here you have a country which is enormously wealthy, and decides that it's been very successful economically and in trade, it's grown into a very developed economy, but it hasn't invested traditionally in the same way in culture, and now it's decided to do so over recent years. In so far as I've seen the museum system is extraordinary, so if you've looked at infrastructure, it's obvious that there is a determined effort to create cultural infusion. In Singapore you do feel that the government is grappling with it in a very systematic and cogent way. I've been trying to identify the extent to which [government investment in developing the arts] is seen as having a benefit economically, because it's part of the creative industries, recognising that a country which can no longer compete in wage terms now has to compete in terms of intellectual property, in terms of the creative industries. Whether or not the investment is actually fundamentally economic, or whether or not it is truly a sense that in order to be a developed culture, you want that kind of artistic practice, that kind of balance... My sense is that in the end, ultimately, it may be a kind of economic determination rather than a cultural determination.

CB: Changing track a little, you're known as something of a dandy, so you obviously have a healthy respect for the sartorial crafts. Do you think there is a link between an appreciation for the craftsmanship and creativity in clothing, and appreciating those same qualities in art?

CSS: I do think that if one pays attention to visual things, one pays attention to all visual things. If one seems interested in works of beauty, creativity, then that should be something endowed to everyday life. Funnily enough the line between art and craft was one of the things I spent ages discussing with postgraduate students at the V&A (Victoria and Albert Museum) and I've sort of forgotten the methodological issues which were involved, but as you will detect, I'm not very keen on boundaries. I think one of the very healthy things which has happened in my lifetime is that areas of practice which were viewed as 'the crafts' have been influenced by art practice in such a way that now, suddenly, they're viewed as arts. Certainly they've been developed. The potter was trained as a potter, a sort of ceramicist, maybe who went from a potter to a ceramicist to a ceramic artist to a fine artist. One of the contemporary artists whom I very much admire, who's now an academician, is Grayson Perry, who I think I admire partly because I respond to and respect the way in which he crosses the boundaries, exactly the boundaries I have been talking about — the boundary in terms of the medium. Ceramics is a medium, a craft, that has been incorporated into the practice of fine art and I think fine art is richer for it.