A Palace of Arts and Learning

I doubt if very many of the people who find their way out of the narrow, traffic-ridden roads on either side of James Gibbs's great, but somewhat neglected, church of St. Martin's-le-Strand and then walk through the slightly secret gateway to Somerset House stop to think that the two branches of the Courtauld Institute on either side of the entrance — the gallery, which is open to the public, on the right-hand side and the academic facilities, including a library and lecture theatre, on the left — occupy a site which was once the very heart of the late eighteenth-century art world.

The reason for this is that the first part of the newly constructed Somerset House to open — that part of the building which fronts immediately onto the Strand and which occupies the relatively narrow neck of building which leads out from the main courtyard of Somerset House into the Strand — once housed not only the Royal Academy of Arts through the small door on the right-hand side as one entered, but also, on the opposite side, the Society of Antiquaries and the Royal Society.

The Royal Academy's first premises had been in an old warehouse which had been built as an auction room on the south side of Pall Mall (on the site now occupied by the Institute of Directors). The founding members took it over in 1768 from Richard Dalton, the King's librarian, who had been running it unsuccessfully for the sale of prints. But this building was quite obviously going to be unsuitable in the longer term, since it was inadequate for the rather grandiose ambitions not only of the members of the Royal Academy, but also of the King on their behalf.

So, in 1771, three years after its foundation, George III offered the Royal Academy a set of rooms in the old Somerset House, still a slightly ramshackle and largely sixteenth-century private palace, which had been owned by the Dukes of Somerset and looked out onto the river Thames. These rooms, which were refurbished at a cost of £600, provided space for the Royal Academy Schools — one to teach drawing from the antique, which was supervised by the Keeper, George Michael Moser, and a second to teach drawing from the life, supervised by the so-called Visitors, members of the Royal Academy who were paid a guinea an evening to teach. There was a lecture room, where fashionable society would come to hear the President, Sir Joshua Reynolds, deliver his Discourses; and a library, which was apparently 'in a small apartment over the archway…in a room looking from the north side of the courtyard'. The Keeper and his daughter, Mary Moser, also an RA, had rooms nearby.

On 7 January 1771, an advertisement appeared announcing that

> Notice is hereby given to the Members and Students, that the Academy is removed to Somerset House, and will open on Monday next 14th Inst. at 5 o'Clo: in the Afternoon.

A week later, the Duke of Cumberland was there to greet the members of the Royal Academy as they arrived at their new premises. On 23 April 1771, which was St. George's Day, the Royal Academy held the

first of its annual dinners to celebrate. They invited the great and the good of eighteenth-century London, including 'the highest in rank and the highest in genius, the poet as well as the prince, the minister of State and the man of trade'. The following year, Thomas Rowlandson was admitted as a student in the Royal Academy Schools and almost immediately got into trouble for disturbing one of the more glamorous female models with his peashooter.

Only three years after the Royal Academy had moved into old Somerset House, the Office of Works, which looked after all public buildings on behalf of the government, realized that the buildings, many of which were not much used and were becoming increasingly dilapidated, would offer the ideal site on which to unite a number of government offices, particularly those connected to the administration of the Royal Navy.

Much to the annoyance of William Chambers, who was Comptroller of the Office of Works as well as Treasurer of the Royal Academy, the task of reconstructing Somerset House was initially given not to Chambers, who, owing to his long experience, extensive knowledge of contemporary buildings in France, and deep understanding of architectural theory, had every possible qualification to undertake the task, but to William Robinson, the Secretary to the Board of Works, who did not. Chambers protested to his boss, Thomas Worsley, writing in June 1774 to complain how Robinson's designs showed 'no mercy for poor Inigo Jones's fine front…nor for a great part of that extensive palace almost new, having only been built about thirty years' and how 'I could easily save both and many thousand pounds, but neither I, nor any of the Board officers are consulted, even in this vast work, which is to contain at least a dozen offices, and which the ground alone is to cost the nation seventy-eight thousand pounds'.

Luckily for Chambers, William Robinson died a year later on 10 October 1775. The task of designing the greatest public building project of the eighteenth century was instead entrusted to Chambers. The great courtyard followed the model of the latest private palaces in Paris and allocated space at the entry into the courtyard to the learned societies. The buildings were intended to be 'an object of national splendour as well as convenience' and an 'Ornament of the Metropolis'.

Work proceeded apace. By 17 March 1780, Chambers was able to report to the Treasury that 'the apartments allotted to the Royal Academy in the new building at Somerset House are now completely finished, and that his Majesty has directed this year's exhibition of pictures to be there'. On 1 May 1780, the first of the summer exhibitions to be held at Somerset House opened to the public. Over 60,000 people came to see it, which would be a respectable number of visitors to an exhibition today and brought in a record £3,069 in admission fees. The *Public Advertiser* described how 'the happy Arrangement of the Pictures, and the Magnificence of the Apartments, render it a very grand *Spectacle*…not to be equalled in any part of Europe'.

The Schools of the Royal Academy opened slightly later in the same year on 16 October 1780. Sir Joshua Reynolds, as President, delivered the ninth of his discourses, which he had given biennially since 1773. He was able to describe how

> This building in which we are now assembled will remain to many future ages an illustrious specimen of the architect's abilities. It is our duty to endeavour that those who gaze with wonder at the structure may not be disappointed when they visit the apartments. It will be no small addition to the glory which this nation has already acquired, from having given birth to eminent men in every part of science, if it should be enabled to produce, in consequence of this institution, a school of English artists.

What would the building have felt like for a visitor to the first Summer Exhibition held in Somerset House in 1780 or for one of members of the Royal Academy arriving at the building for the first time to hear Reynolds's discourse ?

The front door had a bust of Michelangelo over it done by the sculptor, Joseph Wilton, who had been one of the founder members of the Royal Academy and succeeded George Michael Moser as the Keeper. One then came into an entrance hall, not large, about twenty-five feet square, with a fine pair of Doric columns flanking a short flight of stairs which led to a somewhat compressed and steep semi-circular staircase beyond. On either side were casts of two *Centaurs*, which signaled the commitment of the Royal Academy to the study of the antique. On the right hand side was the life room, where students were able to draw not only from male models, which had long been regarded as a central part of the training of artists, with two different male models available for classes every week, paid five shillings a week as a retainer and an extra shilling for every sitting, but also from a female model who was available '3 nights every other week', but only for the benefit of students who were married or over the age of twenty-one.

At the back of the entrance hall was the staircase which took visitors (somewhat precipitously) upstairs and which was later depicted by Thomas Rowlandson in an aquatint of visitors to the Summer Exhibition tumbling down. On the first floor was a grand Library with a ceiling painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds, which showed *The Theory of Painting*. On the left of the Library was the so-called Antique Academy, where students were able to draw from a number of casts of the greatest statues of antiquity, including the Apollo Belvedere and the Belvedere Torso, some of which had been removed by Moser from the old St. Martin's Lane Academy, one of the antecedents of the Royal Academy where Moser had taught in the 1730s. There was north light from windows looking out onto the Strand and, in an apse at the west end, a stove to provide heat. Beyond the Antique Gallery was the Meeting Room, where the business of the Royal Academy was conducted: regular meetings of the so-called General Assembly, in which new members were elected, and of the Council, which met surprisingly often to oversee the conduct of affairs, including the issuing of rules and the admission of students.

On the top floor, guarded by a Greek inscription which read 'Let No Stranger to the Muses Enter', was an ante-room, which in turn led into the so-called 'Great Room', rather too small for the number of pictures it had to contain, top-lit by large, semi-circular lunettes and hung every year from near the floor

to the ceiling by paintings submitted by painters besides those shown by members of the Royal Academy themselves. The best of the works were hung on the line those requiring closer attention at eye level, and the less good skied at the top of the room, while others were ignominiously hung either in the ante-room or, worse, downstairs, with architectural drawings shown on the first floor and sculpture in the Life Room.

This then was the set of spaces — the theatre —, rather cramped and confined, in which many of the activities of the art world took place for a period of fifty-six years from 1780 through to 1836, when the Royal Academy moved to the eastern half of the new National Gallery. It was here that the annual dinner was held and where fashionable society came to see and admire the latest works of art in early May, crowding the rooms to such an extent that a German visitor, Gebhard Wendeborn, complained how the rooms were 'often so crowded with gentlemen and ladies, with pretended connoisseurs and supercilious critics, who all come to stare at the pictures that, in the middle of the day some ladies are ready to faint, on account of the heat of the rooms, and the powerful perfumes of the odiferous company [with] which they are filled'.

Thomas Lawrence arrived as a student in the Schools in September 1788, looking like 'a young Raffaelle' with chestnut locks flowing on his shoulders' and, the following year, the young J.M.W. Turner was admitted to the Schools. In 1790, the members were getting discontented with Reynolds as President, now old and nearly blind and they refused to elect, as Reynolds had wanted, Joseph Bonomi as Professor of Perspective. He resigned in high dudgeon. But he was persuaded to remain and delivered the last of his great Discourses in December 1790. He died in February 1792 and, on 3 March 1792, the officers of the Royal Academy — dressed in black cloaks — led the funeral procession which took two hours to travel from Somerset House to St. Paul's.

Benjamin West was elected to succeed Reynolds as President and remained as President through to 1820, a much less accomplished lecturer than Reynolds, still with the remnant of an American accent, but having the advantage of the ear of the King. But the mood of the times was changing. One of the members of the Royal Academy, Thomas Banks, was arraigned on grounds of being 'a violent republican'. Meetings of the General Assembly were often fractious. In 1799, the Irish artist James Barry was dismissed on grounds that he was openly critical in his Lectures as Professor of Painting of the officers and practices of the Royal Academy, and Benjamin West, like Reynolds, was compelled to resign for a period in 1805.

In 1805, the Swiss artist, Henry Fuseli, took over as Keeper in the Schools. In contrast to Joseph Wilton, his predecessor, who was rather refined, Fuseli was an intellectual, short and prone to swearing, always with a book in his hand, and interested at least as much in the content of art as he was in its practice. Benjamin Robert Haydon, when he was a student in the Schools, described how Fuseli would all of a sudden 'burst out with a quotation from Homer, Tasso, Dante, Ovid, Virgil, or perhaps the Nibelungen, and thunder round to me with 'paint dat'. Perhaps not surprisingly, the practice of art took a historical turn.

The decade from 1810 to 1820 was less beset by squabbles. In 1813, Benjamin West went with Thomas Lawrence, Robert Smirke and Joseph Farington to a dinner on Shooter's Hill to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of his arrival in England and was able to reminisce how 'the establishment of the Royal Academy had done much in giving dignity to the Arts, and that too much could not be done to preserve its importance'.

The Dulwich Picture Gallery, established by the will of Noel Desenfans in 1811, allowed the Schools to borrow works from the collection to copy. At the same time, the purchase of the Elgin Marbles by parliament for the British Museum meant that students were granted permission to go and study there, while the collection of casts in the Royal Academy Schools was enriched by new copies made in the Vatican Museum on the instruction of the Prince Regent, who also lent one of the Raphael Cartoons. In 1816, the Royal Academy added works on loan from private collectors to its School of Painting, which it established in one of the top floor rooms alongside the Great Room — Sebastiano del Piombo's *Pope Julius II*, which belonged to John Julius Angerstein, and Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne*¸ which then belonged to a jeweller, Thomas Hamlet. These were works which were soon to grace the National Gallery in Angerstein's house on Pall Mall.

All of this makes it sound as if, by 1820, when Thomas Lawrence succeeded as President, the Royal Academy was becoming boringly respectable. But there were presumably still students who behaved with less decorum, such as Richard Redgrave who described how during his time as a student, they would meet 'to drink ale-grog or egg-flip and to discuss our art and its difficulties. Sometimes we sat to one another as models for our pictures; sometimes we sketched; and sometimes, but rarely, we had a game of cards'.

From 1810 onwards, there was more criticism of the Royal Academy, not least from artists who were not elected as members and with writers like William Hazlitt denouncing it as 'a society of lucksters in the Fine Arts, who are more tenacious of their profits as chapmen and dealers, than of the honour of the Arts'. Indeed, by the 1830s, many felt that the Royal Academy was too oligarchic, its benefits confined to London and of no use to the manufacturers of the north, whose views were increasingly stridently represented in the House of Commons. In 1835, William Ewart proposed the establishment of a Select Committee 'to enquire into the best means of extending a knowledge of the Arts and Principles of Design among the people (especially the Manufacturing Population) of the Country; also to enquire into the Constitution of the Royal Academy, and the effects produced by it'. The Royal Academy survived, but, in moving from Somerset House to Trafalgar Square in 1836, the sense of close proximity of artists, students and teachers all meeting hugger-mugger on the staircase and in the entrance hall of Somerset House was lost forever.

What emerges from any study of the Royal Academy in this era between the late eighteenth century and the more decorous period of the 1820s is what a small and intense world it was, inflated by a strong sense of its own grandiosity, riven by intense jealousies, stimulated by a sense of competition amongst the artists jockeying for space in the Great Room. All the major artists knew one another. Students met

older artists through their teaching in the Schools. Artists painted in an increasingly flamboyant style in order to command the best position in the annual exhibition, most of all Turner who used to arrive on varnishing day to ladle on high-coloured pigment as if with a trowel. They would all meet for dinner in the local taverns, while Benjamin West allowed the students to come and visit him at a morning levée. Meanwhile, the existence of the annual exhibition allowed for the growth of a proper public for art, mainly amongst the elite, but becoming broader and more democratic in the early nineteenth century with the development of other, more commercial galleries, the opening of the British Institution, and the increasing availability of art criticism in newspapers and periodicals.

So it was that from these small rooms alongside the entrance to Somerset House that the greatest artists of the nineteenth century emerged, including the extraordinarily precocious Thomas Lawrence, JMW Turner who was Professor of Perspective at the Royal Academy and delivered an annual series of lectures in an inaudible mumble, and John Constable who was a late developer, endlessly hoping that he might one day be elected to the ranks of the Academicians, which he only achieved towards the end of his life.

We are used to the idea of an art world which is increasingly global and cosmopolitan, with the activity of art spread out across the city as a whole. But in the late eighteenth century, the art world was dominated by the events and activities which took place within these few beautifully ornamented rooms at the entrance to Somerset House, where students were trained, where the sculptor Nollekens would hold forth to a group of students in the entrance hall, where upstairs the leading artists would meet to transact the business of the Royal Academy, and, on the top floor, the *bon ton* would assemble to examine with their eye glasses what the best artists of the day had produced during the year.

Bibliography

The standard monograph on William Chambers remains John Harris, *Sir William Chambers: Knight of the Polar Star*, London, 1970, to be supplemented by John Newman, *Somerset House: Splendour and Order*, London, 1990 and the essays in John Harris and Michael Snodin (eds.), *Sir William Chambers: Architect to George III*, London and New Haven, 1996. For the history of the Royal Academy, the most recent, scholarly study is Holger Hoock, *The King's Artists: The Royal Academy of Arts and the Politics of British Culture 1760-1840*, Oxford, 2003, which should be read alongside James Fenton's more popular *A School of Genius: A History of the Royal Academy of the Arts*, London, 2006. Neither has wholly superceded two older histories, William Sandby, *The History of the Royal Academy of Arts from its foundation in 1768 to the present time*, 2 vols., London, 1862 and Sidney Hutchison, *The History of the Royal Academy 1768-1968*, London, 1968, both of which contain original source material. For a detailed study of how the exhibitions of the Royal Academy looked, see David Solkin (ed.), *Art on the Line: the Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House 1780-1836*, New Haven and London, 2001.