

# The Diary:

## Charles Saumarez Smith

The Royal Academy chief pays homage to history by recreating meals the artists ate while they were dreaming of an Academy

I have become an addict of the Maltby Street Market on Saturday mornings, where one can get everything one needs to eat at the weekend in a curious architectural no-man's land in Bermondsey, south-east London. There's a branch of St John that sells great, fat chocolate brownies and bread at half the price they charge in Whole Foods. But I prefer the bread they sell up the road at Jacob's Ladder Farms, where customers are given a lecture on the art of bread-making and then charged £8 for a loaf. Some of the better suppliers have been forced to move eastwards where they operate through a little gate under Greek revival railway arches. They include the Kernel Brewery, which serves strong beer first thing in the morning. I like the sense that the market is slightly 18th century in terms of small suppliers who are coming direct to market, cutting out the middle men and serving the pleasures of the table direct.

Last Saturday, in the evening, I went to dinner with Christopher Le Brun, president of the Royal Academy, to meet Nicholas Watkins, an art historian who taught for many years at the University of Warwick, and his wife Nadia. They were both students at the Courtauld at the time that Anthony Blunt was unmasked as a spy. Nadia said the atmosphere was slightly uncomfortable. Blunt lived in the flat upstairs and students intuited that something was going wrong with his life without knowing quite what.

Watkins has written an exceptionally well informed article for the *Sculpture Journal* about Le Brun's foray into sculpture, which is now of long standing although he is still known principally as a painter. Seeing the photographs of his maquette for a competition for a monumental sculpture at Ebbsfleet, I cannot but regret that the jury did not choose his mythological wing set against a concave disc. Of course, it was a more conventional work than Mark Wallinger's hyper-realistic child's horse but it had the advantage that it might actually have been built, whereas the colossal horse turns out to be too costly and, I suspect, too likely to blow down.

Some time ago, art historian Dan Cruickshank organised a dinner at his house in Spitalfields for the patrons of the Royal Academy. He arranged for experimental chef Caroline Hobkinson to cook what she called a "gastrogeographical" journey in which each course illuminated an epoch in the history of Spitalfields, including oysters served with pickled shallots, ale and pepper in homage to Sam Weller, a character in Charles Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers*, who remarks that "poverty and oysters always seem to go together".

The meal was so enjoyable that I rashly agreed to do something similar when my book on the early history of the Royal Academy is published this month. The offer completely ruined my summer holiday as I spent the whole time fretting about how I was going to recreate the meals the artists ate while they were dreaming of establishing an Academy. It's known that members of the Sublime Society of Beefsteaks – which was set up by an artist, George Lambert, and included William Hogarth – used to eat beefsteak (of course) together with baked potatoes, onions, chopped shallots and toasted cheese. There is also a single menu surviving from one of the Academy's 18th-century annual dinners but it's not much help as a precedent as it includes fish and sauce, ham, fowls, greens, pigeon pye, roast beef, tongue and turtle, all apparently eaten at the same time. I wanted to serve turtle soup, a great 18th-

century delicacy, until my wife pointed out that turtles were an endangered species. In the end, we chickened out. My wife discovered that she had booked tickets to go to *Götterdämmerung*, and I luckily found out that the Royal Academy's in-house caterer is expert at preparing historic meals. So, we were all able to sit down to a meal that started with mock turtle broth (at the time a very standard substitute for the real thing that could be either bought at, or delivered by, the East India Coffee and Chop House). It also included beefsteak pie and ended, very appropriately, with lashings of syllabub washed down with the best Royal Academy claret.

Last Wednesday, Pace opened its new gallery on the ground floor of 6 Burlington Gardens, the building just to the north of the Royal Academy. They have restored the west room with its strange, cast-iron, late 19th-century columns, which make the room look as if it belongs in Chelsea, New York. Pace has made good use of the scale of the space by installing an exhibition of the emptily atmospheric seascapes of Hiroshi Sugimoto alongside works by Mark Rothko.

I had assumed there would be a certain amount of hostility to an upmarket New York gallery going in to the ground floor of a citadel of culture. But it shows how much the art world has changed that it is the commercial art galleries as much as the not-for-profits that can afford to show free exhibitions of the highest quality.

Upstairs in 6 Burlington Gardens, we have assembled a collection of the work of nearly all the current RAs, together with many honorary RAs, including work by Anselm Kiefer, Frank Gehry and Cindy Sherman, in preparation for an auction to be held on Tuesday, the day before Frieze opens. What we discovered when we were fundraising to renovate the old Museum of Mankind building was that the first question many donors asked was what the RAs themselves were contributing. The answer is that they have all been encouraged to give works of art for sale by auction and have responded with spectacular generosity. Bidding began last week on a microsite ([www.ra-now-onlineauction.com](http://www.ra-now-onlineauction.com)). It's in a good cause.

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