The True Origins of the Royal Academy

A place to train the next generation: "The Academicians of the Royal Academy" (1771-72) by Johann Zoffany

I spent my summer holiday last year in our cottage in Anglesey off the north coast of Wales. Because our children are now grown up and we have visited the local castles many times, I had slightly more time than I normally do to think about aspects of the history of the Royal Academy, which have interested and puzzled me.

Although I think I have pretty much read the standard histories of the Royal Academy, including the recent histories by Holger Hoock, now a Professor of British History in Pittsburgh, entitled The King's Artists, and by James Fenton, the poet and Royal Academy's Antiquary, I had been slightly confused and perplexed as to the precise chronology of its foundation and the respective role of the various protagonists involved in it. I knew that the architect, William Chambers, had been closely involved and that there was a suggestion, put forward by the Royal Academy's current librarian, Nick Savage, that Chambers was actually much more significant to the foundation than Joshua Reynolds. But, more especially, I was preoccupied by a set of problems and issues relating to the founding of the Royal Academy which have engaged me since becoming its Secretary and Chief Executive in 2007 and which are perhaps particular to my role as Secretary.

One of the things I discovered when I joined the Royal Academy was that a number of the Academicians are extraordinarily interested in, and knowledgeable about, the so-called Laws of the Royal Academy, those rules which govern its procedures and which were first published in a small volume, of which only a single copy is known to exist, in March 1769. These Laws are believed to vest the ultimate authority for the running of the institution in the members of the Royal Academy—the Royal Academicians—through the meetings of the so-called General Assembly, which consists of as many of the Academicians as can attend all gathered together (I assume based on the Greek idea that democracy takes place in the αγορα). They think of it as their parliament and, as in parliament, they regard it as their responsibility to comment on, and criticise, the actions of the executive. I confess that I do not regard my greatest forte as being knowledge and understanding of, or even a particular interest in, the niceties of bureaucratic procedure. I am not one of those people who, in attending meetings of committees, feel that it is my moral responsibility to hold the chairman to account on grounds of protocol. Yet, when I arrived at the Royal Academy as its Secretary, I discovered that I was expected to know the so-called Laws by heart and to understand the minutiae of their operation. I was encouraged to keep them by my bed and to read them every night before going to sleep. I was expected, following the historic expectations of the role of Secretary, to be the guardian of process, the person who could quote precedent, and adjudicate on different interpretations of the Laws.

A long time ago, I was trained and worked as an 18th-century historian at the Warburg Institute. I became interested in the question: who on earth could have written these Laws? Who, in the mid-18th century, at the high noon of the Enlightenment, in a circle of people which included the great political philosopher, Edmund Burke, could have devised an organisation of such magnificent, nearly Byzantine complexity, in which there is such a nice view of the appropriate balance of authority that it is not clear, and has not been for nearly 250 years, whether or not the authority for decision-making lies with the organisation's Council or its General Assembly and where there is such a clear and obvious determination to avoid the abrogation of power in the hands of a single person, so that power is neatly distributed in nearly equal fashion between four so-called officers: the President, who is the source of ultimate authority but who has to submit himself to annual election in order to be held directly answerable to the organisation's electorate; the Treasurer, who holds the purse strings and whom Reynolds used to describe as the Viceroy, because William Chambers, the first Treasurer, was the person who had direct access to the King; the Keeper, who is in charge of the Royal Academy Schools, an important part of the organisation and who, in the early days, was responsible for looking after the day-to-day running of the establishment (not just the Schools); and the Secretary, who is expected to be the guardian of due process.

Of course, this system is not so unusual in organisations and learned societies. There are versions of it in other equivalent organisations founded before the Royal Academy, like the Royal Society and the Society of Antiquaries. But, in the case of the Royal Academy—and this was the issue which interested me most of all—the exact way in which the system was planned to operate was established and laid out in a set of rules in the space of just over ten days between Monday, November 28, 1768, when four people went to visit King George III in St James's Palace to talk about the idea of establishing a Royal Academy, and Saturday, December 10, 1768, when 28 artists returned to St James's Palace to celebrate the new institution's foundation. How on earth was it that an entire organisation, which has lasted nearly 250 years, was dreamed up and devised, with all its attendant rules of procedure, in the space of just over ten days? Who wrote the rules? How and why did they devise them in the way that they did?

So, at a table looking out over the mountains of Snowdonia, I sat down to try to work out the answer, at least for my own benefit. I put down the date November 28, 1768 in large letters onto a document on my word processor and wrote out what I thought had happened that day, who were the four people who went to see the King, something of their nature, experience and personality, why they thought it might be a good idea to establish a Royal Academy, and to speculate on what the King is likely to have said in reply. I stuck as far as I could to the facts as I knew them. I resisted any temptation I might have had (I never actually was tempted) to introduce false dialogue or to embroider the facts as they are known. But I did very much want to establish, at least in my own mind, and I hope now in that of the reader, the personality and motivation of those people who were involved.

As soon as I had written out what happened on November 28, 1768, I realised that it was completely impossible to understand why that group of four people—the architect, William Chambers, the young American painter, Benjamin West, the much older Swiss artist and teacher, George Michael Moser, and the fashionable court painter, Francis Cotes—had managed to obtain an audience with the King without understanding the circumstances which had led up to their visit and the quarrel which had split the so-called Society of Artists, the professional organisation which had been founded in 1761 and was the immediate predecessor of the Royal Academy. At this point, I should confess that, in putting together a bag of books to take with me on holiday, I hadn't managed to locate in the disorder of my study Matthew Hargrave's absolutely admirable and definitive book on the Society of Artists, published under the title Candidates for Fame: The Society of Artists of Great Britain, 1760–1791 and, in retrospect rather stupidly, I was too mean to order a duplicate. So, I began to try to work out on the basis of my rather fragmentary and incomplete notes the exact set of circumstances, again as far as possible day-by-day, which had led William Chambers to march out of a meeting of the Society of Artists in a great rage on Friday, November 4, 1768. In this, I was guided not so much by detailed

research on the surviving archive of the Society of Artists, which Matthew undertook for his doctorate, but by a knowledge, which I have myself experienced, as to how a group of artists can get incredibly upset and angry about issues concerned with hierarchy, where their works are hung in exhibitions, and who holds authority in any organisation which in any way represents their professional interests and, by implication, their status. It could be that this is true of any professional organisation and it is just possible that the Society of Antiquaries and the Royal Society in the 18th century were as full of friction, feuds and professional in-fighting as was the Society of Artists. But I doubt it. There seems to have been something special about artists in the 1760s: the numbers of them who were involved in the Society of Artists; their professional jealousies; and the differences of opinion between the younger and more ambitious artists, who were interested in new types of subject matter, and the older and more established artists, who the younger ones felt were hogging all the best positions in their annual exhibitions and were keeping power in a small group without allowing the younger artists to be represented among the so-called Directors of the Society.

It's an age-old conflict between those with long professional experience, who felt they had a right to run the Society of Artists, and the young Turks, who used to go boozing in the evening and singing glees and were, following the example of William Hogarth, very anti-authority. This conflict was made more difficult in the 1760s— and, I occasionally think, in the 21st century as well—by the fact that artists tend to spend all day alone in their studios, their status can be measured by where their work is hung in an exhibition, and they are not, in general, used to the disciplines of mediating differences of opinion through systems of organisation. The result was that arguments within the Society of Artists caused a group of artists led by William Chambers, who had a fairly high opinion of himself, to walk out of the Society of Artists, which was a comparatively democratic organisation, in order to establish a rival, and professionally superior, organisation under the direct authority—and with the blessing—of the King.

By now I was enjoying myself. What had begun as a holiday pastime was developing into an attempt to try and understand, under the microscope of narrative description, exactly what was the movement of the various individuals involved in the establishment of the Royal Academy, what they thought and felt, how they coalesced, using as far as possible and in so far as I had access to them, original documentary sources, most of which have been published, rather than secondary authorities, and using, as far as I felt able to—while, I hope, respecting the documentary sources—an imaginative reconstruction as to who the people were, the differences in their personalities, and their social attitudes. If I brought to the exercise any particular skills, they were not ones of research, but of a reasonably long experience of, and interest in, the tensions which surround any system of professional organisation and a particular experience of how the Royal Academy operates and feels today. Of course, there is a risk of anachronism, of reading back into the past too much of the experience of today. But I would like to think that my experience gives me a particular form of interpretative and analytic sympathy with the micro-politics of these 18th-century debates.

Having tracked back to what happened between June and November 1768 in order to give an understanding of what led to the four artists going to see the King on November 28, 1768, I tracked forward to find out what happened as a result of this visit: the rumours which surrounded the imminent establishment of the Royal Academy; the efforts which were made to coerce Joshua Reynolds into becoming President; the dinner which was held on Friday, December 9 at Joseph Wilton's house next to his sculptor's yard in Portland Street; and the meeting which was held the following day at St James's Palace, when, according to the first description of what happened, recorded in the first minutes of Council, the so-called Instrument of Foundation was "laid before his Majesty who signified His Approbation and Ordered that the Plan should be put in execution, signing the Instrument with his own Hand".

Describing what happened in the next three months was relatively plain sailing because it is all recorded in the early minutes of Council. I think that by now I had a reasonably clear view of the

process which went into the writing of the Laws, which was that they had to be put together at some speed between the time when the four artists went to see the King and the day of the Royal Academy's foundation, based on long-standing ideas and plans which had been first drawn up in 1749 and during the 1750s, when there had been repeated attempts to establish some form of academy. There followed a period of three months when the newly established Council talked about and discussed how the organisation would operate in detail, and in particular how the Royal Academy Schools would be run. I found that by writing about what happened as far as possible day-by-day one got a rather different feel for the way the organisation was established: not, as one might expect, all at once, but pragmatically, making up the rules as they went along. I also found that by establishing a chronological narrative, some aspects of the foundation, which are perfectly familiar, appeared differently. For example, Reynolds's first Discourse, delivered on Monday, January 2, 1769, was not, as it is often described, a calm and considered set of reflections on the state of artistic practice but, on the contrary, had to be written at speed in the space of the fortnight over Christmas and in between a number of meetings of the Academy's newly established Council. He did not have the time for calm reflection about the practice of art. And, although the letter has been previously published, I would like to think that the suggestion in a letter written by Joshua Sharpe, a lawyer in the Inner Temple, to Edmund Burke that Reynolds might have tried to resign in February is extremely likely to have been true. In fact, from the detailed narrative, it is quite clear that Reynolds needed quite a bit of convincing that the Royal Academy was a good idea, rather resented having been co-opted by royal fiat, and was upset that he was the only person not to be paid. This is quite different from the more traditional view of him as the éminence grise behind its establishment.

By the time I had got to March 1769 in describing what was happening in terms of the micro-politics of the weekly Council meetings, I felt that I had more or less accomplished what I had originally set out to do. On Friday, March 17, Council ordered the Laws to be printed, together with all the by-laws as an appendix. Only one copy survives in the Royal Academy's archive. This was the original blueprint for the organisation, which I had wanted to understand. But, at this point, I recognised that there was a fundamental weakness in what I had done. It's all very well to study a historical process—in this case, the establishment of a historically important organisation—through a day-by-day description as to exactly what happened. You gain an understanding of the texture of events, the extent to which they are contingent and accidental—the sense of a historical process as a process, which can be reconstructed and, to an extent, deconstructed. But, at the same time, of course, you lose the longer perspective, the sense that events are not arbitrary, but are, at least to some extent, predetermined. In order to understand the micro-narrative, you needed some understanding of the many previous attempts to establish an academy and of the different types of artists' organisations which had been set up in England throughout the first half of the 18th century before the Society of Artists was formed in 1761. Luckily or unluckily (I'm never entirely sure which) I had been asked the previous year to give a lecture about the establishment of the Royal Academy in which I had chosen to do it through the longue durée, going back to Renaissance Italy and to the establishment of the Accademia di San Luca in Rome in 1593. So, I had a ready-made introduction, lightly covering the previous two centuries of artists' academies in order to provide a prelude to the évènements of 1768.

At this stage, my writing was no more than a holiday recreation, trying to understand for my own purposes why the Royal Academy had come into being in the way that it did, why it is structured in the way that it is, who was responsible for its system of organisation. I am the first to acknowledge that institutional history is not everyone's cup of tea; that it's extremely hard to make the life of ancient committee meetings interesting; and plenty of people have said, either politely or slightly less politely, that people are interested in reading about artists as artists, not as members of an organisation, even an organisation as historically significant as the Royal Academy. But, of course, you cannot wholly disaggregate the practice of art from the circumstances in which it is practised. The establishment of the Royal Academy gave the next generation of artists a place where they could be trained. It gave the artists who were involved in establishing it a sense of their artistic, as well as their social, prestige. We

are nearly all in one way or other involved in organisations and in the social networks which surround them. The way they operate, and their culture, bears historical analysis. After all, there's a huge literature on the management of modern organisations. I see no reason why some of the same analysis should not be applied to organisations and their culture in the past.

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