Art and Public Culture in the 1830s and today

Keynote lecture for *Victorian Futures – 1832 – 1837*
14 May 2015

A Ministry of the Arts, under the auspices of the Crown: This 1772 dedication leaf by Francesco Bartolozzi to Sir William Chambers's "A Dissertation on Oriental Gardening" shows George III opposite the Royal Academy, then located at Somerset House (courtesy of Royal Academy Collections)

The Royal Academy was founded in 1768 by George III as the main public institution for the arts in London, responsible for the teaching of pretty well all the major artists of the period and for an annual public exhibition. At the time, it was the main point of access for the majority of the population to the practice of contemporary art. But, during the 1830s, it essentially turned its back on the possibility of a public, quasi-governmental role and on funding by national government and instead chose to maintain its status as a private institution run by artists.

This is, not surprisingly, still very much a live issue for the RA. It jealously guards its independence from central government; it is not beholden to the civil service, and feels passionately that this allows it to act in the interests of artistic freedom, unswayed by the temporary interests of party or the interfering tendencies of politicians.

In order to understand the significance of what happened in the 1830s and the shift in the role of the RA from being a lead organisation for the promotion of the arts in society to being perceived, at least by parliament, as a much more private fiefdom, it is necessary to go back to the 1760s, the period of the academy's formation and the beginning of a movement that argued parliament should take an interest in the education of the public in the arts: not just in the movement which led to the establishment of the Royal Academy, but in the failed attempt on the part of John Wilkes to establish a National Gallery. In his book The King's Artists: The Royal Academy of Arts and the Politics of British Culture 1760-1840 (Clarendon Press, 2005), Holger Hoock makes a revisionist case for thinking about the RA not just as a private institution, a kind of artists' club, but instead, as an agency of public policy in the arts, responsible not just for an annual public exhibition, enriching the commercial interests of the individual artists whose work was hung, but also for the promotion of a national school of art through its teaching. George III took a deep personal interest in its foundation and some aspects of its operation represented his interest in the role of kingship having a cultural dimension. He was insistent that it should be founded with a proper legal framework for its operation. He gave advice on who should be elected as members. He bought works from its annual exhibition. And, to begin with at least, he paid many of the bills, subsidising its operation from the privy purse. It was a Royal Academy, founded by, and answerable to, the king rather than to parliament, but it was nonetheless viewed as a public institution, responsible for teaching, for initiatives in the arts, and for representing the interests of artists, including providing them with salaries, through teaching posts, and pensions. It was set up as a kind of Ministry of the Arts, but under the auspices of the Crown.

During the late 18th and early 19th century, there were many occasions when the government turned to the Royal Academy for advice. Many of the academicians were involved in the establishment of the Committee of Taste which was responsible for the erection of memorials to those who had distinguished themselves in fighting in the Napoleonic Wars. There was a public mood in support of appropriate forms of commemoration of the great military and naval victories of Nelson and Wellington, and memorials were set up throughout Britain designed by sculptors like Richard Westmacott who were specialists in the neoclassical style. Academicians helped support the establishment of the first public art gallery at Dulwich and academicians made the public case for the acquisition of the Elgin Marbles by the government as a way of improving public taste. Based at Somerset House, which was itself designed as, in Edmund Burke's words, "a national building", the RA operated alongside the Society of Antiquaries, the Royal Society and many of the offices of the civil service, including the Stamp Office, the Tax Office and the Navy Office. Here were the agencies of public policy in the arts, the sciences as well as the government of the navy.

So, what happened in the 1830s? The first thing was that the government decided to build a new, grand, neoclassical building right in the heart of Westminster, close to the Houses of Parliament, to house, on the east side, the recently established National Gallery and, on the west side, to provide much larger and more publicly visible premises for the Royal Academy. I don't think that historians have registered the formidable public symbolism involved in the Office of Works being commissioned to create a public building which, on its east side, was intended to contain the works of art from the past for the purposes of public instruction and, on its west side, the main institution for the training of artists. Architectural historians have always been critical of the National Gallery as a public building as being too long and low, and inadequately monumental, but the reason surely that it was designed in the way that it was is that it was planned in order to house not one but two separate public institutions. The length of its façade reflects this fact. It wasn't quite the classical temple envisaged by John Nash for the centre of Trafalgar Square, but it was a visible manifestation of the commitment of government to the display of, and support for, the fine arts.

The Great Reform Bill of 1832 was a moment when the nature of government moved from being the concern of a relatively small, and largely London-based, oligarchic élite to a much wider-based and more democratic group. It brought into the House of Commons and into the activities of government a number of northern, more radical MPs, who wanted the government to give thought to how an effective system of art training could improve the quality of manufactures and who resented what they regarded as the monopolistic and restrictive system of teaching operated by the academy because it was, and always had been, dominated by ideals of high art, rather than practical design. These MPs, known as Philosophical Radicals, argued for a much wider definition of the role and responsibilities of government, a government which took seriously its cultural responsibilities for purposes of general education: some of their ideas were what we would regard as instrumental, powerfully influenced by the writings and ideas of the circle round Jeremy Bentham; but many of them were also idealistic, believing that it was possible for government to improve the living conditions and opportunities for learning of the population at large.

One of the consequences of the Great Reform Bill was the establishment not long afterwards of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Arts and Manufactures under the auspices of the Board of Trade, which was set up in order to look at the question of how far the government could, and should, involve itself in the arts and in the training of artists, as well as investigating the strengths, and more especially the weaknesses, of the Royal Academy. Its purposes were to "enquire into the best means of extending a knowledge of the Arts and of the 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". It met in two stages, first in 1835, with a large and representative membership, and then in 1836 with a much-slimmed-down membership, which was regarded as an effective sleight of hand by William Ewart, the radical MP for Liverpool and its chairman, since it was now dominated by radicals, including Joseph Hume, MP for Manchester, John Bowring, the former editor of the Benthamite Westminster Review, and Thomas Wyse. The presumption behind the establishment of the committee and the beliefs of many of its more prominent members was that the government should be much more active and interventionist; that it should not just sit on its hands and allow for a laissez-faire political economy, but should set up museums and art schools and improve the quality of design in manufactured goods, and should expect to do so through the use of public institutions, regulated by parliament and through the expenditure of public money.

The establishment of the parliamentary select committee coincided with an increasing number of attacks in the press and from artists themselves. They argued that the Royal Academy itself needed to be reformed, that it was the preserve of a small coterie of artists rather than being representative, as was the Society of British Artists, of artists at large. It was accused of having "converted the republic of art into an aristocracy". Benjamin Robert Haydon, the artist who had been a vocal critic of the academy ever since one of his large mythological pictures on the subject of Dentatus was moved into an outside room in the annual exhibition in 1809, attacked its failure to establish an effective school of history painting. He used the opportunities afforded him by a commission from Lord Grey to paint the Reform Banquet in the Guildhall to bend the ear of Whig MPs on the benefits of providing public money to support the practice of art. There was, simultaneously and certainly supported by Haydon, a movement in the House of Commons, led by William Ewart, demanding that, if the RA was to be housed at government expense in a new building in Trafalgar Square, then its affairs should be subject to effective government scrutiny. As Martin Archer Shee wrote in his two-volume biography of his father, Sir Martin Archer Shee, the then President of the Royal Academy:

In the eyes of these gentlemen, the Academy was a royal or aristocratic institution to attack — an exclusive and privileged body to destroy. Its existence was an offence against commercial freedom and social equality. Its avowed object, its legitimate functions, and its acknowledged services, they were neither solicitous to examine nor qualified to appreciate.

At the committee hearings, it was pointed out that there were plenty of 18th-century artists, including Sir Joshua Reynolds himself, as well as Richard Wilson, James Barry and John Flaxman, who had managed to become artists perfectly well without the benefits of an academy training. Not surprisingly, representatives of the broader-based Society of British Artists felt that the academy was unhelpful in the way that it monopolised the system of honours for artists. There was a strong feeling on the part of the academicians that the committee asked first for evidence to be given by those who were known to be hostile to it, including the artists John Martin and Benjamin Robert Haydon, and only afterwards asked the president, secretary and treasurer to appear before it. Adversaries of the academy attacked all aspects of the way it operated, the way members were elected, the extent to which academicians dominated its annual exhibition, and the state of the Royal Academy Schools.

Haydon, the most consistently vocal and effective of the academy's adversaries, was asked if it was governed by charter "like other public bodies". He answered:

No; they only exist by the royal pleasure; they cunningly refused George the Fourth's offer of a charter, fearing it would make them responsible; they are a private society, which they always put forward when you wish to examine them, and they always proclaim themselves a public society when they want to benefit by any public vote.

He was asked what he most disapproved of in the academy, surely itself an indication of the prejudices of the select committee. He answered:

Its exclusiveness, its total injustice . . . The artists are at the mercy of a despotism whose unlimited power tends to destroy all feeling for right or justice; forty men do as they please, it is the fact; the people have an appeal constitutionally, but the artists have no appeal; the academy is a House of Lords without appeal. It is an anomaly in the history of any constitutional people, the constitution of this academy; I cannot conceive how it could have been framed, upon investigating it. It is extraordinary how men, brought up as Englishmen, could set up such a system of government.

On June 15, 1836, Sir Martin Archer Shee was at long last invited to respond as president. Haydon recorded in his diary: “This day thou knowest what is to happen. O God, I ask only for justice and truth to triumph.” Shee was, not surprisingly, on the back foot. His son, who was a lawyer, describes his father’s state of mind when facing the committee.

Sir Martin had watched, with feelings of just indignation, the partial character of the proceedings, and the anti-academic spirit that marked the whole course of the inquiry. It may, therefore, be easily imagined that, in obeying the summons of the committee, he was in no mood to conciliate their favour, or deprecate their hostility, by meekness of tone or deferential placidity of demeanour. He was little solicitous to disguise his strong sense of the injustice exhibited towards the Academy, in the eagerness with which the committee had invited the attacks of its assailants, and encouraged the vague and senseless vituperation which, in their evidence, supplied the place of authentic statement or specific charge.

There are various accounts as to how Shee performed in front of the committee, a number of them hostile, including, not surprisingly, Haydon, who described in his diary how he “entered into a rambling defence and was repeatedly called to order by Ewart . . . He accused the evidence of being personal and partial . . . Rennie jumped up and denied it, and was called to order.”

But both the official record and Shee’s biography imply that Shee was pretty self-possessed and made a good case for the academy. He was remembered by his fellow academicians as having the skills of a lawyer, as well as being a good writer, and he argued, as he had argued in previous discussions with the Prime Minister, Lord Grey, in submissions regarding the importance of housing the Royal Academy in the new building in Trafalgar Square and in making the case for withholding information from parliament, that the Royal Academy was essentially a private institution, answerable to the crown only, and not to parliament.

From this point onwards, the Royal Academy retreated to a position, as Shee had argued, of being a private institution, self-governing, administered according to the requirements of its own laws, but not answerable to the government. Individual academicians might be, and indeed were, involved in the establishment of the government Schools of Design in a committee which included Sir Francis Chantrey, an RA, Charles Cockerell, a recently-elected RA, and Charles Eastlake, who was later to be president of the RA, but the academy’s own School remained resolutely independent, not subject to the jurisdiction of the government schools, not accredited by government or the Department of Education and Science and its successor bodies to this day, but, instead, self-regulated.

The RA could, at this moment in its history, have become a more public body responsible for the regulation of the newly- established Schools of Design. It might have had a role later in the century in the establishment of the London art colleges. It might have become the representative body for artists as the Royal Institute of British Architects was to be for architects. It chose not to be, to remain private, and to exercise its influence through individual members rather than institutionally.

Just as the Royal Academy retreated into being a more private institution, interested in serving the commercial and purely artistic interests of its members, so the country as a whole moved in the other direction: setting up museums in provincial cities; establishing a widespread system of art education; believing that access to art, and the enjoyment of art, should be open to every citizen. One can perhaps characterise these changes during the 1830s as, on the one hand, the retreat of a private institution founded in the 18th-century enlightenment and dedicated to the highest ideals in the practice of art; and, on the other hand, the advance of a more didactic and democratic public culture, advancing the rights of the citizen and the duties of government.

I am interested in these arguments and debates, not just for historical reasons, but because the debates replicate many of the issues which are being discussed and debated nowadays. How far should the action of government extend into the organisation of institutions of art? How far should museums and art schools be funded directly by government as instruments of public policy? Or should they instead be funded by their users, by students through a system of fees as is now the case in universities and art schools, or by visitors and philanthropic supporters through admission charges and donations in the case of museums? Should the government itself engage in issues relating to the practice of art or should it allow other bodies with delegated authority, including the Arts Council, a free voice to regulate and encourage the practice of art?

In practice, the government tends to be interested in systems of regulation and control and in reducing levels of public funding, without having any very evident deeper commitment to the best ways of teaching art and encouraging art practice. None of the parties in the recent election had much to say on these issues. The Conservative party has stuck to the principle of free admission while at the same time progressively cutting back on public funding of museums and art schools to the point where there is a risk that they become unsustainable. It was obvious throughout the debates surrounding the general election that the current Conservative party is deeply neo-liberal, intent on cutting back the responsibilities, and costs, of central government and transferring them back to the private citizen.

The Labour Party, meanwhile, committed itself to maintaining tight control of public expenditure, which assumed some level of continuation of this approach in practice, if not ideologically. Neither of them have much obvious belief in the role of government in art education or in wider aspects of cultural policy. The modern-day Conservative party is a party of laissez faire. The Labour party long ago lost its long-standing commitment to the right of the individual citizen to have access to the citadels of high culture.

Yet it is right to give thought to those questions which preoccupied the Radicals of the 1830s. What is the best system of art training? How do we ensure that the most able people in the country have the facilities and opportunities to practice art? And how do we ensure that the display of art in museums and public galleries has a proper cultural and educational value to citizens at large? These questions, many of which were first asked by John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham, remain legitimate today.

By Charles Saumarez Smith