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The King's Artists: The Royal Academy of Arts and the Politics of British Culture 1760-1840

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This book sets out to give an account of what the foundation of The Royal Academy of Arts in 1768 meant for artistic practice in particular and cultural life more generally in Britain between 1760 and 1840. It is to be welcomed, because it fills a gap, and fills it well. The history of art institutions in Britain attracts sporadic attention. Trevor Fawcett published what remains the canonical study of art outside the metropolis, *The Rise of English Provincial Art* thirty years ago, while Sidney Hutchison's history of the Royal Academy came out in 1986.(1) More recently, however, attention has turned to the RA, largely because of the ground-breaking exhibition, *Art on the Line*, that David Solkin curated in the Academy exhibition rooms at Somerset House in 2001.(2) The essays in the book that accompanied the show dealt variously with some of the germane issues, from the politics of hanging, to the messages communicated by display, since when Mark Hallett has written a fascinating paper (to be published in Eighteenth-Century Studies) on how the hang in the Great Room at the exhibition of 1784 was expressly designed to rehabilitate the public reputation of the Prince of Wales. More recently, two doctoral dissertations have contributed to the field. Matthew Hargraves, 'Candidates for fame: the Society of Artists of Great Britain circa 1760-1792' (University of London, 2003) is an exemplary and welcome account of the affairs of the first exhibiting institution. Patricia Morales, '"Mere good taste is nothing else but genius without the power of execution": artists as arbiters of taste, 1792-1836' (University of Warwick, 2003) deals with threats to the professional autonomy of the Academy's artists, and with their relations with the connoisseurs of the British Institution over the specified period.

Dr Hoock's book, then, falls neatly in the middle. He has arranged his material around three main themes. The first, 'Academies of Art' focuses precisely on this topic, to ground the founding of the RA within history and to discuss how, once founded, it itself provided a model for provincial Academies elsewhere in the British Isles. Part Two is concerned in an admirably wide-reaching way with 'The Politicization of Art', understanding 'politics' to embrace both the conduct of the affairs of state, and the internal politics of the institution itself. We end with 'Forging the Cultural State', which supplies, amongst other things, a most welcome account of how the RA was centrally important in wartime attempts to define a national iconography in those memorials to heroes that were incrementally filling St Paul's Cathedral, or to the efforts, mostly fruitless, to embellish London with appropriate public buildings. The whole is grounded in extensive research in both primary and secondary source material. The author is to be commended both for admitting to the shortcomings of the occasional passage where the current state of knowledge does not allow

any definitive account, and for understanding the United Kingdom also to be a European country, and consequently, when appropriate, bringing in continental examples to contextualise particular passages. The book is reasonably well-illustrated with monochrome plates throughout, and has an extremely helpful bibliography.

Dr Hoock sets the scene with an 'Introduction', before dealing with the events leading up to the foundation of the Royal Academy. Although the tale is fairly well known, it bears the retelling, and there is fascinating material on, for instance, the attitudes of George III to his Academy. Hoock demonstrates the degree to which the king was sufficiently interventionist to press for the admission of William Hoare and Johan Zoffany to Academicianship. This is in and of itself interesting, for Hoare was a painter of pastel portraits, based in Bath, and royal favour therefore indicates both the cultural clout of that city, and the catholicity of taste exercised when it came to measuring the merits of some artists. The chapter is also particularly useful for two statistical tables; one outlining the numbers of students admitted, the other the numbers of visitors to the annual exhibition, each year. These allow one to judge such things as the public curiosity in the fine arts at a glance.

Reynolds had anticipated the formation of some future British school of art in his first *Discourse*, and Chapter 2 concerns itself with this issue. It is fascinating to learn, for instance, that by the 1800s this phenomenon seemed to be taking shape with a rapidity that nobody had anticipated, while the old problem – that a national school should be realised in history painting, yet the only way to earn a living through art was by painting portrait – persisted. Hoock then goes on to demonstrate in Chapter 3 how many provincial academies formed themselves on the London model, although the Foulis Academy, founded in Glasgow in 1753/4 had beaten Reynolds and his colleagues to it, by offering 'the full continental academic curriculum taught by a continental staff' (pp. 55, 57, 97) from that date. This chapter in general is excellent and welcome. There is much that is new, and disparate information is coordinated with real literary skill. It is natural that the text should move on in the next chapter to contemplating the international significance of all this.

One of the virtues of the next section on 'The Politicization of Art' is that it recognises that simply by being established as a *Royal* Academy the institution was saddled with a particular political identity; one that, for instance, made it a target for a Wilkesite mob in 1771, when it ripped down and destroyed a transparency symbolically extolling the virtues of monarchy that had been draped across the façade of the Academy's premises. This is a fascinating topic because that political identity had potent potential to cause problems. Reynolds, for example, was closely associated with the Foxite Whigs, and yet had to deal directly with the King, whose noted 'dislike' of Reynolds must arguably have extended well beyond personal antipathy. Again this is all excellent material. Hoock understands, too, that the exhibitions were used to manipulate the images of public figures. As has been mentioned, the 1784 RA exhibition was of particular interest in this respect. In the Great Room hung not only Reynolds's enormous equestrian portrait of the Prince of Wales, but also his more modest representation of Charles James Fox. By its very format, which insisted on association with Van Dyck's picturings of the Stuart monarchy, the former conferred what might have been viewed as improper status on the prince. The latter had Fox with his hand resting, at his own request, on a paper docketed 'A Bill for the better regulating the Affairs of the E. India Company &c.', which motif was as provocative. George III was later quoted as approving Reynolds's portrait but concluding that Gillray was 'the better limner. Nobody hits off Mr Fox like him', to show that the point had been taken.

Subsequent chapters deal with the real tensions that the French Revolution and wars created in an artistic community that contained such dubious Americans as Benjamin West, alongside notable radicals such as Thomas Banks, the sculptor. There is an account of the Duke of York ordering the closure, on grounds of political sensitivity, of William Hodges's exhibition of his two pictures, *The Effects of Peace* and *The Effects of War* in 1794, to highlight the significance that the fine arts could have in the wider world. Hoock maintains that these tensions took the Academy to the edge of dissolution in the earlier years of the nineteenth century, before stasis was restored to a demonstrably weaker institution.

The final section, on 'Forging the Cultural State' is both extremely interesting and very welcome. We read of how the Academy and Aademicians were active in trying to lobby for legislation positive to the institution and themselves. This ranged from lifting the duties on the importation of works by artists, on the grounds that these were for study and not for future sale and profit (a position that some might rightly have considered dubious), to issues of copyright. It is instructive to learn of the role that artists were taking upon themselves to assume in public life, and, in a useful way, this discussion increases our understanding of the activities which the forgotten landscapist but influential institutional fixer Joseph Farington detailed in his voluminous diary (indeed, the section opens with an account of what he was up to in 1798). It forms a necessary scene-setter to a final chapter which details the efforts made to gain Academical control over state commissions for monumental sculpture, or great public monuments. That an influential group of connoisseurs, prominent amongst whom were Sir George Beaumont and Richard Payne Knight, was able to thwart these efforts at gaining exclusive control points to the evolving situation in which authority in taste was becoming contested. Which one would have to expect if the arts were aspiring to so central role in defining the national culture.

Had the book attempted to be inclusive, it would have been far longer than it is, and would have presented many more problems of structuring differing narratives than have been surmounted in the volume that we have. There are inevitably some areas with which Dr Hoock deals with a lighter touch than others. The Society of Arts does not attract much attention. However, even without the account we now have from Matthew Hargraves, it did present an intriguing counter to the RA in various ways. It questioned the exclusive definition of what it was proper to admit into public exhibitions of art, by allowing into its walls the kinds of work that might be designated under the umbrella 'novelty'. It also supplied a focus for those painters who, whatever their merits, had not been thought fit to invite to become Academicians.

As these included Joseph Wright and John Hamilton Mortimer this does invite one to inquire more closely into the politics that surrounded the founding of the Royal Academy and the selection of the original Academicians. Gainsborough, based in Bath, considered his invitation sufficiently momentous to snub his old and close friend Joshua Kirby, for example. And, by 1768 Wright enjoyed a European reputation, his fame spread by the fine mezzotints that he caused to have scraped after the lamp- and moonlit scenes that he alone was painting. The level of that reputation is to be gauged from the encomia on his works that were regularly carried by the newspapers. And, in *Painting for Money*, David Solkin has tellingly associated such works as *An Academy by Lamplight* (Yale Center for British Art) painted in 1769 with a critique of the pretensions of the Academy, founded, of course, in the previous year.(3) The politics of this deliberate exclusion invite enquiry, for at the very least it points to a real anxiety about the project getting potentially blown off course by works that could not be accommodated within the superficially traditional academic theoretical superstructure that was being incrementally erected by Reynolds through his *Discourses*.

The barring of George Stubbs ought to be noticed, too. On the face of it the simple explanation would be that, as a painter of mere animals, he hardly qualified for inclusion in an institution such as the RA was purporting to be. Yet, in his series of scenes of various episodes in the encounters between a lion and a horse, he was extemporising on a theme first established in antique sculpture, and, therefore, of impeccable provenance. And the RA would subsequently show no aversion to admitting animal painters to its ranks. So the case of Stubbs invites some investigation, as does that of John Hamilton Mortimer, who stayed loyal to the Society of Artists through the early 1770s (before he, like others, succumbed to the inevitable). For Mortimer was a history painter: that is, precisely the kind of artist one would have thought the RA would have welcomed. This is particularly interesting because one of the founding Academicians had been Angelica Kauffmann, who was what one might think of as a living oxymoron, a female history painter.

To have introduced such subjects might have detracted from the main thrust of the book, but they are germane, as are other omissions. There is little sustained discussion of newspaper or periodical art criticism, for instance, though what there is, is to the point and of the high standard of the rest of the volume. Yet this material must, if treated with care and scepticism, yield a great deal which bears on some of the themes that

have been outlined elsewhere in this review. At the very least, the order in which paintings were discussed in a newspaper review might, given the political orientation of that paper, have allowed for a more accurate understanding of such things as the politics of exhibition hangs; even whether those hangs were communicating their intended messages with any efficacy.

It is, finally, surprising that the connoisseurs of the British Institution get such short shrift. Dr Hoock is absolutely right to emphasise the stresses that were threatening to tear the RA apart in the early 1800s. By founding the British Institution, and inaugurating their own annual exhibitions (an opportunity Academicians had no scruple in exploiting when it came to showing unsold but previously exhibited work) they were evidently setting themselves up as rivals, if not alternatives. The nature of that rivalry was spelled out in 1813, when the Institution had what might be termed the temerity to mount a Reynolds retrospective. Reynolds had been the Academy personified. The inference was that without him it had failed its ideals, and needed to be, it would seem, if not marginalised, then at least to be joined on the cultural field by other significant players. Two years later, irritated by the carping of such as Sir George Beaumont against the 'white' painters, principally Turner, but also Augustus Wall Callcott, the artists hit back through the anonymous *Catalogue Raisonné* ; in which prominent connoisseurs were ridiculed.

That the Academicians were no longer the principal arbiters of taste; in other words, that practitioners could now be challenged when it came to judging the fine arts, is a fascinating development, and perhaps greater acknowledgement of it might have underpinned that later section of the book that deals with the Academicians' thwarted attempts to take unto themselves control over the commissioning of memorial sculpture.

But to criticise a text for what it chooses not to deal with is not to detract from its very real virtues. *The King's Artists* will, as the convention has it, be a valuable addition to any library. Apart from supplying the best account that we have of the institutional history of the RA, and of its impact and consequences, it raises hosts of compelling issues, and cannot but stimulate a desire to develop and expand some of those strands, which I have been able only briefly to outline in this review.

Notes

1. Trevor Fawcett, *The Rise of English Provincial Art: Artists, Patrons, and Institutions outside London, 1800-1830* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974); Sidney C Hutchison, *The History of the Royal Academy, 1768-1968*, 2nd edn (London: Robert Royce, 1986).Back to (1)
2. David H Solkin, ed., *Art on the Line: the Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House, 1780-1836* (London/ New Haven: published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and the Courtauld Institute Gallery by Yale University Press, 2001).Back to (2)
3. David Solkin, *Painting for Money: the Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England* (London/New Haven: published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 1993).Back to (3)

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