CELEBRATING THE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE ART SCHOOLS: A NEW RESOURCE

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Art collections

Bridget Riley, *Study for 'Entice 1, 1974'*,1974

Somewhat more than five hundred years ago a rebirth of humanism rekindled habits of enquiry and debate. Earnest discussion, private research and repeated attempts to abandon apprenticeship to an artist's studio in favour of formalised teaching began to gel into the forerunners of the academies and universities. Many famous painters and sculptors played a key role in detonating those changes, which rolled out across Europe in the centuries that followed. But painters and sculptors had long wanted to escape the status of mere artisan. Thus one of the goals of the academic approach was to increase the status of the painter and sculptor; but that same quest inspired some painters and sculptors to claim personal charisma and mysterious talents, in due course nourishing the idea of genius. These were notions that came into conflict with the organising principle of the academy, to which some artists became hostile. This is important because ambivalence towards art education has persisted through to the present day.

Collections of art works have long been assembled to promote awareness of individuals, organisations and ideas, or to enshrine them in memory. They have been devoted to wealthy collectors, to booty accumulated during imperial conquests, to artists, to periods and to themes (such as "Modern Art").

In the establishment of this National Collection we see a celebration of what we might reasonably take to be the generator of Britain's achievements in this field: the universities, colleges and academies of art.

Art education in the UK

Origins

Britain's art education has its roots in the work of itinerant drawing tutors. The first attempts to formalise training have been traced to the early 17th century, but they did not result in a fully-fledged academy until the second half of the 18th, which makes Britain's art education about a century younger than that of France, which is in turn about a century junior to Italy. Yet this country's achievements on the world stage have been and remain outstanding.

Astonishingly, in some European countries art practice has yet to achieve legitimacy as a university subject, whereas in Britain its status has increased and the amount of provision has continued to expand over much of the last 150 years.

An examination system covering the art and design syllabus in England and Scotland developed through the 19th century and, by the middle of the 20th, specialist national diplomas were being awarded in painting and sculpture. In 1960 a National Council for Diplomas in Art and Design (NCDAD) was established as a body responsible for validating the bulk of the art and design courses at degree-equivalent level in the UK. It was decided that NCDAD should pass that responsibility to the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) in 1974, at which time successful candidates were able to gain an honours or Masters degree in art and design subjects. That process of recognising fine art's valid place within the higher education system culminated in the award of the first PhD in Fine Art by the CNAA in 1978. [1]

Growth and diversity

The importance of Britain's commitment to the enhancement of its manufactures was confirmed by the Great Exhibition and, despite competition from the new medium of photography, the number of schools of drawing grew rapidly. A century later more than a hundred schools of art had an output of more than a thousand diploma holders across the art and design fields.[2] By 1981 there were 45 institutions offering fine art courses at degree level, with a total enrolment of 4,900.[3] The number of higher education institutions teaching fine art practices rose sharply through the 1990s to more than 75 and the number of undergraduate students of fine art to more than 14,000 in 2000-2001.[4] In 1998 the Culture Secretary Chris Smith questioned assumptions about the need to devote attention to halting the long decline in agriculture and manufacturing and instead drew attention to a group of "creative industries" - the fine arts prominent among them - that had been booming. They had, he suggested, generated 50,000 jobs and £60bn in revenues during 1997-98.[5]

Meanwhile, over the same one hundred and fifty year period, the number of artists to achieve recognition and exercise influence on the international stage has also grown - in proportion to the increase in the scale of global interest in fine art. Those who believe in the spontaneous eruption of "talent" might view this as no more than coincidental, but it seems reasonable to suggest that Britain's achievements on the international art stage point to the outstanding quality of our higher education in fine art practice. British artists have wielded extraordinary influence within the rarefied atmosphere of the art world, have been greeted with popular acclaim and exhibitions such as Sensation and the rise of the Young British Artists have brought the British art world notoriety.

Such claims are of course predicated on the idea of a national dimension to art education. But it may be argued that this perspective on art practice is threatened by what might be seen as a dissolution of the nation state.

F*ountains Abbey, Yorkshire*, John Sell Cotman

It is certainly true that the character of art education has been changed by the increasing volume of student exchanges and by the fact that institutions have been recruiting overseas for many years. More important is the profound change in the makeup of the population and an accompanying cultural shift.

The world portrayed by artists such as John Sell Cotman and Paul Nash is as specifically of its country as the music of Elgar; it is also reasonable to anticipate that, as the National Collection expands to reflect the current makeup and concerns of art schools, a very different and more diverse picture will emerge. This is to associate the shift away from the traditional idea of the nation state with a departure from what was experienced as a singular culture.

The term "multicultural" began to enter the vocabulary of the art schools in the early 1980s, some time after the ethnic mix of the art school intake began to change; by the early 1990s the character of the degree shows and courses also began to reflect increased cultural diversity.

Sunset over the Malverns, Paul Nash, 1944

A National Collection

The achievements of UK art education have been marked in various ways, including showcase exhibitions of the work of graduating artists (the Young Contemporaries in 1950s and '60s, more recently the New Contemporaries and Fresh Art) and some exhibitions that focussed on particular educational practices.[6] Many of our colleges and universities have also established their own institutional collections to support or to celebrate the educational process.

Public Enemy, Chris Ofili, 1992

But it was not until the mid-1970s that there was a conscious effort to bring into existence a collection of works by artists who studied or taught in the art schools: the NCDAD passed on not only its validation work but also a collection of paintings, sculptures and fine prints. Indeed it purchased these works specifically for the purpose. The CNAA collection is important for three reasons. Firstly, it has its roots in the tradition of art and design education for which Britain has gained such a high international reputation. Second, the collection shows the strength and confidence with which artists in Britain embraced the prevailing abstraction of the 1960's and early 1970's (prominent among them being works by Sean Scully, Robyn Denny, Bridget Riley, John Carter and the late Kenneth Martin). The third and most important reason is that the collection carries a message: it underlined the main principle underlying the Coldstream reform of the early 1960's - that practising artists and designers should exercise a controlling influence over higher education in the field.

The last Chairman of the NCDAD was Stewart Mason. He convinced nervous assessors at the Department of Education and Science of the propriety of a project to assemble and bestow an art collection: he selected paintings, sculptures and prints to create a visible symbol of the achievements and vigorous independence of the art schools. They would, he believed, 'immediately demonstrate the impact of the art design sector upon what had hitherto been a strongly technologically-oriented body.'[7] The art schools had developed a strong tradition, an ethos, and it was that ethos that the collection was to embody.

It is around the nucleus of the CNAA collection that we are launching what is intended should grow now into a comprehensive showcase for art education in the UK. Nine of the institutions that responded to an invitation to participate in the initial phase are represented in this first phase of the virtual collection, selected by a national hanging committee, to be accessed via the web. The works are accompanied by a database of information that can be interrogated using specially-developed software. Until now we have had a patchy and fragmentary picture of the achievements of the subject in Britain, but the new National Collection will begin to bring together increasing amounts of material; it is also intended that it should stimulate a reappraisal of the history and significance of the teaching of fine art practice.

The idea of building a National Collection was put forward by the CNAA Trust when it convened a seminar accompanied by an exhibition of the CNAA collection in 1999[8]. The proposal gained the support of a number of university-level fine art courses and of the subject association.[9] One of the challenges identified during the seminar was that of acknowledging and

representing the diversity of competing approaches to art education and the corresponding diversity of criteria used to judge the quality of its outcomes.

Reflecting the Scope of Practice in the Art Schools

The Trust commissioned a feasibility study that revealed that the strategy was consistent with the aims of a body established to encourage the development of new resources for higher education.[10] It was decided that a virtual collection should be created as part of the range of services, tools and mechanisms being established for colleges and universities to exploit fully the value of online resources and services. The organisation commissioned to carry out this work[11] established a hanging committee to determine criteria with which to begin to set the scope of the collection. The topic is one of immense potential scope and complexity, but it is not intended simply to make a portmanteau of university art school collections. It has been and will remain essential to create a National Collection that will not only show some of the works that art school collections continue to build up, but also that it should assemble information that can be knitted together to reveal some of the narratives that make up the pattern of studies in this field.

Periods

The website through which the collection is accessed provides the user with a timeline on which works are presented. In this first phase of the National Collection we begin to get some flavour of each period - for example the contrast between the last decades of the 19th and 20th centuries, and the earnest abstraction of the early 1970s. However, works are by artists whose own studies and subsequent (direct or indirect) impact on the educational system widens the relevance of the collection. An example is the body of works by Richard Hamilton, who began his studies at the Royal Academy in 1938, taught until 1966 and continues to exercise considerable influence into the 21st century.

Curriculum

Diversity was a challenge from the outset. Hogarth, Gainsborough and Reynolds (each of whom had been apprenticed in England) took part in the struggles that accompanied the academies of art established in the 18th century but, in the early 19th century, the question of art education took on a new urgency. In the wake of the Napoleonic wars Parliament was asked to encourage the practice of drawing and design to strengthen manufactures for export. The Government School of Design was founded in South Kensington in 1837, followed by other, regional schools. The following is a description of one school that will serve to give an idea of the character of provision in the mid-19th century:

"The Government Schools ran courses in elementary drawing, shading from the flat, shading from casts, chiaroscuro painting, colouring, figure drawing from the flat, figure drawing from the round, painting the figure, geometrical drawing, perspective, modelling and design. All these courses were introduced from the start at the Glasgow School apart from that of design. The course in design was the 'summit of the system' . . . After 1853 the above pattern of courses was extended to 26 stages which formed the national curriculum for art schools. This system was known as the South Kensington system."[12]

Examples from the collection give an idea of the character of student work in the late 19th century and the level of polish expected. It is clear that drawing formed the essential channel into practices that reached back to classical Greece and renaissance Italy. In general, whilst a great many subjects were studied in great detail, students were not encouraged to stray far from the closely prescribed syllabus and models provided. The art school described above is one that would still be familiar to those who studied in art schools through to the middle of the 20th century. However, that syllabus was abandoned in favour of the encouragement of the development by each student of his or her personal art practice; as this era of personal development progressed so the range of those practices greatly increased.

Teaching and learning

Drawing was taught in Britain during the 17th century by travelling tutors whose students sometimes sought diversion but often needed the skills with which to record their observations, particularly on military campaigns and voyages of discovery.

Interior, Norwich School of Art, James Munnings, circa 1897

It has been suggested that the first attempt to formalise the teaching of art was supported by the Treasury of Charles 1.[13] Later, when Parliament decided that art practice should be harnessed to design for industry in the cause of trade and the national economy, the authorities sought a suitable model. When a report was made to Parliament it was to recommend not the French but the Prussian approach. The Prussians lived up to their military reputation, and Clive Ashwin has given a hilarious account of the regimentation of a drawing class - students chanting a response reminiscent of the training sequences in Kubrick's Full Metal Jacket as they wield their drawing instruments in unison.[14] In 1836 the House of Commons voted the sum of £1,600 to enable the Board of Trade to set up a "Central School of Design" and The Government School of Design was duly opened on 1 June 1837 at Somerset House. Reflecting the Prussian model, art and industry were expressly linked and the approach to teaching was didactic in character, seeking to impose supposed standards of aesthetic excellence.

Regional development proceeded vigorously in the mid-19th century. As a premier centre of industrial development Birmingham was a focus for social and political debate, visited frequently by John Ruskin. It was also the first Municipal School of Art, enjoying some degree of autonomy and so able to challenge some national policies. The School adopted an Arts and Crafts approach to working with materials and became closely associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Ruskin and Morris directed attention back to Nature, but artists such as Turner were showing how imagination could reshape what we perceived as "natural".

At the beginning of the 20th century drawing from the antique began to give way to drawing from life ? at, for example, the Slade School. Britain's art schools nevertheless remained somewhat conservative in character while the seeds of Modernism were being sown in France. A search for realism was still under way when, in 1937, Claude Rogers, Victor Pasmore, William Coldstream and Graham Bell published a prospectus for a private art school in Fitzroy Street, later named The Euston Road School. They taught their students to consider urban subjects in an objective way, but could not be said to teach from a theoretical position. After 1945 they continued teaching and their methods had an enduring influence on British art, not least through their participation in the re-shaping of the system whereby institutions and courses were validated.[15]

Changes that stemmed from the 1960 "Coldstream Committee" report gave impetus to the new ideas that had already been fermenting in some of the art schools in the 1950s. A preoccupation with craft gave way to a world of ideas, such as those of D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson ("On Growth and Form"), Norbert Weiner ("cybernetics") and Walter Gropius (the Bauhaus), from which new curricula began to emerge. An example is provided by the energetic Harry Thubron, who taught in the 1950s at Kings College at the University of Durham with Victor Pasmore, Tom Hudson, Richard Hamilton, Alan Davie and Terry Frost. All sought to articulate the basis of their teaching: Harry was concerned to get his students to experiment in a constructive manner and favoured the basic design principles articulated during the life of the Bauhaus. He did not have a theory or formula for his teaching; his model was Paul Klee and his goal was to engender a vital awareness of colour, shape and of the materials to hand. Like many other influential artist-teachers, Thubron's influence was felt through the many institutions in which he held teaching and leadership posts.

Plaster Circle, Harry Thubron, 1962.

Technology

One of the factors that increased the diversity of practices in the art schools was the development of what we now refer to

collectively as the media. Back in the mid-1960s there was a vogue for technical experiment in the art schools - for vacuum forming, spray painting and photographic silkscreen printing. It was even suggested that painting and sculpture might take a step back in favour of the creative experimentation with light, sound, film, computing, etc. In the following decade Peter Fuller argued passionately that art is impoverished when the artist is distanced from the artefact by technology. Art and technology nevertheless became firmly wedded in most of the art schools, where new technologies continue to be introduced alongside those of painting and sculpture.

At the beginning of the new century we begin to gain a perspective on the development of some of the newer media within the art and art educational worlds (e.g. video at Dundee), but there will continue to be a challenge to find effective ways of building into such a National Collection the growing range of conceptual, telematic and interactive modes of art practice.

Gender

In this first phase of the development of the National Collection the gender balance in representation is 77% male. Until recently women formed a high proportion of the art student population while the museums and galleries included few examples of womens' work.

Monument, Rachel Whiteread, 2002.

Figure Study - Seated Female Nude, Florence Camm, 1897

The art schools have contributed to progress towards equality of opportunity: women formed a high proportion of the many winners of awards and medals gained by students of Birmingham School of Art over the last twenty years of the 19th century, and the Slade School was the first English art school to offer female students equal opportunities to study from the life model. A dramatic change has taken place over the last 30 years ? a change that has been informed and underpinned both by contextual and studio work in the art schools, several of which have now been led by women artists.

Springboard

At one end of the spectrum fine art as a subject is simply a part of mass higher education, while at the other it exists to launch successive generations of artists into practice in a contemporary world of art that is Brobdingnagian ? matching in the scale of its ambitions the worlds of Michelangelo, Titian and Rubens. Young British artists have famously claimed a place in that vigorous new art world and some of the art schools have made it their business to shape themselves as springboards into art practice. It may therefore be that the collection will in due course come to reflect some of the reciprocal impact of the educational world and an art world buoyed by celebrity, wealth, promotion and style.

Many higher education institutions have their own art collections, some place them in galleries and some put them in the care of curators. But the accumulating tide of work as some 4,000 students graduate in fine art practice each year is daunting: annual showcase exhibitions and institutional curators face an improbable task as they try to filter the huge potential volume of work to be represented.

Philosophy, Research and Controversy

This introduction and indeed the National Collection itself is provisional. This is because it is launched in an initial phase of development, presenting work from around 10% of the institutions now offering degrees in fine art in these islands. It is provisional also in that it can be read as a prospectus for a programme of research aimed at revealing the rich conceptual legacy of our art education, together with a pointer towards and point of access to dozens of university and college collections in which are held early evidence of the work of students who have subsequently risen to prominence. It is for this reason that there is likely to be a long-term association between the collection and the work of the Arts and Humanities Research Board.

The philosophical issues raised by art education are fundamental: we have already noted the issue raised by those who doubt that art can or should be taught. Even for those who do accept the premise that art practice can be advanced by educational means there remains a significant challenge. Ours is a culture built on the premise that what we know is that which we can explain in word and number. Hence the adage that ?a picture is worth a thousand words? points to those things that are best perceived as gestalten or patterns. However, this does not tell us what it is that we know or even if the act of recognition constitutes (non-verbal) knowledge.[16]

Another aspect of the subject is its history. Pevsner described the Academics of Art[17], but history needs not only to accumulate but also to be kept under review. Bretton Hall College of the University of Leeds has hosted important archives since 1985[18], but the subject is served by controversy as well as by scholarship, a fact that will no doubt be reflected in the development of this resource.[19]

The plan is to develop the collection as a national resource to which all higher education institutions are able to contribute. But it is also likely that those already represented will in time revisit and reshape the representation - the story ? told here. It is not only the collection that will grow but so also the commentaries that provide a critical accompaniment to it: high on the agenda will be an assessment of the sheer vigour of contemporary practice at the interface between Britain's art schools and the wider world of art.

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[1]In the specialist area of sculpture, at Leicester Polytechnic (now De Montfort University).

[2]In 1959 114 art schools submitted candidates in all of the subjects forming the curriculum of the National Design Diploma. The output of fine art graduates stood at 1,085.

[3] CNAA, Special Statement No. 1 - Art and Design (paper drafted by Registrar for Art, Design and the Performing Arts), 15 September 1983.

[4] HESA

[5] Creative Britain, Chris Smith, Faber & Faber, London 1998

[6] E.g. The Developing Process, an exhibition held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, in 1959. A catalogue was published by Kings College, Durham.

[7] Robert Strand (1987), A Good Deal of Freedom: art and design in the public sector of higher education, 1960-1982. London: CNAA.

[8]The Education of Vision, an exhibition that inaugurated the Wingfield Gallery in Suffolk to accompany a national seminar documented in a resum? edited by Stroud Cornock, published in June 1999

[9]The National Association for Fine Art Education (NAFAE)

[10]The Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) is an independent advisory body that supports further and higher

education by providing strategic guidance, advice and opportunities to use Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to support teaching, learning, research and administration.

[11] Visual Arts Data Service

[12]Rawson, G., The Glasgow Government School of Design, Journal of the Scottish Society for Art History, Volume 4, (1999). A history of early art education was researched by Marjorie Allthorpe-Guyton at Norwich School of Art and published as A Happy Eye (Jarold: Norwich), in 1982

[13]Gilbert Benthall, a manuscript on the Early Art Schools in London, circa 1965. (Held by National Art Library.)

[14] Clive Ashwin Drawing and education in German-speaking Europe, 1800-1900. Ann Arbor, Mich. : UMI Research Press, c1981

[15]Report of the National Advisory Committee on Art Education, HMSO, 1960.

[16] Stroud Cornock, Forms of Knowing in the Study of the Arts. In Marks, DF, Richardson, JTE and Russell, DG (Editors). Imagery 2: Proceedings of the Second Imagery Conference, Human Performance Associates, 1986, 202 - 207

[17]Nikolaus Pevsner (1940) Academies of Art. Cambridge: University Press.

[18] The National Arts Education Archive was established in 1985 at Bretton Hall College to provide a documentary trace of the development of Arts Education, in the UK and worldwide. It is based in the Lawrence Batley Centre.

[19] E.g. David Thistlewood's document dealing with The Developing Process. Also Madge, C. and Weinberger, B. (1973) Art Students Observed. London: Faber.