

Academic Art and the Twentieth Century

The Royal Academy of Arts 1910-1951

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Abstract

This thesis examines the art shown at the Royal Academy of Arts in London between 1910 and 1951. It attempts to demonstrate that this often neglected body of works was a highly prominent element of British visual culture of the time and was often seen to meet the social needs of the twentieth century. While most studies of this period concentrate on the modernist movements the Academy is equally deserving of attention: its annual Summer Exhibitions were the most popular shows of contemporary art and were widely reviewed in the press. This study explains why academic painting and sculpture were thought to be important phenomena and how they were perceived by their makers, the critics and gallery-goers.

Academic art is examined by considering the aesthetic concepts and artistic genres that were most prominent in the critical discourses surrounding Burlington House. The first chapter explores the functions performed by naturalism, the artistic approach that was seen to define academic culture. The second chapter treats the importance of formalism, a concept that is now usually associated with modernism but played an equally important role at the Summer Exhibitions. The third chapter shows how and why landscape and portraiture became the dominant academic genres of the first half of the twentieth century and also explains the decline of narrative painting. The fourth chapter demonstrates that modernist art itself often engaged with the Academy, either by criticising it or by claiming it could perform some of its traditional functions. Academic art was still impossible to ignore in this period and this thesis attempts to show what scholars can learn from its continuing importance.

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Introduction

In 1913 the painter Henry Herbert La Thangue submitted his work *Violets for Perfume* to the Royal Academy of Arts in London. The picture was presented as his Diploma piece, a donation to the institution's collection which all new elected members were expected to make.¹ At first glance, the image appears a rather anodyne representation of country life. It depicts a couple of peasant women gathering freshly picked violets in a sun-drenched Mediterranean orchard. Clearly reflecting the influence of Jean-François Millet and Jules Bastien-Lepage, the painting seems to invite the viewer to contemplate the imagined simple joys of rural labour in the balmy climes of Southern Europe. It could be described as a visualisation of a timeless, almost Arcadian, realm that could have had little to do with the realities of contemporary life. The artwork may be interpreted as an escapist fantasy offered to an urban middle-class audience which was uninterested in the actual problems of the post-Edwardian countryside.

However, a more thorough study of the canvas complicates this reading. In fact, the picture can strike the careful viewer as a surprisingly melancholic statement. The woman in the foreground wears a contemplative, almost mournful, expression as she tips her basket. The action itself, the gathering of dead flowers, could be seen as a reminder of the transitory nature of existence and indeed lifeless plants had often been used by Victorian and Edwardian painters to inspire such thoughts. The painting recalls John Everett Millais' *Autumn Leaves* of 1856 in which, as in La Thangue's image, the girls' blank expressions and the waning sunlight of the background complements the sense of loss and regret that pervades the scene. The title of the 1913 piece is also significant: it tells us that the peasants gather the remnants of past vitality in order to produce perfume. Perhaps this narrative was meant to compare the

¹ Mary Anne Stevens, *The Edwardians and After: The Royal Academy 1900-1950* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1988), 116.

woman's work to that of the painter: his creation can also be viewed as a distillation of bygone experiences, of once vivid moments, that may preserve their fragrance but cannot restore them to life.

This interpretation of the image as a nostalgic meditation is apparently corroborated by evidence of the social circumstances in which it was produced. At the time the British public was becoming increasingly aware of the fact that life in the country's villages was rapidly changing. Numerous people were leaving the smaller settlements in search of better employment in the cities and by 1901 the island had become the most urbanised area in the world.² These demographic shifts reflected the rise of industrialised agriculture which made the workers' manual skills superfluous. The approaches to rural labour and the patterns of daily life which had been established for generations were disappearing. The changes were often seen as a cause for concern: in 1911 the Scottish politician Alexander Murray wrote that the massive emigration from rural districts was 'a drain on the nation's manhood which all Scotsmen will regard as a mortal danger'.³ *The Manchester Guardian* also expressed its dismay at the fact that 'there is not enough labour on the land' and that many farmed areas remained untilled.⁴ In 1913 *The Times* wrote about the 'housing problem' of English villages, the inhabitants' inability to afford local properties, and the ensuing disappearance of rustic lifestyles.⁵ The poet Edward Thomas claimed that 'the countryman is dying out' and even suggested that 'the zoological society' should receive a few pairs before it was too late.⁶ Clearly, many observers thought that a vital component of national culture was about to be lost irredeemably. The somber mood that characterises *Violets for Perfume* can thus be

² Trevor Rowley, *The English Landscape in the Twentieth Century* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), 13.

³ 'Depopulation of Scottish Villages', *The Observer*, 23 April 1911, 6.

⁴ 'The Dreaded English Countryside', *The Manchester Guardian*, 20 December 1913, 8.

⁵ 'Housing in the Villages', *The Times*, 23 September 1913, 3.

⁶ Edward Thomas, *The Country* (London: Batsford, 1913), 19.

interpreted as a reaction to the perceived ruptures in the traditions of the British countryside. Although the image is a depiction of French peasants the latter faced problems similar to those of their social peers from beyond the Channel and the work could be easily seen to address the issues closer to home. The thoughtful basket bearer seems to contemplate the fragility of her world, the threat posed by modernisation to manual labour and those who practiced it. The painter becomes a witness to a vanishing realm and a preserver of its endangered beauty.

Importantly, pictures like these were often seen not as mere elegiac ruminations but as timely interventions, as possible responses to the situation. In 1915 *The Studio* published an article on the paintings of Leonard Campbell Taylor. Writing at the time of the first global conflict Herbert Furst predicted that

...as time passes... this great European War will be chronicled in heavy tomes, will be commented upon with much acumen by learned historians, will be digested with much difficulty by unwilling schoolboys – *dead matter*. But perchance the eager student or the unwilling scholar may pause for a moment to look upon an ‘old’ picture painted at the time of the Great War, and it will speak to him – *a living thing*. In truth, works of art, counted as toys and baubles by the multitude, neglected and rejected whilst the cannons roar, are the fruits by which we are known to posterity; they are a better record of our existence than the chronicles of our most glory-covered battles.⁷

Here visual art is described as an indispensable method of recording contemporary reality, as the sole medium capable of preserving a society’s experiences for the ages and moving the audiences of tomorrow. Significantly, the author was convinced that the ‘humbler painters of portraits, landscapes and even of still-life’, such as Taylor but also, one might add, La Thangue, were the most likely to capture the attention of future generations.⁸ The latter seems to have been highly interested in recording activities that were rapidly being replaced by twentieth-century agricultural innovations: his friend and fellow academician Alfred Munnings wrote that in the 1910s La Thangue was looking for a ‘quiet old world village where he could live and

⁷ Herbert Furst, ‘The Paintings of Leonard Campbell Taylor,’ *The Studio*, February 1915, 3.

⁸ Ibid, 3.

find real country models,' apparently trying to portray the vanishing traditions of the English and French provinces.⁹ It seems that their maker and at least a part of the public interpreted his works as an important attempt to address the problems facing British villages by preserving their threatened heritage for posterity. While they could hardly stop the destructive forces of new technology and demographic change pictures like his Diploma piece were seen as valuable historical records and critiques of these forces' irresponsibility. Naturally, we can question the effectiveness of this critique and such works' ability to foster genuine self-reflection. But it seems that for some commentators of the time they had the power to problematise the present. Thus what initially appears an anodyne escapist image was actually perceived as a potential contribution to contemporary debates, as an engagement with the era's pressing problems.

Many of the works exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts in London during the first half of the twentieth century made a similarly negative first impression on some viewers, particularly on those who favoured the more recent artistic trends. This period famously saw the emergence of modernism in Britain, of a variety of new movements which radically questioned the validity of the European pictorial tradition of the previous few centuries. In the 1910s practitioners like Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell abandoned the conventions of naturalistic painting and created highly stylised images influenced by Roger Fry's writings on formal beauty. At the same time Wyndham Lewis was developing his own idiosyncratic idiom inspired by continental cubism and futurism. The 1920s and 1930s also saw the rise of abstract art as championed by Barbara Hepworth and of surrealism as seen in Edward Wadsworth's enigmatic still lives. Thus by the Second World War a significant part of the British art scene was devoted to the exploration of untraditional aesthetic approaches.

⁹ Alfred Munnings, *An Artist's Life* (London: Museum Press, 1950), 98.

The story of Britain's –isms has been told many times and will not be dealt with in detail here. However, it is worth reminding the reader that much of this experimentation was motivated by a desire to address the peculiar character of twentieth-century life. In the catalogue of his second exhibition in New York (1920) C. R. W. Nevinson claimed that the idioms of ages past were not capable of representing the modern urban realities: 'it is impossible to use the same means to express the flesh of a woman and the ferro-concrete of a sky-scraper'.¹⁰ In 1931 Paul Nash stated that the rise of non-naturalistic art could be explained by 'the insecurity and muddle' in which practitioners lived, that it was a natural reaction to an unprecedently complex environment.¹¹ These artists were convinced that radically novel approaches were needed if one wished to convey the excitements and problems of the contemporary world.

While there was no universal agreement as to what the art of modernity should look like, the members of the avant-garde were united in their conviction that the pictorial styles of the last few centuries were no longer appropriate. Thus they were famously dismissive of those practitioners who remained interested in these conventions. The bastion of this allegedly backward-looking art was, of course, the Royal Academy of Arts in London. As the new groups were busy overthrowing traditions those who exhibited at Burlington House still cultivated the Victorian representational idioms. They continued to produce naturalistic state portraits, detailed depictions of the countryside as well as sculptures inspired by the Greco-Roman heritage. The modernists and their sympathisers were highly critical of this perceived conservatism. In 1910 the critic C. H. Collins Baker wrote about the Academy:

¹⁰ C. R. W. Nevinson, *My Art Creed* (New York: Bourgeois Galleries, 1920), 2.

¹¹ Paul Nash, 'Nature, Life and Art', *Weekend Review*, 5 December 1931, Vol. 41, 716.

By now, of course, it has become a sort of joke, the number and the quality of conspicuous artists whom this institution could not stomach, even as it is a perpetual mystery whither vanish the prize-winners of its competitions.¹²

In her book *Modern Painting in England* (1937) Mary Chamot similarly claimed that the institution only exhibited ‘work of a type that may have had some spark of originality twenty or thirty years ago’ and that ‘Academic success does no good artistically’.¹³ The pieces shown at the annual Summer Exhibitions were thus seen as pale imitations of a moribund tradition which failed to address the excitements and problems of twentieth-century life. The modernists and their supporters dismissed academic art as an irrelevant exercise that could hardly engage productively with the social world.

Apparently, this view has been adopted by more than a few later scholars. While the British avant-garde’s history has been explored at great length by the likes of Charles Harrison, David Peters Corbett and Lisa Tickner the practices promoted by the Academy remain much less thoroughly studied.¹⁴ Harrison claims that art of the late nineteenth century was often ‘priggish and sentimental’ suggesting that the works which continued this tradition were equally deserving of scorn and celebrates the ‘strengths’ of the avant-garde which came to replace it.¹⁵ Fortunately, modernism’s heroic narratives of achievement have been effectively questioned by scholars such as Griselda Pollock and Janet Wolff yet we still have comparatively few accounts of the period’s alternative aesthetic approaches, particularly in the British context.¹⁶ Most general surveys of early twentieth-century art like Dennis Farr’s *English Art 1870-1940* (1984) or *Sculpture in Twentieth-Century Britain* (2003), edited by

¹² C. H. Collins Baker, ‘The Paintings of Walter W. Russell’, *The Studio*, August 1910, Vol. 50, 171.

¹³ Mary Chamot, *Modern Painting in England* (London: Country Life Ltd., 1937), 80-87.

¹⁴ Charles Harrison, *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981); Corbett, *The Modernity of English Art*; Lisa Tickner, *Modern Life and Modern Subjects: British Art in the Early Twentieth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000).

¹⁵ Harrison, *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939*, vii and 13.

¹⁶ Griselda Pollock and Fred Orton, *Van Gogh: Artist of his Time* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1978) and Janet Wolff, *AngloModern: Painting and Modernity in Britain and the United States* (London: Cornell University Press, 2003).

Penelope Curtis, barely mention the kinds of objects that were exhibited at Burlington House.¹⁷ This relative neglect suggests that many historians still believe that academic art was indeed out of touch with contemporary concerns and that it could contribute little to our understanding of the era.

However, there are some important exceptions to this general trend. Richard Morphet was the first to attempt a history of British realist art of the interwar period in what is now a little known 1981 article in *Les cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*.¹⁸ He related this visual subculture to the reaction against the perceived excesses of pre-war futurism and vorticism as well as the renewed interest in Classical Antiquity and the Italian *quattrocento*.¹⁹ Morphet did not concentrate exclusively on academic art; his article also covered modernist figures like Edward Wadsworth. In 1988 Burlington House staged an exhibition entirely devoted to academic practice: *The Edwardians and after: The Royal Academy 1900-1950*. The catalogue, by Mary Anne Stevens, provides much useful information about a number of pictures but the author rarely attempts to relate them to wider cultural trends or to show their relevance to the debates of the time.²⁰ Some of these questions were posed by the 2017 exhibition *True to Life: British Realist Painting in the 1920s & 1930s* at the National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh. In the catalogue Patrick Elliott and Sacha Llewellyn explore the reasons for realism's continued relevance after the First World War and its reception by the public.²¹ Like Morphet, they do not concentrate on academic practice but offer a broader survey of realist art, broad enough to include painters like Stanley Spencer and Edward Burra.

¹⁷ Dennis Farr, *English Art 1870-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); Penelope Curtis, ed., *Sculpture in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Leeds: Henry Moore Institute, 2003).

¹⁸ Richard Morphet, 'Le réalisme anglais entre les deux guerres,' *Les cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne* 7, 8 (1981), trans. J.-M. Lucioni, 322-345.

¹⁹ Ibid, 323 and 334-341.

²⁰ Stevens, *The Edwardians and after*.

²¹ Patrick Elliott and Sacha Llewellyn, *True to Life: British Realist Painting in the 1920s and 1930s* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2017).

Another major contribution to the debates about this period is the online chronicle of the Academy's Summer Exhibitions put together by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art as part of the celebration of the annual shows' two hundred and fiftieth anniversary.²² The project accompanied an exhibition tracing this history at Burlington House that was presented alongside the 2018 summer event. The chronicle consists of short essays on each year's show that employ a great variety of perspectives, from studies of individual artists to discussions of the broad political context. The texts shed much light on the reception of academic art in the first half of the twentieth century. Yet the chronicle does not attempt to give a general account of the functions of this visual culture as a whole in the period nor does it argue at much length that it played an important role in British art. The catalogue published for the 2018 exhibition, by Mark Hallett and Sarah Victoria Turner, also offers a history of the annual shows but not as detailed as the one presented by the online chronicle.²³ Coverage of academic art after the Edwardian age can also be found in the realm of artists' monographs and one should mention the studies and exhibition catalogues devoted to John Lavery, Laura Knight, William Orpen and William Reid Dick amongst others.²⁴ These are mostly biographical and rarely devote much analysis to the broader social context in which a maker's works were produced and exhibited.

My thesis is an exploration of this often marginalised body of works from the twentieth century's early decades. It is an attempt to fill some of the gaps in the literature that I have identified. I will argue that the paintings and sculptures promoted by the institution were

²² The Royal Academy Summer Exhibition: A Chronicle 1769-2018, accessed 27 February 2019, <http://www.chronicle250.com>

²³ Hallett, Mark and Sarah Victoria Turner, *The Great Spectacle: 250 Years of the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2018).

²⁴ Kenneth McConkey, *Sir John Lavery* (Belfast: Ulster Museum, 1985); Caroline Fox, *Dame Laura Knight* (London: Phaidon, 1988); Robert Upstone, *William Orpen: Politics, Sex and Death* (London: Imperial War Museum, 2005); Dennis Wardleworth, *William Reid Dick, Sculptor* (London: Ashgate, 2013).

often seen to engage effectively with contemporary life and to meet major social needs. In his Academy lectures, published in 1913, George Clausen urged his colleagues to ‘commemorate worthily what is going on in this wonderful age’ and this study presents a claim that many of Clausen’s fellow members of the royal institution heeded his call.²⁵ By examining art periodicals and the general press, the RA’s administrative archives and the writings of gallery-goers as well as the visual material itself, I will attempt to show that both the artefacts’ makers and a significant part of the public perceived this practice as a vital component of British culture. The annual Summer Exhibitions were among the most well-attended public events in the country: according to the Academy’s annual reports most shows of the period 1910-1951 were visited by between 140 000 and 200 000 people about a half of whom purchased catalogues.²⁶ As late as 1938 writer Elizabeth Bowen claimed that the visits to these shows constituted ‘the nation’s homage to art’.²⁷ They were reviewed by all the major newspapers and were avidly discussed by socialites. Pieces by RA members were regularly commissioned by the state and many people encountered them on the streets or in the interiors of major institutions on a daily basis. These artists were patronised by the social elite which remained highly interested in grand presentation portraits and naturalistic landscapes. Thus a study of academic practice can augment our understanding of the way in which the upper classes presented themselves and of British society’s perception of itself more generally. Additionally, such a discussion could allow us to see the avant-garde’s creations in a new light by deepening our knowledge of modernism’s significant other.

²⁵ George Clausen, *Royal Academy Lectures on Painting* (London: Methuen & Co, 1913), 354.

²⁶ *Annual Report from the Council of the Royal Academy of the Year 1911* (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1912), 16; *Annual Report from the Council of the Royal Academy of the Year 1921* (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1922), 26-27; *Annual Report 1932*, 33; *Annual Report 1947*, 24.

²⁷ Elizabeth Bowen, ‘The 1938 Academy: An Unprofessional View,’ *The Listener* May 1938, Vol. 19, 952.

The aim of this thesis is to demonstrate that academic art was often seen to meet the demands of twentieth-century life in ways that others visual subcultures could not. I will show how Burlington House was embedded in contemporary culture and answered the needs of wartime propaganda, nationalist discourse, the movement for the preservation of the English countryside and other phenomena. I will argue that many of its traditional practices were still seen as relevant after the Edwardian period and that it developed some new tools for engaging with the new era's complexity. The thesis also offers some new perspectives on naturalism and formalism, two of the most important aesthetic concepts of the time, by showing how the two could be used together and to what ends. Additionally, I will approach some important gaps in the existing literature which has not examined at great length the complex relationship between the avant-garde and Piccadilly. As I will demonstrate, these two aspects of the art world presented themselves as polar opposites yet often found it necessary to engage and even learn from each other. Elliott and Llewellyn have discussed the influences that shaped realist painting of the interwar period and the subjects it tackled but have not explored in detail the reasons for this idiom's continuing popularity.²⁸ In the first chapter I address this issue by considering naturalism's perceived accessibility, its contribution to the war effort and the opportunities for critique it offered. Harrison and Corbett, among others, have studied the significance of formalism after the Edwardian era yet have not treated the important roles it assumed in Burlington House, a topic I cover in the second chapter.²⁹ Furthermore, the texts by Stevens, Elliott and Llewellyn and the RA online chronicle have not traced the features that academic artists between 1910 and 1951 had in common, the concepts that shaped their thinking and those that critics and viewers employed to describe

²⁸ Elliott and Llewellyn, *True to Life*, 30-47.

²⁹ Harrison, *English Art and Modernism*, 145-166; Corbett, *Modernity of English Art*, 67-85.

the overall character of the Summer Exhibitions. My thesis offers an account of these issues by discussing the most prevalent aesthetic concepts of the time and the genres that defined the annual shows. I will attempt to show that in these four decades Burlington House had a distinct identity that was both shaped by and reflected in the majority of objects presented there.

At the start of this project I was interested in the concept of ‘modernity’ and wished to uncover the Academy’s own stance towards it. My research eventually revealed that the term ‘modern’ was rarely used by academic artists and their supporters and was mostly associated with the avant-garde. It would have been difficult to claim that Burlington House was ever presented as a champion of ‘modernity’ or of the radical innovations that were often seen as synonymous with this concept. However, this does not mean that the institution was not interested in the contemporary world and its problems. In fact, my work came to suggest that the Academy proposed numerous ways to describe and make sense of twentieth-century Britain even though most of them differed from the usual markers of ‘modernity’. The art at the Summer Exhibitions offered various alternative contemporaneities that emphasised continuity and tradition but also sought to adapt to the social and technological changes of these decades. The institution’s conception of the present was usually conservative in nature and represented the interests of the political establishment although some of its artists employed the visual idioms associated with conservatism to question its reliability and adequacy. Despite the ubiquitous respect for the past the art at Burlington House was much readier to engage in contemporary debates than is usually assumed.

Eventually my research revealed that two aesthetic concepts dominated the discourses surrounding the Academy and coloured its contributions to twentieth-century culture, namely, those of naturalism and formalism. The notions of verisimilitude and the

satisfying arrangement of shapes were ubiquitous in the critical accounts of the annual shows. While the two concepts are now rarely associated with each other, in the early twentieth century they were often found to coexist, even coexist harmoniously, in academic works. They allowed this art to appeal to various audiences and negotiate a number of cultural tensions that modernism rarely addressed. The period's periodicals also made it apparent that Burlington House came to be defined by the genres of landscape and portraiture which were usually seen as its greatest aesthetic successes and most distinctive contribution to British culture. Narrative painting lost the prominence it had possessed in previous centuries but it did not disappear entirely and continued to be seen as an important aspect of the institution's identity. These crucial aesthetic concepts and genres provide the basis for the thesis' structure and are treated in detail in the next few chapters.

I will employ a rather loose definition of 'academic art'. This phrase will refer to the objects seen at the Academy's annual events as well as to works that were shown elsewhere but were produced by artists who regularly exhibited at this institution. It seems that this corresponds to the meanings invested in the expression by writers of the early twentieth century who employed it both when discussing the Summer Exhibitions and when reviewing presentations of art by academicians at private galleries or public spaces. I will not argue that there is a single distinctive trait that can be found in all pieces which fit this description; I do not think this can be done. At first glance, it might appear that this visual culture can be reduced to the perceived naturalism that characterised many of its paintings and sculptures. However, such an account would obscure the important role played by formalist aesthetics in the critical discourses surrounding these pieces. Nor would it do justice to the manner in which some academic practitioners subverted the public's expectations and made them question art's ability to depict reality. One could also imagine an attempt to define academic art as the

practice that adhered to Early Modern and Victorian traditions. Such a claim would be supported by many statements of the institution's members who often emphasised their work's ties to the famous achievements of past centuries. Yet many of the modernists were also learning from the European history of their crafts and eagerly studied the canvases of the National Gallery. The RAs were not the only ones who could say they had a significant relationship with the Old Masters and their art could not be defined exclusively along these lines. All of these themes will be explored at greater length in the following chapters. For now, it suffices to say that my aim is not to impose artificial and anachronistic restrictions on what counted as 'academic'. I will rather try to uncover the plurality of functions that different works were meant to perform and the complex ways in which they interacted with contemporary culture.

Burlington House catered to an upper-class audience that commissioned portraits from its artists and attended the exclusive opening days of the Summer Exhibitions. As Nikolaus Pevsner noted in 1945, the institution reflected the 'particularities of a wealthy and settled class.'³⁰ However, the majority of visitors were from a middle-class background, many of whom rarely saw other exhibitions. In 1930 the art critic 'Bernard Gui' commented that every year the show welcomed 'hundreds who will go there unperturbed, when nothing on earth would drag them into the, to them, glacial atmosphere of a private gallery.'³¹ Many of the objects on display were within the means of more modest households and were purchased by people who owned few, if any, other artworks. Academic artists sought to appeal to a wide public much of which had little knowledge of the art world. This audience's social make-up seems to have changed little between 1910 and 1951. Attendance rates fluctuated but rarely

³⁰ Nikolaus Pevsner, 'Artists and Academies', *The Listener*, 31 May 1945, Vol. 33, 608.

³¹ 'Bernard Gui', 'The Royal Academy and the Public', *The Studio*, June 1930, Vol. 99, 388.

fell beneath 140 000 or rose above 200 000.³² The Summer Exhibitions remained the most visited and widely reviewed platform for contemporary art in Britain.

Inevitably, the thesis will often refer to the works of the modernists as well. They posed a crucial, even unprecedented, challenge to the Academy's traditions and authority that encouraged the latter to articulate its beliefs with greater clarity and force. If one wishes to understand the roles that Burlington House performed its primary rival must be considered carefully. It is important to acknowledge that modernism was never a monolithic entity. Scholars like Natalya Lusty and Vincent Sherry, among others, have noted that the phrase 'modern art' performed a great variety of often contradictory functions in the first half of the twentieth century.³³ Throughout this period there was a significant number of artists who described their art as 'modern' or who were given this label by the press. They espoused very different aesthetic creeds which were sometimes presented in carefully crafted manifestos and sometimes only in private notes. The avant-garde never spoke with one voice and never offered a single answer to the problems of twentieth-century life. However, the term 'modern' was a highly important presence in artistic discourses and must be considered in any account of the period's visual culture. It was widely employed in the press to denote the trends that emerged after the Edwardian era. Artists often referred to it, either to claim allegiance to it or to dismiss what it signified. The word 'modernist' was often used in ways that suggest that for many observers the avant-garde did present a unified front or at least that the similarities between its protagonists were more important than their differences. It does seem to be the case that, despite their numerous disagreements, the aesthetic innovators had significant

³² *Annual Report from the Council of the Royal Academy of the Year 1911*, 16; *Annual Report 1921*, 26-27; *Annual Report 1932*, 33; *Annual Report 1947*, 24.

³³ Natalya Lusty, 'Introduction', in *Modernism and Masculinity*; eds. Natalya Lusty and Julian Murphet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 8; Vincent Sherry, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge History of Modernism*, ed. Vincent Sherry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1.

traits in common. Most of them advocated a critical reading of the Western artistic tradition and sought to forge a new language that would not be seen as a slavish imitation of past exemplars. They argued that the new age they lived in presented humankind with unprecedented problems and opportunities and demanded a radically novel visual response. The avant-garde and its champions often antagonised mainstream critical opinion and successful established artists. Sometimes, presenting modernism as a cohesive unit could serve to bolster the authority of a controversial statement by suggesting it was supported by a large group of radical creators.

These artists were also often united in their disapproval of Burlington House. Yet their relationship with this symbol of conservatism was always ambiguous. On the one hand, the avant-garde and the RAs frequently anathemised each other in public statements and foregrounded their aesthetic disagreements. In 1931 Henry Moore claimed that the Academy served no useful purpose ‘unless catering for popular taste is a useful purpose’.³⁴ In an infamous speech of 1949 the institution’s current President Alfred Munnings openly mocked those who found anything worthwhile in the new artistic movements.³⁵ Additionally, Burlington House mostly displayed works that continued Victorian traditions while the modernists rarely even referred to academic culture in their statements and writings. However, the lines dividing the two camps were often much blurrier than this rhetoric of hostility leads us to believe. In the first half of the twentieth century some adventurous artists like Augustus John, Stanley Spencer and Frank Dobson were made associates of the institution and their works were regularly shown at the Summer Exhibitions where they rarely escaped the critics’ attention. Additionally, as early as the Edwardian period the artists of Burlington

³⁴ ‘Interview with Sculptor Henry Moore’, *Architectural Review*, June 1931, 189.

³⁵ Timothy Wilcox, *Munnings v. The Moderns* (Manchester: Manchester City Art Gallery, 1986), 11.

House became interested in formalist aesthetics and critics began to evaluate their works on such terms. In their writings painters like John Lavery and Laura Knight discussed the importance of line and colour arrangements to their practice. Modernist pieces, for their part, often engaged with the Academy's visual culture even when the latter had been repudiated in their makers' writings. The avant-garde often found it necessary to construct arguments against the RAs and, occasionally, even to claim some of its legacy for itself. In any case, the bastion of the establishment could not be ignored. This complex relationship will be explored in greater detail in the following chapters where I demonstrate that the two poles of the art world were far more interested in each other than they would normally admit in their publications.

This thesis is not an attempt to present the artists associated with the Academy as neglected geniuses in need of worship; it explores an often-sidelined subculture which was more prominent than is usually assumed. It is also important to acknowledge that these works did not often embody liberal, let alone radical, social ideas and that they were rarely meant as serious challenges to the *status quo*. They were exhibited at an institution governed almost exclusively by males who were supported by the elite and were rarely sympathetic to the feminist or proletarian movements for social reform. However, I will claim that this art was often seen as an adequate depiction of modern life as it was perceived by conservative viewers and a consideration of this vision could also be helpful to those who wish to understand the more progressive social trends of the time. Additionally, I will argue that some academic artists did question the widely accepted ideologies although this was usually done in subtle and ambiguous ways. It is also possible that some observers could have interpreted the objects in a less conventional manner and seen in them signs of social critique even when the makers had no such intentions.

This thesis does not consider at great length the issues of gender, class and race, the classical trinity of critical theory. Not because I think these themes are unimportant or irrelevant to my subject but because they have been exhaustively treated by other scholars. Historians have discussed twentieth-century British art in the context of the period's contested gender roles, the social upheavals of the Great Depression and the world wars and have exposed the Eurocentric narratives underlying both the establishment culture and most of the artistic avant-garde. Katy Deepwell has examined the patriarchal structures that underpinned the interwar art world while Janet Wolff has addressed the androcentric rhetoric of modernist aesthetics.³⁶ Patricia Chu has considered modernism in the light of racial discourse and the concept of nationhood.³⁷ The intersectional biases of an institution like the Royal Academy are very familiar to researchers and an exploration of these power relations would yield few novel insights into the period's social dynamics. Instead, I will concentrate on the ways in which academic art was perceived by contemporaries and the meanings which were consciously imbued in it. I am here more interested in how artists, critics and gallery visitors described Burlington House than in the power imbalances that were embodied in it. The latter are crucial for our understanding of British culture but have already been explored in great detail.

I have chosen to concentrate on the period from 1910 to 1951. The former year saw both the end of the Edwardian period and the first exhibition of French Post-Impressionist art organised by Roger Fry. This famous polarising event which presented the London public with an unparalleled quantity of avant-garde works has often been hailed by historians as the birth

³⁶ Katy Deepwell, *Women Artists between the Wars: 'A Fair Field and no Favour'* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010); Wolff, *AngloModern*.

³⁷ Patricia Chu, *Race, Nationalism and the State in British and American Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

of British modernism. It was followed by several shows of foreign modern art at the Allied Artists Association that took place between 1910 and 1914.³⁸ The Whitechapel Gallery presented an important survey of the new trends in 1914 which largely consisted of British artists. Thus the early 1910s saw the emergence of modernism as an important cultural force in Britain that posed an unparalleled challenge to the traditions favoured by Burlington House. The academic art produced after this date is usually taken to have grown increasingly out of touch with the novel trends and thus with the issues of twentieth-century culture in general. However, I will attempt to show that Burlington House eagerly contributed to contemporary debates and devised ways to respond to the new competition. 1951 is equally significant as it was then that the institution organised a show about French modernism of its own. While the Academy had shown individual modernist works before that date this was its first exhibition dedicated to the avant-garde and can thus be seen as an important sign that Burlington House no longer saw itself primarily as a bastion of the naturalistic idiom and that it had fully adopted some forms of modernism. The period is framed by two important exhibitions of avant-garde French painting, two events that marked critical shifts in the trajectories of British visual culture.

I am interested in these four decades because at the time the Academy remained distinct from and largely opposed to modernism. I wish to uncover how the institution offered alternative ways to conceptualise the twentieth century, ones that differed from the avant-garde's strategies yet found favour with many critics and viewers. The new movements often claimed to be uniquely capable of depicting the new age but I will argue that Burlington House was often thought to perform this function more effectively. Modernism questioned the Academy's authority and readings of tradition more radically than any earlier artistic

³⁸ Anna Gruetzner Robins, *Modern Art in Britain 1910-1914* (London: Barbican Art Gallery, 1997), 7.

formation. This opposition provoked the royal institution to articulate its values with greater consistency and force and to prove its continued relevance. However, I am also interested in the links between Burlington House and the avant-garde, the ways in which they influenced each other despite their widely publicised enmity. This ambiguous relationship affected many artistic discourses in Britain in the four decades after 1910 and forms one of the main subjects of this thesis. The other main reason for my choice of period is my wish to cover both world wars as well as their immediate aftermath as academic art played a crucial role in both wartime propaganda and the commemorative processes that followed. These conflicts posed challenges to the art market but also provided Piccadilly with unprecedented opportunities to engage a very wide public and conceptualise British nationhood.

In the 1910s the Academy developed a set of strategies of engaging the twentieth century and the modernist phenomenon that remained largely consistent until 1951. There certainly were changes at Burlington House over these four decades. For instance, the presence of works that can be described as modernist gradually increased at the exhibitions and so did the number of modern artists among the elected members. The two world wars inevitably affected the Academy's activities and the public's perception of them. However, after the full emergence of modernism in the 1910s the institution adopted certain aesthetic commitments and patterns of self-presentation that mostly remained in place until the 1950s.

This study mainly covers painting, sculpture and the graphic arts as the academic architecture of the period is somewhat better studied, largely thanks to the fame of Edwin Lutyens, PRA between 1938 and 1944.³⁹ While his buildings and those of some of his colleagues are still celebrated the academic products of the other visual arts remain little

³⁹ See Elizabeth Wilhide, *Sir Edwin Lutyens: Designing in the English Tradition* (London: Pavilion, 2000); Andrew Hopkins and Gavin Stamp, eds., *Lutyens Abroad: The Work of Sir Edwin Lutyens outside the British Isles* (London: The British School at Rome, 2002).

known. Furthermore, painting and sculpture were involved with the new age's complex problems in ways very different from those of architecture. The representational arts grapple with reality through a visual rhetoric of mimesis that has a far more limited role in spatial articulations. Academic architecture relied on historical idioms that made use of an idiosyncratic critical vocabulary which often found little application in the other arts and deserves a separate study. I should also admit that painting plays a more central role in this account than sculpture. The latter usually received less critical attention and the Academy's members always included more painters than sculptors. The institution was widely seen to be more adept at the two-dimensional arts and this was apparent in the percentage of such works at the annual shows. This imbalance is addressed in more detail in the third chapter. However, it should be noted that some academic sculptors like William Reid Dick or Charles Sargeant Jagger did achieve financial and critical success and contributed to the Academy's public image.

The following chapters are devoted to the most important concepts employed in the critical discourses surrounding the Academy. I will employ each of them as a lens through which to perceive the manner in which this visual culture was seen to meet contemporary social needs. The first chapter discusses the significance of naturalism in academic art and its reception. The emulation of visual reality was widely associated with this aesthetic tradition and this perception often shaped critics' attitudes to Burlington House. I will explore how and why naturalism was seen as important to twentieth-century British culture and how this idiom was employed in nationalistic discourses and military propaganda, among other subjects. The second chapter considers how academic artists made use of formalism, an artistic approach they shared with the avant-garde. I suggest that the line dividing Burlington House from the modernists was blurrier than is usually assumed. I also argue that many academic works were

thought to exhibit formal beauty without indulging in the perceived non-naturalistic excesses of the new movements. This fact allowed the institution's supporters to both participate in the high cultural discourse of 'art for art's sake' and present their preferred pieces as rooted in the allegedly accessible and down-to-earth pictorial tradition of Britain. In the third chapter I consider landscape painting and portraiture, the dominant genres at the post-Edwardian Academy. I explore their functions in the context of the nascent movement for the protection of the English countryside and the culture of commemorating prominent social figures. Narrative painting is also discussed; an explanation is offered for its decreased prominence but so is an account of the roles it continued to play. The fourth and final chapter is about modernism's engagement with academic art. I argue that the avant-garde often referred to the institution's art of the past and the present and even sought to appropriate some of its traditional functions. I attempt to show that an awareness of academic visual culture can also deepen our understanding of modernist practice.

Before presenting the main body of my argument, however, it is worth exploring the secondary literature at greater length. This thesis is indebted to the excellent studies of the Academy's early history edited by David Solkin and Sarah Monks, John Barrell and Mark Hallett.⁴⁰ Their books explore in depth the discourses surrounding the annual exhibitions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century as well as the artists' often complex relationship with the institution. Hallett has examined the British press' reception of the shows of the Academy's first few decades and his consideration of the multitude of voices and interests engaged in the reviews informs my discussion of twentieth-century criticism.⁴¹ John

⁴⁰ David Solkin, ed., *Art on the Line: The Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House 1780-1836* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001); Sarah Monks, John Barrell and Mark Hallett, eds., *Living with the Royal Academy: Artistic Ideals and Experiences in England 1768-1848* (London: Ashgate, 2013).

⁴¹ Mark Hallett, 'The Business of Criticism: The Press and the Royal Academy Exhibition in Eighteenth-Century London,' in *Art on the Line*, ed. Solkin, 65-75.

Bonehill has also provided a useful account of the manner in which these reviews could shape an artist's reputation and affect the public's perception of his or her work.⁴² Jason Edwards' essay on John Gibson has shown how artists could both engage in and challenge the Academy's practices and his work has influenced my consideration of painters who developed critiques of the naturalistic idiom even as they made use of it.⁴³ Here I should also mention Holger Hoock's study *The King's Artists: The Royal Academy of Arts and the Politics of British Culture 1760-1840*.⁴⁴ He provides a helpful analysis of the importance of cultural patriotism to the Academy's identity and considers the manner in which its artists articulated loyalist and dissenting politics. Hoock also traces the perceived emergence of a national school in painting with definable aesthetic characteristics and the subsequent association of naturalism with the 'national character'.

Pamela Fletcher's book *Narrating Modernity: The British Problem Picture 1895-1914* (2003) has also influenced much of my discussion.⁴⁵ She has explored the so-called 'problem pictures', paintings that depicted ambiguous but tantalising scenes from modern life which fascinated late Victorian and Edwardian audiences. Her nuanced examination of the conventions of early twentieth-century pictorial naturalism and the press' responses to the Summer Exhibitions as social events have greatly augmented our understanding of that period's academic practice. Problem pictures were mostly out of fashion by the end of the First World War but some of the debates they engendered retained their relevance. Corbett's work on the modernity of English art in the period 1914-1930 (1997) will also be important

⁴² John Bonehill, 'The Eye of Delicacy:' Joseph Wright of Derby Reviewed,' in *Living with the Royal Academy*, eds. Monks et al., 89-110.

⁴³ Jason Edwards, 'By Abstraction Springs Forth Ideal Beauty? The 'Real Academy' and John Gibson's Anglo-Roman Modernity,' in *Living with the Royal Academy*, eds. Monks et al., 195-220.

⁴⁴ Holger Hoock, *The King's Artists: The Royal Academy of Arts and the Politics of British Culture 1760-1840* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003).

⁴⁵ Pamela Fletcher, *Narrating Modernity: The British Problem Picture 1895-1914* (London: Ashgate, 2003).

here as its author discusses the ability of that time's visual culture to address the problems of contemporary life. He claims that painters and sculptors after the First World War proved incapable of thematising the issues of their time, that there was a 'retreat, evasion and concealment of modernity's impact' which, while present in most non-academic art, was particularly evident in the pieces exhibited at Burlington House.⁴⁶ However, Corbett seems to conflate unnecessarily the concept of contemporaneity with the loaded term 'modernity'. I will argue that, while academic artists were wary of the word 'modern' they often sought to portray and even celebrate British life of the twentieth century.

I should also mention the two histories of the institution written by Sidney Hutchinson and James Fenton (1968 and 2006).⁴⁷ Both books offer useful accounts of the Academy's social role, public activities and internal politics through the decades yet they don't explore in much detail the actual objects shown on Piccadilly nor the manner in which they responded to contemporary concerns. Theophilus Paul Cowdell's unpublished 1980 thesis 'The Role of the Royal Academy in English Art 1918-1930' does examine the public's perceptions of the institution but, like the writings of Hutchinson and Fenton, it offers little insight into the individual paintings and sculptures seen there.⁴⁸

This body of works is discussed at some length in studies of art produced during the world wars such as Susie and Meirion Harries' *The War Artists: British Official War Art of the Twentieth Century* (1983), Brian Foss's *War Paint: War, State and Identity in Britain 1939-1945* (2007) and James Fox's *British Art and the First World War 1914-1924* (2015).⁴⁹ Harries' book

⁴⁶ Corbett, *The Modernity of English Art 1914-1930*, 1-11 and 193-200.

⁴⁷ Sidney Hutchinson, *The History of the Royal Academy 1768-1968* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1968); James Fenton, *School of Genius: A History of the Royal Academy of Arts* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2006).

⁴⁸ Theophilus Paul Cowdell, 'The Role of the Royal Academy in English Art 1918-1930', doctoral thesis, University of London, 1980.

⁴⁹ Susie and Meirion Harries, *The War Artists: British Official War Art of the Twentieth Century* (London: The Imperial War Museum, 1983); James Fox, *British Art and the First World War 1914-1924* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

provides individual entries about the practitioners employed by the state to record the century's major conflicts, many of whom were members of the Academy. Foss studies the activities of the War Artists' Advisory Committee formed in the second global conflict and the art it collected. Fox argues convincingly that the First World War brought British visual art 'into a more symbiotic union' with contemporary life than ever before as artists sought to prove that their works could meet major social needs and were not a useless luxury in time of war or during the rebuilding which followed.⁵⁰ He examines many pieces informed by the Victorian idioms and the manner in which they were seen to serve the war effort which makes his study an important source for this thesis. However, he does not concentrate exclusively on this visual subculture nor does he produce an account of its significance beyond the Great War. There remains a significant gap in our knowledge of this tradition which the following chapters will attempt to fill.

⁵⁰ Fox, *British Art and the First World War*, 7.

Chapter I. Naturalism

Perhaps the most prominent feature of academic art of the first half of the twentieth century was its perceived naturalism. The painters and sculptors who exhibited at Burlington House were widely seen to adhere to the belief that art should emulate visible reality as faithfully as possible, a belief which was often thought to have defined Western European art since at least the fifteenth century. The critic Anthony Bertram called this approach ‘the foot-rule in which the academic mind takes so great a delight’.⁵¹ The practitioners were often discussed in such terms: *The Times* commented on the ‘explicit accuracy’ of Stanhope Forbes’ pictures and reproached William Orpen for his alleged exclusive reliance on outward appearance.⁵² The annual shows’ reviewers frequently noted the pictures’ verisimilitude and the portraitists’ ability to capture ‘likenesses’.⁵³ The academicians themselves expressed their support for this aesthetic: in one of his lectures George Clausen contends that it is ‘the appearance of nature that has to be observed and analysed, the object being to present or suggest an illusion’.⁵⁴

In this chapter I will explore the significance of naturalism in the critical discourses that surrounded academic art. I will show how this approach was thought to meet the demands of contemporary culture and I will attempt to answer why many observers considered it relevant to twentieth-century concerns. What follows is an examination of the role that naturalism played in nationalistic and military rhetoric as well as in discussions of the nature of the British pictorial tradition. The chapter also considers the uses to which this aesthetic was put by academic practitioners and the novel and occasionally even subversive ends it served. As I will

⁵¹ Anthony Bertram, ‘Contemporary British Painting. Dod Procter’, *The Studio*, January 1929, Vol. 97, 92.

⁵² ‘Obituary. Mr. Stanhope Forbes’, *The Times*, 3 March 1947, 6; ‘Obituary. Sir William Orpen. A Great Painter’s Technique’, *The Times*, 1 October 1931, 14.

⁵³ ‘Royal Academy. A Consistent Exhibition. Art and the Public’, *The Times*, 30 April 1932, 13.

⁵⁴ Clausen, *Lectures on Painting*, 26.

demonstrate, realism was widely thought to be highly accessible, to please the masses in a way no other kind of visuality could, and this made it particularly important in debates about the social utility of art and its purposes in the post-Edwardian age. Additionally, I will consider the so-called subject picture, an issue closely related to that of naturalism. These were paintings in which the object portrayed was seen to be of greater interest than the manner in which it was depicted. These works were almost always naturalistic and were said to be one of the defining features of the Summer Exhibitions.

As Sally Ledger and Patrick Elliott have pointed out, the terms ‘naturalism’ and ‘realism’ were often used interchangeably in this period to describe the art that sought to provide faithful renderings of the world despite these words’ differing meanings in nineteenth-century literature.⁵⁵ In using the concept of ‘naturalism’ my intention is not to refer to Émile Zola’s practice which had very limited influence on British visual culture after 1910. Instead, I wish to draw attention to the association between verisimilitude and nature, in the sense of both the natural environment and unaffected, straightforward behaviour. Realistic depictions were described as accurate representations of nature, as ‘strict copying of nature’ or ‘nature as she is.’⁵⁶ Importantly, this aesthetic was also presented as a common-sensical practice that appealed to the ‘natural’ inclinations of a wide public and contrasted with the allegedly pretentious and incomprehensible idioms of the avant-garde. The association of realism with nature proved highly useful to academic artists who often sought to foreground their work’s approachability and roots in a widely shared culture.

⁵⁵ Sally Ledger, ‘Naturalism: ‘Dirt and horror pure and simple’, in *A Concise Companion to Realism*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Hoboken, New Jersey: 2010), 86–87; Elliott and Llewellyn, *True to Life*, 12.

⁵⁶ A. L. Baldry, ‘The Art of Mr Albert Goodwin’, *The Studio*, March 1910, Vol. 49, 85; ‘The Lay Figure’, ‘On the Essence of Art’, *The Studio*, December 1910, Vol. 51, 258.

The subject of naturalism in Western art has been hotly debated in recent decades. Scholars like Robert Layton, Norman Bryson and W. J. T. Mitchell have argued that Westerners' tendency to perceive Greco-Roman and Early Modern art as corresponding to visual reality is culturally conditioned and depends solely on our social upbringing.⁵⁷ They have challenged the view that this tradition reflects universally human sensory experiences and possesses any transcultural validity. Jeremy Tanner, on the other hand, maintains that naturalism is to some extent grounded in physical traits that all human beings share and that it constitutes an 'interpenetration' of cultural and biological systems.⁵⁸ In his discussion of Greek sculpture of the fifth century BC he claims that these figures provided more detailed accounts of bodily maturation than any objects produced before that time.⁵⁹ Tanner contends that the concept of naturalism is necessary for historians who want to explain the period's style and its differences from those that came before and after it.

It is not the purpose of this chapter to settle the debate or to examine the relation of twentieth-century aesthetics to the earlier cultures mentioned above. In using the term 'naturalism' I will follow British critics and artists of the period 1910-1951. It seems that the concept was mostly seen as unproblematic and readily understandable. As I have pointed out, it was usually associated with academic culture and the Early Modern tradition the latter emulated. This culture was thought to produce accurate renderings of one's surroundings, a claim that even the institution's detractors did not dispute. My aim is to remain sensitive to

⁵⁷ See Robert Layton, 'Naturalism and Cultural Relativity in Art', in *Form in Indigenous Art: Schematisation in the Art of Aboriginal Australia and Prehistoric Europe*, ed. P. J. Ucko (Canberra: Humanities Press, 1977), 3-43; Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983); W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

⁵⁸ Jeremy Tanner, *The Invention of Art History in Ancient Greece: Religion, Society and Artistic Rationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 67-96.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 67-96.

the particularities of the age's aesthetic discourses rather than to argue for the objective validity of their assertions.

Art for the 'ordinary visitor'

The naturalistic art cultivated at the Academy was widely considered to be far more accessible than the modernists' experimental approaches. The institution itself emphasised its approachability: in 1935 its current secretary W. R. M. Lamb wrote that the summer shows' organisers

...must look for real achievements that will be comprehensible and enjoyable to the ordinary visitor who seeks a ready means of cultivating a personal taste in contemporary art.⁶⁰

It is worth referring to the Institute of Adult Education's activities in the 1930s and 40s when it staged annual exhibitions in towns and villages around the country as part of a rather condescending program named 'Art for the People'.⁶¹ The shows were targeted at those who rarely visited such events and were aimed to acquaint the allegedly uncultivated lower classes with a higher aesthetic realm. At the 1940 show the visitors were interviewed about their preferences and their answers were said to demonstrate that realistic pictures were admired the most and that relatable subject matter was always preferred by the viewers.⁶² The interviews suggest that naturalism was perceived as a universally comprehensible idiom which required no previous knowledge on the part of the observer. This view seems to have been widely accepted throughout the four decades following 1910.

These attitudes can be related to the concept of 'consensus art' coined by Andrew Brighton. In his definition this kind of visual culture answers the needs of a wide public that is

⁶⁰ W. R. M. Lamb, *The Royal Academy: A Short History of its Foundation and Development to the Present Day* (London: Alexander MacLehose & Co., 1935), 111.

⁶¹ John Gordon, 'Likes and Dislikes', *The Studio*, February 1940 Vol. 119, 34.

⁶² Ibid, 35.

not normally interested in art and whose expectations are shaped by other more popular and influential media such as cinema and the press.⁶³ Brighton presents ‘photographic’ realism as a defining trait of this practice and as a sign of proficiency appreciated by a wide middle-class clientele. The discourses surrounding academic art of the twentieth century’s first half seem to embody many of the features he describes and the concept of ‘consensus’ nicely captures the alleged commonsensical nature of this tradition.

In contrast to naturalism, the new methods employed by the avant-garde were frequently described as bizarre and unintelligible. In a 1946 article in *Apollo* we read:

To-day it is assumed to be an artist’s indisputable right to choose his subject from the utterly irresponsible regions of his own mind; to be absolutely indifferent as to whether anybody else understands his symbols; and to have no need even to use the recognised or recognisable methods of craftsmanship to express whatever it is he is expressing. The higher, the fewer. The artist has finally retired to his ivory tower, and has now demolished the stairway. The fewer able to penetrate his seclusion and understand what he is doing, the more sublime the art is assumed to be.⁶⁴

The critic was clearly suspicious of modernism’s experimental approaches which often failed to correspond to audiences’ expectations and left them baffled. He apparently considered this unapproachability a sign of the artists’ pseudo-intellectual pretentiousness and inflated self-esteem, all reasons to doubt the new movements’ validity and legitimacy as responses to contemporary life. Unlike them, naturalistic art was easy to understand and reliably provided familiar experiences. These views were shared by many other observers of this period and constituted a major argument in favour of academic culture.

Importantly, all of these texts were penned by critics and journalists who usually described the lower classes as well as the majority of the bourgeoisie in a highly stereotypical fashion and assumed that most gallery-goers had very little knowledge of art. Our

⁶³ Andrew Brighton, ‘Consensus Art: Serious Art: Greenberg: Wyeth’, *Critical Quarterly* 42, issue 2 (Summer 2000), 135.

⁶⁴ ‘Perspex’, ‘Two and Two Make Four,’ *Apollo*, March 1946, Vol. 43, 51.

understanding of the public's preferences is inevitably distorted by the prejudices of those few who took the time to write about contemporary visual culture. Yet these sources retain their historical value as they inform us about the views of the people who were intimately involved with the art world and who often helped determine the Academy's policies. Additionally, the reviews in the major newspapers would have been widely read and thus shaped the opinions of consumers to a certain extent. As long as one is aware that the positions articulated there were not necessarily shared by all or even most observers, these texts are indispensable to scholars of twentieth-centuries perceptions of the British public.

The debate about approachability was part of the ongoing rhetorical conflict between the modernists and the establishment. This pattern of hostility seems to have benefitted both parties. It allowed the latter to present itself as a staunch supporter of true tradition that was not swayed by passing fashions and sensation-seekers. Winston Churchill, who became honorary member of the Academy in 1948, claimed that Burlington House must remain aloof from such developments:

Certainly it is not the function of the Royal Academy to run wildly after novelty. There are many opportunities and many places for experimental artists to try their wings – and it is not until the results of their experiments have won a certain measure of acceptance from the general agreement of qualified judges that the Royal Academy can be expected to give them its countenance.⁶⁵

The Academy's animosity towards the modernists could be presented as an unwavering support for art's perennial values that refused to compromise its integrity in favour of attention-grabbing deviations.

On the other hand, the modernists could reap the advantages of opposing an institution that was often perceived as conservative and resistant to modernity. Their criticism of the place that could be thought to promote outdated formulas emphasised their

⁶⁵ 'Variety in Art. Academy Policy. Mr Churchill on Discipline', *The Times*, 2 May 1938, 10.

commitment to creating new and relevant idioms. It provided a symbol of the establishment against which to rebel and articulate one's version of artistic non-conformity. The avant-garde's position outside an organisation that catered to the country's elite also lent legitimacy to the social critique of, for example, Wyndham Lewis' writings or Mark Gertler's picture *Merry-Go-Round* (1916). Academic culture was modernism's necessary other, its Jungian shadow, that helped it define itself and construct its identity. It is important to note here that the two camps were not always hostile to each other nor were their aesthetic commitments necessarily opposed. In the following chapters I show that they had much more in common than they were usually willing to admit. However, this perceived antagonism was an important feature of the British art world and most artists positioned themselves in one of the two artistic formations.

The alleged popularity of realism had obvious advantages for the Academy's detractors. It enabled them to claim that the institution pandered to the tastes of the vulgar and that the successes of the artists shown at Burlington House were due to their lack of intellectual ambition. Anthony Butts, for instance, complained in 1940 that the Piccadilly exhibitions did nothing 'to educate, to extend perception, to develop taste' but merely provided the crowds with cheap thrills.⁶⁶ However, the perceived accessibility of naturalistic art also provided the Academy's champions with an important argument as they could make the case that the comprehensibility of this idiom was a proof of its legitimacy and superiority over the avant-gardes practices which few could understand. In 1932 *The Times* critic wrote:

Undoubtedly and emphatically the first duty of the Royal Academy, with its commanding position and material resources, is to the public. Whatever may be said by extremists the social responsibility of such a body comes first, and for the great majority of people the Summer Exhibition of the Royal Academy represents exclusively what they understand by 'art'.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Anthony Butts, 'The Royal Academy of Arts 1940', *The Listener*, 9 May 1940 Vol. 23, 936.

⁶⁷ 'Royal Academy. A Consistent Exhibition. Art and the Public', *The Times*, 30 April 1932, 13.

Here the approaches promoted by the institution are praised for their accessibility and are even presented as the only ones capable of meeting an important social need. Burlington House is said to be almost duty-bound to adhere to the more traditional styles as they satisfy 'the great majority of people'. The critic 'Perspex' had a similar view:

Academicians are not ashamed of performing a social service to the public instead of demanding a service from it. The cynic's retort will be that of course the Academy is a market, its wares mere market wares, and would dismiss them as so much *furniture*. But that is precisely what even the greatest masterpieces of art have *always* been and always will be. Therefore, it is not depreciation but, on the contrary, high praise if one can say of these Royal Academy exhibits that many of them would make pleasing *furniture*.⁶⁸

This writer insists that all important works ever created had been produced with the public's needs in mind and that artists should be content with providing pleasing and accessible backdrops to their clients' lives. A 1920 article in *Colour* also made an intriguing case about the importance of the 'uncultivated' observers:

There is no satisfactory substitute for the rough and ready judgement of the crowd; and 'cast thy bantling upon the rocks' is good advice to any artist. The disadvantage of 'secessions' is that they tend to protect the artist from this rough and ready judgment by creating their own special publics of comparatively cultivated people. Personally, I believe that there is nothing worse for the artist than intelligent appreciation. It makes his work too easy. Even when the technical standard of the secessionist body is high, as it often is, it is not the same discipline for the artist as popular judgment; because the real problem of art is not technical excellence in the abstract but technical excellence that will go down. The secret ambition of every good artist is to move the 'man in the street' without his knowing it...⁶⁹

The average visitor to the summer shows is said to be the best arbiter of aesthetic value. True art, according to the critic, should be able to move all spectators, regardless of their previous knowledge and experience, and the works that are most widely admired are necessarily the best ones. Significantly, the products of 'secessionist' groups are seen as self-indulgent creations which could or should have little power over the average gallery-goer. Herbert Furst also suggested that the artist should submit to the viewers' judgment:

⁶⁸ 'Perspex', 'Art Notes', *Apollo*, May 1943 Vol. 37, 114.

⁶⁹ 'Notes of the Month', *Colour*, May 1920, xvi.

...his principal object in life is to give the public what it wants... The pressing need of the moment is to bring home to the student that he cannot continue to look upon himself as a parasite, a favoured exception whom the public is under an obligation to feed so he may devote himself to self-expression. Instead he should be brought up with the idea that he is a useful person, indispensable to society – which in fact he is – when he knows his job.⁷⁰

In this text the practitioner is encouraged to meet the public's expectations and to be sensitive to its needs. It is 'his' social duty to produce pieces that are readily comprehensible and useful and all other approaches, the author states, are ultimately egoistic and unworthy of support.

The quotes provided above emphasise the importance of accessibility in art. The last two go as far as to make the claim that only the kind of visual culture that could engage the majority of observers deserves respect and financial endorsement. As I have already shown, naturalism was perceived in such terms and it is very likely that the critics I referred to had this idiom in mind. In their eyes the alleged popularity of naturalism granted it a legitimacy and authority which modernism could never possess. Thus the former's champions were thought to contribute to contemporary culture in a way which their rivals could not match.

Modest Gentlemen

The biographies and autobiographies of academic artists from this period also foregrounded the approachability of this culture and its makers. In the first half of the twentieth century there appeared numerous such books by and/or about renowned painters like John Lavery, William Orpen, Alfred Munnings and Laura Knight which continued the nineteenth-century tradition of RA biographies.⁷¹ What is particularly interesting about the post-Edwardian writings is the tendency to present their protagonists as down-to-earth hardworking

⁷⁰ Herbert Furst, 'What Every Art Student Ought to Know', *Colour*, February 1931, 18-19.

⁷¹ John Lavery, *The Life of a Painter* (London: Cassell & Co., 1940); P. G. Konody and Sidney Dark, *Sir William Orpen: Artist and Man* (London: Seeley Service & Co., 1934); Alfred Munnings, *The Finish* (London: Museum Press Ltd., 1952); Laura Knight, *Oil Paint and Grease Paint* (London: Nicholson & Watson, 1936).

professionals rather than as charismatic ‘geniuses’. In their book on William Orpen (1934) P. G. Konody and Sydney Dark approvingly cite the painter George Lambert’s assessment of Orpen’s character:

‘He is a very methodical, business-like Irishman, despising the word ‘art’ and having no use for the word ‘genius’. Here, in a shrewd summing-up of Orpen’s unrivalled efficiency as draughtsman and of his attitude towards Art with a capital A, is to be found the explanation of his whole brilliant career.’⁷²

The subject is presented as a reliable expert craftsman who has little time for Romantic rhetoric or aesthetic reveries. His work ethic is perceived as more important than any notion of inspiration or spontaneity. A similar practical attitude is evident in Walter Shaw-Sparrow’s book on Lavery:

Many painters of to-day send their works everywhere to be either lauded or rebuffed by the candour of different nations with different traditions and schools; and by so doing, an artist is able to gather from his current reception whether he has touched the eternal heart of life, or whether he belongs to a few years in the history of wayward fashions. This knowledge gives him quite a fair idea of what connoisseurs and critics may think and say in the years to come... John Lavery got a firm hold of this truth quite early in his dealings with art...⁷³

Here the artist is praised for his willingness to submit his work to criticism and his attention to what potential buyers might have to say. Far from posing as an autonomous self-certified creator Lavery seeks the approval of the public and presumably modifies his approach in accordance with its preferences. One finds the same outlook in Owen Rutter’s biography of Philip de László:

There was nothing of the *cher maître* about him. He was no poseur; he gave himself no airs. He had dignity and he knew his worth, but he was modest.⁷⁴

In writings like these academic practitioners are presented as sensible and devoted professionals who provide value for money and are sensitive to the expectations of gallery-

⁷² Konody and Dark, *Sir William Orpen*, 131.

⁷³ Walter Shaw-Sparrow, *John Lavery and his Work* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1911), 2.

⁷⁴ Philip de László and Owen Rutter, *Portrait of a Painter: The Authorised Life of Philip de László* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1939), 11.

goers. Their art is seen as highly approachable and easy to understand and very much in tune with the average viewer's needs.

The RAs' self-portraits also present them in a similar light, John Lavery's self-portrait with Shirley Temple (1936) being a particularly good example. The artist is shown talking with Hollywood's most famous child actor who was very popular in the 1930s. The picture positions him within contemporary mass culture rather than in the rarefied highbrow ambiance preferred by the modernists. Lavery seems to have aspired to the kind of fame enjoyed by film stars and offers an appropriately affable and unpretentious self-image. While the artist is depicted with his palette and brushes Temple holds a croquet mallet and this seems to suggest a certain equivalence between the two sets of objects. Tongue-in-cheek, the painter compares his tools to a child's toy and painting to a sport-like pastime. Lavery presents his brushes as toys for grown-ups, his art as a pleasant diversion that could be enjoyed as widely as Temple's performances.

The kind of brushwork preferred at Burlington House is also significant in this context. While this is not true of all exhibitors at the summer shows, the majority of painters there favoured smooth glossy surfaces over gestural brushstrokes. The works of figures like Algernon Newton, Frank Dicksee or James Gunn hardly ever reveal any traces of the artists' hands, never disturbing the photographic attention to detail or the illusion of three-dimensionality. Every attempt is made to present these pictures as windows onto reality and belie their physicality. The viewer is encouraged to concentrate on the scenes depicted rather than on their makers' agency. This preference can be seen as another display of the alleged self-effacing modesty of academic artists. Their products often suggest that the painters were more interested in creating a reliable illusion than in drawing attention to their own personas.

One is left with the impression that the makers were less concerned with demonstrative originality or bravura technique than with offering dependable exercises in naturalism.

This rhetoric of down-to-earth modesty and pragmatism was to some extent a departure from earlier modes of writing about the RAs. Nineteenth-century biographies sometimes made use of Romantic narratives about the innate gifts of their subjects and their superiority to a philistine public. In his 1831 book on Henry Fuseli, for instance, John Knowles described the closing of the painter's Milton Gallery in such terms:

Thus terminated the exhibition of one of the greatest efforts of genius ever executed by one artist. It is lamentable to contemplate that, after the labour of so many years, the energies exerted by the painter, and the privations which he endured during the time he was executing these pictures, they should have been met with so much of neglect from the public.⁷⁵

Fuseli is presented as a solitary misunderstood genius who had created masterpieces beyond the comprehension of most of his contemporaries. Quite unlike the Lavery of Shaw-Sparrow's account he is said to have done without the validation of clients and to have worked on his project for years even when no remuneration was forthcoming. Frederic Leighton's biography, published in 1906, often employed a similarly dithyrambic tone; the author reminisced about the painter's

...yearning, unsatisfied spirit, which, though subject at times to great elevation of delight, at others was also the victim of profound depressions and a sense of loneliness – a state of being born out of that strange, only half-explained region whence proceed all intuitive faculties.⁷⁶

We are also told that

[i]n the deepest recesses of his nature burnt the unquenchable fire, the paramount longing to follow in Nature's footsteps, and to create things of beauty. Among the many loyal servants who have dutifully worshipped at the shrine of art, never was there one who more completely devoted the best that was in him to her service.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ John Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli* (London: Colburn and Bentley, 1831), 235-236.

⁷⁶ Mrs Russell Barrington, *The Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Leighton. Vol. I* (London: George Allen, 1906), 10.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 2.

Leighton is presented as a rather extraordinary individual, prone to wild mood swings yet also fired by numinous inspiration and profound love of beauty. By rehearsing the familiar tropes of male ‘genius’ the writer constructs the very antithesis of the pragmatic unpretentious Orpen praised by Konody and Dark. The Victorian painter is seen as a monk-like devotee of pure art, far removed from the concerns of ordinary men. While this kind of rhetoric is not apparent in all nineteenth-century biographies of academicians it was a significant presence in the genre of this period. In contrast, it seems to have been largely absent in the books published between 1910 and 1951 some of which emphatically distanced themselves from it, marking an important change in the manner the Academy was perceived and presented itself.

So why did the RAs’ champions choose to abandon the Romantic rhetoric of their predecessors? The answer seems to lie in the writings by and about the avant-garde that emerged at the time. The modernists and their fellow travelers often emphasised the autonomous nature of their practice, their alleged reluctance to pander to popular taste. In an article of 1922 Lewis wrote:

Art always has been, and within limits it must remain, the monopoly of the intelligent few. The mass will go to the performance of Shakespeare, the national picture collection, or buy the *Tale of a Tub*, but will understand nothing. Art is either an improvement of the head, of the summit of a society, or it is popular art, which, given primitive conditions, can be admirable, but will not satisfy the civilized man.⁷⁸

This unabashedly elitist position became characteristic of the new movements which often struggled to secure patronage or appreciation in the press. Their sympathisers frequently described these practitioners as isolated figures whose brave experiments were rejected by a narrow-minded society. In 1920 the writer John Cournos praised Jacob Epstein for his resilience in his war with a benighted public:

After a long and persistent struggle, there are but few left to detract from the artist’s craftsmanship... To judge, however, from the storm of hostility which his symbolic figure, *The Christ*, has aroused in

⁷⁸ Wyndham Lewis, ‘The Credentials of the Painter’, *The English Review*, April 1922, Vol. 34, 395.

critical and lay circles, it is clear that artistic history repeats itself, and that, like Rodin before him, Epstein must fight his artist's battle all over again.⁷⁹

This account harks back to the nineteenth-century books mentioned above and could be seen as a continuation of Romantic genius-worship. Like their Georgian and Victorian predecessors, the avant-garde's chroniclers foregrounded the exceptional nature of their subjects and even cast them in messianic roles. In a 1920 article on Nikolai Roerich's stylised landscapes we read:

In our days the struggle between 'mechanical civilization' and 'the culture of spirit' (to use Mr Roerich's own expressions) is reaching a decisive point. When an artist to whom it is given to reflect the colours, the sounds and the thoughts engendered in Infinity remains whole-heartedly within the vibrations linking him with it, he makes them tangible to all; but it must be a whole-hearted, spontaneous attitude on the part of the artist; only then does he stand as one of the leaders clearly outlined on the summit of the mountain where the battle is raging.⁸⁰

Here the entire world's destiny is said to depend on spiritually enlightened individuals like the Russian painter, a kind of impassioned hyperbole found in many contemporary accounts of modernist practitioners. They were made to appear as great cultural heroes who were neither interested in nor depended on the approval of the average gallery-goer.

By discarding this elevated style of presentation, the academicians and their supporters seem to have deliberately positioned themselves against the novel trends. The modernists posed a challenge to Burlington House that the latter chose to answer by foregrounding those of its advantages which the avant-garde most conspicuously lacked. The emergence of a new cultural field that posed as autonomous and heroically isolated from the mainstream provided the RAs with a reason and an opportunity to emphasise their art's accessibility and embeddedness in the status quo. While the new movements could only claim to appeal to small circles of admirers the objects at Burlington House were presented as addressed to society at large. They were said to respond to the expectations of most viewers

⁷⁹ John Cournos, 'Jacob-Epstein: Artist-Philosopher', *The Studio*, July 1920, Vol. 79, 173.

⁸⁰ R. Jarintzov, 'A Russian Painter: N. K. Roerich', *The Studio*, April 1920, Vol. 79, 60.

in a way that modernist art could not. The experimenters' disdain for popular culture only rendered the Academy's self-presentation more believable while the latter reinforced the modernists' critical position. Burlington House claimed to fulfil important social needs in contrast to an avant-garde which allegedly only expressed the whims of a few eccentrics. The RAs argued that they offered real value for their clients' money and that their works' accessibility marked them as particularly deserving of public patronage. As I will show this strategy proved particularly useful during the two world wars and in their aftermath when the demand for an eloquent and comprehensible public art was particularly urgent.

The presentation of academic artists as practical businessmen seems to have resonated with a significant number of observers in the interwar period. Many critics and practitioners wrote about the need for artists to contribute to the national economy and become financially productive and independent. In 1935 the Academy organised the exhibition *British Art in Industry* devoted to contemporary design. According to the current President William Llewellyn one of the show's main objectives was the promotion of the country's products:

British workmanship had always been unrivalled, but goods of many kinds failed in artistic attraction, with the result that some other countries, with more appreciation of the commercial value of art, had made profits at our expense.⁸¹

The painter hoped that the exhibition might contribute to the development of a commercially successful industry that could compete with foreign output. In an article of 1925 Walter Sickert also stressed the need to emphasise financial profit and suggested that art education was to be seen as an investment that a student was to repay later in life:

A very special responsibility falls on teachers of the arts. They become the natural advisers of the parents as to whether a given student is sufficiently gifted to make it prudent for him to build his

⁸¹ 'British Art in Industry', *The Times*, 5 December 1934, 16.

whole future on the prospect of making a living by the art. Hence it is excellent to make every student feel that he retains his place in the classes only on a kind of extensible sufferance.⁸²

The author felt that art students had a responsibility to their parents and to society in general which had to be repaid through work that answered the community's needs. The artists of the Academy, which Sickert himself had joined in 1924, met this requirement by producing commercially successful pieces that resonated with a large audience. While the modernists could be portrayed as social parasites who expected remuneration for work that scarcely anyone needed the RAs could be seen as efficient competitors on the international and domestic market who did not expect to be treated differently from other producers.

The avoidance of the rhetoric of genius also benefitted the Academy's educational role. One of the institution's primary functions was the nurturing of artistic skills and the transmission of knowledge and experience. In the first half of the twentieth century training there was still based on life classes and drawings of casts after ancient sculptures.⁸³ Students were also expected to attend a series of lectures on art, anatomy, chemistry and perspective. Such a school would have been interested in promoting the view that art, or at least some aspects of it, can be learned and mastered through hard and diligent work. In his reminiscences about his days at the Munich Academy of Fine Arts (published in 1939) de László presents himself as a conscientious student devoted to his practice:

I lived for my work and even in the evenings I remained in my room, while my countrymen spent their nights in the Café Luitpold and other places, drinking and card-playing... I had already ten years of hard work behind me, and I wished to use every hour profitably. I had a feeling of great responsibility towards my own future, and I was desperately anxious to become of real help to my mother and sisters as soon as I could.⁸⁴

⁸² Walter Sickert, 'Illustration: The Training of Students', *Daily Telegraph*, 7 October 1925, 7.

⁸³ Royal Academy of Arts School Laws, 1914 and 1928, Royal Academy Archive.

⁸⁴ De László and Rutter, *Portrait of a Painter*, 53-54.

The painter attributes his later successes to the hard work of his early years and implicitly urges his young colleagues to be similarly assiduous. In such a context it would hardly have been beneficial to argue for the value of inborn untutored talents, a notion that often accompanied the discourses of nineteenth-century Romanticism and its modernist heirs. The image of down-to-earth committed craftsmen that the twentieth-century RAs projected could instill confidence in artistic education and its role in shaping one's career. If success was not the destiny of autonomously inspired individuals but rather the reward for years of diligent study the kind of training offered by the Academy's schools could be presented as crucial to any aspiring practitioner.

The academicians' beliefs about their own creations' approachability were also reflected in their reluctance to write art theory. Most of the exhibitors at Burlington House produced no texts on this subject and those, like George Clausen, who did, rarely advanced particularly original statements. The RA autobiographies of this period tend to concentrate on their subjects' social lives and offer few, if any, aesthetic ideas. In his 1940 book Lavery stated:

I am not a man of theory, and no one ever knew less why he did what he did than I. I question whether artists themselves can gain by theory as much as critics. It may well be dangerous to know too well what one is doing, just as a lover is apt to lose rather than gain by too close a knowledge of his psychological reactions.⁸⁵

This general avoidance of theoretical debate acquires a particular significance when analysed in the context of observers' impatience with the profusion of modernist manifestos and criticism. Ivor Herbert McClure, for instance, suggested in 1922 that avant-garde pictures only existed to provide subjects for the incomprehensible ramblings of their admirers.⁸⁶ In 1932 even *The Studio*, which was sympathetic to modernist developments, complained of the excessive reliance on words in an art that was meant to communicate visually and claimed

⁸⁵ Lavery, *The Life of a Painter*, 53.

⁸⁶ Ivor Herbert McClure, 'The Artfulness of the Critic', *Drawing and Design*, August 1922, Vol. 3, 113.

that this reliance was one of the main problems of contemporary painting.⁸⁷ The profusion of aesthetic literature was apparently perceived as a sign of the avant-garde's inability to communicate with viewers without the aid of explanations. Modernism's textual richness was presented as further proof of the new movements' elitism and lack of ties with the nation's culture. By eschewing theoretical arguments academic artists distanced themselves from this new highly verbal subculture and foregrounded their works' accessibility. This silence was meant to show that their creations needed no textual props and spoke a language that anyone could understand.

It appears that academic art was indeed successful with non-professional consumers. I have already mentioned the numbers of visitors at the Summer Exhibitions and the wide press coverage these events enjoyed. The institution's popularity is also nicely illustrated by the appearance of RAs on cigarette cards. In the first half of the twentieth century cards that were sold with cigarette packs became highly popular collectibles among children and adults alike. They often depicted well-known actors, politicians, writers and other important cultural figures. Academic artists were also a common presence. In the 1926 set of *Player's Cigarettes* cards, for instance, the painters Frank Dicksee, Augustus John and William Orpen appear alongside renowned names like Charlie Chaplin, Rudyard Kipling and David Lloyd George. Apparently, some members of the Academy were deemed sufficiently famous and important to feature in such a selection and help increase sales. To my knowledge, no artists outside Burlington House were granted such an honour in this period.

It is also worth mentioning *The Artist* magazine, first published in 1931. The periodical provided advice to amateur practitioners, primarily on matters of technique. Almost every

⁸⁷ Editor, 'What is Wrong with Modern Painting', *The Studio*, March 1932, Vol. 103.

issue featured contributions by members of the Academy, a fact that was seen as central to the magazine's identity. Its first editorial stated:

The Artist is proud of its contributors. No such band of artists has previously been induced to place their knowledge before students in such a lucid, practical manner – and enthusiastic workers will certainly appreciate the efforts put forth to help them.⁸⁸

The modernists, however, were almost completely absent from its pages in the 30s and 40s. This lacuna suggests that the periodical's editors believed that only the academicians were likely to engage the wider public's interest and stimulate the average Sunday painter. The RAs' detailed and highly technical advice on naturalistic picture-making was apparently thought to have greater appeal than anything their avant-garde colleagues could offer. Considering the fact that *The Artist* appeared during the Great Depression and managed to survive in spite of it, it seems that the artistic establishment did strike a chord with readers. Most of these professional advisers provided a clear goal for novices – the development of a realistic style – as well as practical and easily comprehensible tips on how to achieve it. As I have shown, they also employed the rhetoric of 'genius' and 'inspiration' far less often than the avant-garde which encouraged amateurs to believe that anyone could reach success with the proper training and hard work. The RAs served as models to follow far more successfully than the new movements' proponents.

This interest in supporting Sunday painters is not surprising as Burlington House was known to accept works by amateurs as well as trained professionals. In this period, it was the only place that regularly exhibited such pieces next to those by established figures. This catholicity enabled it to present itself as a particularly democratic institution that encouraged contributions from different social classes and levels of proficiency. The Academy could claim

⁸⁸ 'Editorial', *The Artist*, March 1931, Vol. 1, 5.

to promote interest in art among the general public by showing the efforts of people from outside the art world. In 1922 the critic Amelia Defries made a similar point:

...even if an amateur artist is not a genius he does, by his own experience in the art-work [sic] he enjoys, not only function naturally and cultivate power of observation, but *he teaches himself to understand*, and therefore to appreciate, works of genius. The more amateurs we encourage the more intelligent and enthusiastic support we cultivate for the Masters in the arts.⁸⁹

Encouraging amateurs, according to Defries, meant expanding the public for art and also the number of potential clients. It was in the professionals' best interest to share some of their knowledge with the laity and to make some room for it on the gallery walls. The promotion of such works also foregrounded the Academy's alleged commitment to an art that was universally comprehensible and could be appreciated and perhaps emulated by the greatest number of people.

Another advantage of naturalism related to its perceived accessibility was its association with hard and diligent work. The creation of detailed realistic depictions was often described as more demanding and time-consuming than that of avant-garde pictures which failed to correspond to ordinary visual experience. This issue was persistently thematised in Stanley Anderson's country crafts prints. These works, which were produced in the 1930s and 40s and became the artist's most commercially successful project, depict people engaged in traditional manual crafts many of which were rapidly disappearing at the time. Anderson draws a distinct parallel between the antiquated pursuits seen in *The Wheelwright* (1939) or *The Thatcher* (1944) and his own almost forgotten art of engraving. He seems to celebrate the value of hard manual labour: all of his subjects are shown absorbed by their projects which appear to require great skill and patience. He invites the viewer to consider the dexterity and commitment needed for his own naturalistic printmaking and relates it to the practices he

⁸⁹ Amelia Defries, 'Notes and News', *Drawing and Design*, July 1922, Vol. 3, 103.

portrays. Through both their medium and their subject matter the prints suggest that the products of determined effort should have an important place in British culture and make a case for a return to traditional crafts like Anderson's own.

This fascination with demanding manual work was partly due to the stress on craftsmanship laid at the Academy. The institution was known to expect high technical accomplishments from its exhibitors and to promote them at its Schools. In 1943 a Schools Committee appointed by the RA Council sent a number of questions about general policy to the institution's full members.⁹⁰ One of them related to the nurturing of the students' technique and whether craftsmanship should take precedence in the curriculum over training in aesthetic theory. The majority of respondents stressed the importance of manual dexterity; Meredith Frampton wrote:

Principal education should be in technical matters and these should be dealt with exhaustively as the student will allow his taste to deteriorate if lack of knowledge makes its expression too difficult.⁹¹

Anderson himself opined that 'far too much reliance is placed on books' in contemporary art education; that students should concentrate on honing their skills as makers of images rather than writers.⁹² I have already referred to the academicians' suspicion of theory and their preference for unaided and uncomplicated visual communication. Anderson's prints can be seen as a defense of this approach and of the teachable technical proficiency that naturalism required.

⁹⁰ Letter from W. R. M. Lamb sent to all members of the Royal Academy, July 1943, Royal Academy Archive.

⁹¹ Letter from Meredith Frampton to W. R. M. Lamb, August 1943, Royal Academy Archive.

⁹² Letter from Stanley Anderson to W. R. M. Lamb, March 1943, Royal Academy archive.

The National Tradition

Realism was also closely related to contemporary ideas about the essence of the British artistic tradition. In 1934 the Academy staged a large exhibition of English art from the Middle Ages to the Victorian period which proved very popular and inspired a large number of publications. Andrew Causey has explored its significance at length and has shown that it provoked observers to try and define the most important qualities of the national visual culture.⁹³ The exhibition's organiser W. G. Constable wrote that the country's art was mostly realistic and descriptive and that it rarely aspired to great intellectual profundity.⁹⁴ *The Times* critic also claimed that 'English art is only truly characteristic when its constitutional interest in people and things is taken for granted'.⁹⁵ This newspaper discussed the Scottish tradition in a similar fashion: the Centenary Exhibition of the Royal Scottish Academy in 1926 was said to demonstrate a typical matter-of-factness and the importance of 'human interest'.⁹⁶ These sources confirm that British visual culture was often associated with naturalism. The faithful emulation of the observable world was seen as a defining feature of the island's material heritage, perhaps even as an expression of its inhabitants' alleged preference for down-to-earth behaviour and aversion to abstract theorising.

As is well-known, many writers of this period used the words 'English' and 'British' interchangeably despite the protests of Scottish, Welsh, Northern Irish and other observers. When writing of 'English art' critics often, but not always, had in mind all of British visual culture and this anglocentric bias was evident even in governments' official rhetoric. At the

⁹³ Andrew Causey, 'English Art and the National Character 1933-1934', in *The Geographies of Englishness: Landscape and the National Past 1880-1940*, eds. David Peters Corbett, Ysanne Holt and Fiona Russell (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 275-302.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 286.

⁹⁵ 'British Art. Royal Academy Exhibition. Native Interests and Inspiration', *The Times*, 6 January 1934, 11.

⁹⁶ 'Royal Scottish Academy. Centenary Exhibition', *The Times*, 16 April 1926, 17.

Academy exhibitions Scottish and Welsh artists were greatly outnumbered by their English colleagues yet the institution claimed to represent British art as a whole. Scholars should be careful to avoid such conflations but they should also be aware of the full spectrum of meanings that the word ‘England’ could have in this period.

The reader would have noticed that the exhibition of English art through the centuries and the debates I outlined above took place after the First World War. The conflict and the period of rebuilding and commemoration that followed saw a renewed fascination with traditions that were perceived as national. *Colour* noted in 1920:

One of the more pleasing effects of the war, and one that seems likely to be permanent, is a revival of the spirit of England... The effect is natural enough, and it happens every day in private life when, after any trouble or disturbance, the tendency is to set a keen value on homely things. As reflected in art, the effect is nothing but good for art is always better for being racy of the soil.⁹⁷

Critics and artists felt encouraged to celebrate British achievement but also to identify and neutralise any potentially threatening ‘foreign’ elements wherever they lurked. Modernism and the non-realistic idioms it promoted were frequently discussed in such terms. They were often seen as alien ideas that were out of touch with the nation’s characteristic preferences, ones that could never thrive on Albion’s soil. The London Group’s 1915 exhibition of avant-garde pieces was famously called ‘Junkerism in art’ by *The Times*, a performance in which the painters seemed to ‘execute a kind of goose-step’.⁹⁸ Brandon Taylor has shown how the novel trends were often described as a continental threat and were associated with Jewish culture by anti-Semitic commentators.⁹⁹ This situation would have allowed the Academy to present itself as a bastion of the true national tradition, as the producer of the only kind of art which was in tune with the British psyche. As late as 1932 Paul Nash could complain that being a

⁹⁷ ‘Notes of the Month’, *Colour*, September 1920, xiv.

⁹⁸ ‘Junkerism in Art. The London Group at the Goupil Gallery’, *The Times*, 10 March 1915, 8.

⁹⁹ Brandon Taylor, ‘Foreigners and Fascists: Patterns of Hostility to Modern Art in Britain before and after the First World War’, in *The Geographies of Englishness*, eds. Corbett, Holt and Russell, 169-198.

modern artist was widely seen as incompatible with ‘being British’.¹⁰⁰ While the avant-garde was perceived as a disturbing presence the objects shown at Burlington House were thought to be comfortingly familiar and reassuringly redolent of conventional values. This association seems to have remained relevant until well into the 1940s and, to some extent, even beyond.

The importance of the country’s tradition was also manifest in the academicians’ tendency to emphasise their work’s deep historical roots. In 1940 *The Listener* published an intriguing interview with A. K. Lawrence, RA, and Eric Newton, a critic sympathetic to modernism. The guests defended their respective aesthetic positions and debated their values. This document is particularly important as the interview was broadcast and Lawrence’s opponent was a well-known figure who had gained popularity through his appearance on radio arts series of the 1930s. This was a valuable opportunity for the academician to articulate his institution’s position. Significantly, Lawrence chose to concentrate on his practice’s historical pedigree:

The genuine academic painter is one who bases his method of expression on known or established methods and is in fact in style an evolutionary. He certainly does not seek to invent new styles. He develops his own characteristic manner naturally, and if he does anything which may be said to be new, he does so more as a discoverer than an inventor.¹⁰¹

This art is described as an organic outgrowth of the national visual culture and a continuation of its best practices. The importance of the achievements of the past is foregrounded and the development of British tradition is compared to a gradual evolutionary process. Such a process could clearly brook no sudden violent ruptures such as those initiated by the modernists. Thus the painter implies that they are not legitimate representatives of this development and should yield to the historical authority of the Academy. Considering the prominent platform

¹⁰⁰ Paul Nash, ‘Going Modern’ and ‘Being British’, *The Weekend Review*, 12 March 1932, Vol. 5, 322.

¹⁰¹ ‘The Royal Academy. Discussion between Eric Newton and A. K. Lawrence, R. A.’, *The Listener*, 18 January 1940 Vol. 23, 116.

from which he was speaking, it seems that he believed this argument was highly important and that traditionalism was one of the key advantages of the visual culture he represented.

This rhetoric benefitted from the common perception that smooth historical continuity was one of the most distinctive features of English culture. In 1931 the prominent French anglophile André Siegfried published his book *La crise britannique au XXe siècle* which attempted to identify the problems facing modern Britain.¹⁰² The book was immediately translated in English and attracted much interest in the country, extracts of it being published in *The Times*. According to the author, the English people were so fixated on their past that they could find it difficult to engage with the modern world:

She [England] sits on her little island out of contact with the rest of the world, for in this ‘happy valley’ time does not seem to flow as quickly as elsewhere. England still lives in the atmosphere of the past, and this is one of the secrets of her extraordinary charm. But if she wishes to continue as one of the great powers of the world, or, indeed, to exist at all, a complete revision is imperative.¹⁰³

Siegfried believed that the country needed to be woken from its pleasant somnolence if it was to play a role in the shaping of postwar Europe. This pessimistic reading of English culture provoked much debate in a society that was becoming increasingly aware of its empire's precarious state. Other writers, however, saw this allegedly characteristic respect for tradition in unequivocally positive terms. Towards the end of the Second World War historian Herbert Butterfield published *The Englishman and his History*, a study and celebration of the ‘Whig interpretation’ of history.¹⁰⁴ On this interpretation the nation’s history was a narrative of gradual emancipation, of the progressive increase of freedom and personal autonomy at all social levels. Butterfield believed that this view of heritage was both the product and, to a certain extent, the cause of the English love of historical continuity and gradual change:

¹⁰² André Siegfried, *England’s Crisis* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1931).

¹⁰³ Ibid, 11.

¹⁰⁴ Herbert Butterfield, *The Englishman and his History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1944).

We in England have been fortunate and we must remember our good fortune, for we have actually drawn strength from the continuity of our history. We have been wise, for we have taken care of the processes which serve to knit the past and the present together; and when great rifts have occurred – in the Reformation or the Civil Wars, for example – a succeeding generation has done its best to play providence upon the tears and rents that have been made in the fabric of our history.¹⁰⁵

Here tradition is seen as a stabilising force that has been maintained and should be maintained through all major ruptures in the social fabric. It is even implied that this veneration for the past contributed to the country's successes in the two global conflicts. Voices like that of Butterfield presented the respect for history as a defining and praise-worthy aspect of the national culture thus making the Academy's conservative artists appear more authentic and essentially English than their modernist competitors. An art that consistently claimed to be an organic development of past precedents was bound to appeal in this intellectual climate.

Many of the claims about naturalism I have discussed seem to be summarised and celebrated in Francis Dodd's painting *In the Park* (Fig. 9). The work was created in 1916 but was submitted as his Diploma work in 1935. It is an affable depiction of a woman sitting on a bench outdoors. The viewer's point of view is that of someone sitting next to her. One is invited to imagine herself in conversation with the friendly-looking person, enjoying the sunshine and fresh air. The observer is positioned within a clearly defined space and a particular social situation, one redolent of pleasant walks and convivial conversations. By the time the work was submitted as a Diploma piece it would have also possessed a certain old-fashioned charm due to the sitter's dress from the 1910s. It could have reminded viewers of their youth or childhood; they would have been transferred not only spatially but also temporarily.

This clear articulation of the observer's position was one of the advantages of naturalism that the modernist idioms could rarely replicate. The avant-garde was not usually

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, v-vi.

interested in creating believable three-dimensional spaces or in employing cultural references that were familiar to the majority of gallery-goers. Dodd's painting, in contrast, provides a secure and unambiguous position for the viewer. This position evokes certain pleasant experiences from the not-too-distant past that would have been comprehensible to most members of the public. It is an inviting image that offers a clearly scripted escapist fantasy that could resonate with a wide public, a kind of imaginary home. Dodd's decision to make it his Diploma work is significant. Such works were often seen as particularly important testaments by academicians and were often conceived as manifestos that embodied their maker's aesthetic ideals. The artist's choice to submit this canvas suggests that he regarded the kind of experience it provided as emblematic of his approach and perhaps also of academic art in general. He made a claim about the importance of the naturalism he practiced and the functions it could perform, ones that were radically different from those of modernist culture.

'Performing a social service'

Both Dodd and Lawrence were arguing about the relevance and continued authority of Burlington House and the art it promoted. Their statements would have been supported by the institution's public initiatives. It often engaged in debates on artistic matters, readily giving its professional opinion on a great variety of issues. In the interwar period it offered advice on the artistic potential of the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley and discussed the preservation of Flatford Mill as a memorial to Constable. In 1920 Burlington House headed a protest against the demolition of nineteen London churches and in 1935 it attempted to monitor the cleaning of certain objects in the National Gallery.¹⁰⁶ A memorandum found in the General Assembly Minutes of that year states that:

¹⁰⁶ Hutchinson, *The History of the Royal Academy*, 163.

...the Academy should recommend to the Government that any question of cleaning and restoring pictures in the National Collections should be referred to a Committee of professional painters; and that generally the Academy should more actively assert its authority in artistic matters of public importance.¹⁰⁷

Evidently the institution's members wished to be perceived as the national arbiters of taste as well as to prove their ability to make influential practical decisions. Their hope to work closely with the Government suggests that the RAs thought of themselves as an unofficial Department for Art that should guide society in all issues of aesthetic import. Undoubtedly, their social activities were also intended to cast their own art in a favourable light and lend support to its claim for wider cultural significance.

Additionally, the Academy sought to shape its public image through media appearances. I have already mentioned the discussion with Lawrence that was broadcast by BBC. In 1929 *The Sphere* published an article about the Summer Exhibition Selection Committee which included what was claimed to be the first ever photograph of the Committee at work.¹⁰⁸ As Patrick Elliott has pointed out, the article was apparently meant to render the selection process more transparent and assure readers of the importance of the RAs' activities.¹⁰⁹ In 1939 BBC televised the traditional Varnishing Day on which many of the exhibited artists gathered at Burlington House a week before the annual show was opened.¹¹⁰ Viewers were figuratively invited to what had been a rather exclusive event and see the institution's leading practitioners. Like *The Sphere* article, the television program presented the Academy as open and approachable, as serving the wider public and thus worthy of its attention.

¹⁰⁷ General Assembly Minutes 1935, Royal Academy Archive.

¹⁰⁸ Rudolph de Cordova, 'Behind the Scenes at Burlington House', *The Sphere*, 4 May 1929, 234-237.

¹⁰⁹ Elliott and Llewellyn, *True to Life*, 19.

¹¹⁰ 'Royal Academy Plans', *The Observer*, 26 March 1939, 11.

The Academy's alleged social importance and role in the shaping of Britain's visual identity was perhaps most prominently articulated in the Joshua Reynolds monument in the Burlington House courtyard. It is a naturalistic life-size rendering produced by Alfred Drury and unveiled in 1931. It shows the Academy's first President confidently at work, tools in hand, seemingly about to start painting. The figure's position suggests that the virtual canvas is in front of Reynolds, that is, on the side facing Piccadilly. Visitors entering the courtyard face the tip of his brush. The sculpture could be seen to imply that the people themselves are the canvas, that the first President is just adding the final touches to their appearance. It is as if the Londoners' looks are being shaped by the master, as if their social identity is the product of his art. Alfred Drury seems to suggest that Reynolds' work and, by extension, that of his fellow RAs has had a profound effect on the appearance of the British capital and its residents. The sculptor refers to the role of portraiture and academic visual culture more generally in the development of the citizens' self-awareness and patterns of public behaviour. He reminds us of the ways the summer shows have changed or reaffirmed the gallery-goers' perceptions of each other and molded their understanding of history. The statue implies that the public has come to view its past and present through the lenses of Burlington House's painterly records. The monument makes a bold claim about the Academy's significance and its prominent position ensured that all visitors were exposed to it even if not all of them were necessarily aware of its meaning.

When discussing the Academy's social activities, it is also worth mentioning the major loan shows organised in the 1920s and 1930s. They were large exhibitions devoted to different national schools which presented many objects on loan from foreign collections. The shows of Spanish, Italian, French and Chinese art, amongst others, were greatly admired and visited

by unprecedented numbers of people.¹¹¹ The Spanish exhibition of 1920, the first of that series, was described as an ‘artistic event of considerable importance’.¹¹² In 1927 *The Manchester Guardian* was even more enthusiastic:

It is doubtful if we have ever had in London an exhibition of art so rich in masterpieces and so varied in excelling expressions of man’s handicraft as the assembly of Flemish and Belgian art which the Anglo-Belgian Union has brought to Burlington House.¹¹³

Clearly, the latter event was meant to celebrate London’s alliance with Brussels in the global conflict but the press does seem to have been impressed with the unparalleled number of Van Eycks and Rubenses made available. The shows were also said to influence the capital’s art and fashion: in his history of the Academy Sidney Hutchison claims that the Chinese display captured the capital’s imagination:

The cult of *chinoiserie* took London by storm and aspects of it were reflected in fashions and furnishings for some time to come.¹¹⁴

Exhibitions like this boosted the institution’s reputation and encouraged the public to see it as one of the main hubs of the capital’s cultural life.

The events were praised not only for the renowned works they presented but also for the opportunity to examine the perceived accomplishments of each national school. In an article about the French exhibition of 1932 we read:

Our nearest neighbour is the last to appear at these great assizes of the world’s art in London, where the Flemish, Dutch, Spanish, Italian and Persian art of the past has been displayed at their best to the delight of the public and the occupation of the experts of all nations, who have sifted and compared and estimated the quality of each nation’s achievements.¹¹⁵

This critic was particularly interested in the possibility of defining the essence of a country’s tradition, of identifying its main strengths and flaws. As I have already shown, this exercise

¹¹¹ Ibid, 147-157.

¹¹² P. G. Konody, ‘Spanish Paintings at the Royal Academy’, *The Observer*, 7 November 1920, 10.

¹¹³ J. B. ‘World Assembly of Art Treasures. The Flemish-Belgian Exhibition’, *The Manchester Guardian*, 7 January 1927, 10.

¹¹⁴ Hutchison, *The History of the Royal Academy*, 172.

¹¹⁵ J. B. ‘The French Art Exhibition’, *The Manchester Guardian*, 2 January 1932, 7.

was frequently performed in discussions of British art and the assessment of foreign schools would have easily brought to mind the perceived characteristics of the native ‘genius’. Thus the exhibitions also promoted a renewed appreciation of the national school by comparing and contrasting it with the products of other cultures. The shows were, to some extent, meant to deepen the visitors’ understanding of their compatriots’ accomplishments and instill pride in their successes. The tradition’s prestige was, of course, highly important to the Academy as its authority depended on it; promoting the values of continuity in art served the interests of an institution that presented itself as an heir to the Old Masters. In this context it is worth quoting *The Times* review:

It is no exaggeration to say that, apart from anything else, the Exhibition of French Art at Burlington House illustrates and elucidates the connexions [sic] between ancient and modern painting better than any exhibition we have ever seen before. What has often been claimed in argument is here seen to be a logical necessity...¹¹⁶

Here contemporary art is presented as intimately linked with the past practices; the progression from one to the other is described as a ‘logical’ development. The interwar shows were apparently thought to foreground the links between history and the present and the importance of studying the former when trying to understand the latter. The academicians often emphasised their intimate connection with the past and the grand historical narratives presented in the 20s and 30s encouraged viewers to appreciate this tie. The quasi-Hegelian rhetoric of the exhibitions made the art of Burlington House appear as the only legitimate practice as it had taken the lessons of their predecessors to heart. The events were meant to enhance the standing of the works seen each summer and provoked gallery-goers to assess them more generously. Those who praised Burlington House’s loan shows were perhaps less

¹¹⁶ ‘The French Art Exhibition. Second Notice’, *The Times*, 4 January 1932, 10.

prone to dismiss the contemporary practitioners it promoted and more likely to view them as preservers of the traditions presented in the interwar decades.

Nostalgia and Conservatism

The adherence to the past and the country's heritage did much to endear academic art to conservative opinion. As is well known, the first half of the twentieth century was a time of immense cultural and social change in Britain. In a few decades many traditional perceptions and norms were seriously challenged and some of them abolished. In 1918 women over thirty years of age finally obtained the right to vote while the 1919 Sex Disqualification Act allowed women participation in most professions, at least on paper.¹¹⁷ The decimation of the male population in the First World War allowed some women to adopt previously inaccessible social roles and gain a degree of independence that had been almost unheard of in the nineteenth century. Predictably, these developments in female agency provoked a strong reaction from male conservative quarters nostalgic for earlier times when patriarchal domination had been challenged less often.¹¹⁸ As writer and activist Cicely Hamilton observed in 1927 'the peace in our time for which we all crave will mean a reaction, more or less strong, against the independence of women'.¹¹⁹ The cultural and social position of women remained a highly contestable topic in this period, one that frequently drew the ire of male reactionaries.

The countryside's urbanisation and the rapid spread of motor vehicles were other subjects that caused considerable concern. The development of modern suburbia and the proliferation of new roads were frequently blamed for disfiguring the natural environment as

¹¹⁷ Stephen Brooke, 'Class and Gender,' in *Twentieth Century Britain: Economic, Cultural and Social Change*, eds. Francesca Carnevali and Julie-Marie Strange (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2007), 49-51.

¹¹⁸ Harold Smith, 'British Feminism in the 1920s', in *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Harold Smith (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1990), 47.

¹¹⁹ Cicely Hamilton, 'The Return to Femininity', *Time and Tide*, 12 August 1927, 737.

well as the towns and villages that had retained their Medieval or Early Modern appearance.

In 1911 *The Manchester Guardian* asked:

Is it not rational to give some attention to preserving these places, with their thousand years of tradition and architecture, before sowing broadcast mushroom communities with their poetry and humanism not yet in the making?¹²⁰

In his book *England and the Octopus* (1928) Clough William-Ellis also castigated the unruly spread of novel technologies in the countryside, attempting to shock his readers into ‘some realisation of what their defenseless England is becoming through the acts and omissions of its prodigal people.’¹²¹ In such writings contemporary developments are usually presented in a negative light and contrasted with an imagined bucolic past in which people lived in greater harmony with nature and revered their heritage. The peaceful quiet and stable hierarchies of Early Modern villages were often set up as an example that modernity’s frenetic pace and disregard for tradition failed to live up to. In his classic study *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850-1980* Martin Wiener has shown that in the Victorian period the middle class came to emulate the aristocratic culture of country house living, a practice that continued in the twentieth century.¹²² The countryside and its history acquired a particular significance for prominent strata of society that sought to legitimise their rise to power by adopting practices and forms of self-presentation that were associated with the wealthy landowners of earlier times.¹²³ This adoption was often articulated through a nostalgia for an idealised and chronologically unspecific past that embodied a perceived pure ‘Englishness’ that was endangered by modernity. Like the patriarchal opponents of feminism, the countryside preservationists lamented the loss of age-old values and saw multiple signs of

¹²⁰ M. S. G. ‘A Vanishing England’, *The Manchester Guardian*, 23 May 1911, 16.

¹²¹ Clough William-Ellis, *England and the Octopus* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1928), vii.

¹²² Martin Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 11-14.

¹²³ Ibid, 11-14.

cultural degeneracy. They sought comfort in the country's history and challenged everything that endangered the sense of continuity in their surroundings.

Academic art had obvious appeal for reactionary opinion. Its emphasis on historical continuity and claims for the universal validity of the past's visual culture would have attracted those who mourned the loss of traditional norms and certainties. The institution's celebration of earlier masters resonated with commentators who saw contemporary British culture as inferior to that of previous centuries. The annual shows offered plenty of delights to patriarchal viewers: Gerard Leslie Brockhurst, for instance, exhibited numerous portraits of his lover Kathleen Woodward in the 1930s such as *Ophelia* (c. 1937).¹²⁴ In the series the sitter is thoroughly objectified, the painter scrupulously recording every detail of her appearance and presenting her face from different angles. He shares his visual delight in his mistress with other male heterosexual observers in a manner reminiscent of earlier depictions of female 'beauties' such as George Romney's treatment of Emma Hamilton. Gerald Kelly's pictures of his wife like the tellingly entitled *Jane XXX* (1930) functioned in a similar fashion. These images could comfort males who objected to the legal gains made by feminists and the changes in women's social status after the war. The works embodied a patriarchal eroticism familiar from Early Modern art, redolent of times when gender roles had rarely been questioned. The pictures reassured them by demonstrating that objectification of women was still very much welcome in official venues and formed an important strain of contemporary art. Even depictions that seemed to celebrate women's creative and intellectual agency could serve to confirm stereotypes. Harold Knight, for instance, often painted his famous wife Laura and other women engaged in reading or playing musical instruments (*At the Piano* of c. 1921, or *Girl Reading* of 1931). Despite the models' activities the paintings remain images of attractive

¹²⁴ Stevens, *The Edwardians and After*, 64.

figures to be savoured. Significantly, the protagonists do not meet the viewers' gaze but passively accept its presence. It is likely that Knight was particularly concerned about women's empowerment as his wife was more successful professionally and became a full member of the Academy before he did. His pictures were probably meant to reassure him and other males that, despite Laura's election, the institution still promoted Victorian gender roles. As Katy Deepwell has pointed out, only five women became ARAs in the first half of the twentieth century and only two of them were promoted to RAs.¹²⁵ Burlington House remained an institution controlled by white males who were rarely responsive to any movements for social equality.

Of course, avant-garde practitioners could be as patriarchal as the academicians; Janet Wolff, amongst others, has drawn attention to the masculinist rhetoric employed by many modernists.¹²⁶ However, the new trends lacked the explicit visual links to Britain's past that academic culture displayed and thus were less likely to attract those nostalgic for the country's bygone social structures. Furthermore, modernity was likely to be associated with the recent shifts in gender identities and thus perceived as suspect and even complicit in the allegedly destabilising critique of old values. Thus the Academy's products were much better suited to the needs of most reactionary males.

Landscape painting, on the other hand, could offer solace to gallery-goers who regretted the changes in the English countryside. The landscapes shown at Burlington House evoked Gainsborough, Constable, Crome and other earlier masters of the genre and observers were well aware of these connections. Regarding the 1947 London show Perspex noted:

¹²⁵ Katy Deepwell, *Women Artists between the Wars: 'A fair field and no favour'* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 107.

¹²⁶ Wolff, *AngloModern*.

Our eighteenth century artists discovered England and the vein of quiet beauty has not become exhausted in more than two hundred years of intense working.¹²⁷

The author described the current practitioners as followers of a century-old tradition who preserved and built upon its finest achievements. Algernon Newton's *Dawn* (1936) is a typical representative of this kind of images. It is a peaceful view of a river that could be located almost anywhere in England. Explicitly relying on nineteenth-century models, the work offers a reassuringly patriotic statement about the British tradition's continuity and the country's beauty. It invites the viewer to imagine herself as a solitary traveler in this idealised corner of the island where one could get in touch with some of the nation's allegedly essential values. This kind of pictures referred to the visual imagination of a previous age, one that had known nothing of motor vehicles or concrete suburbia. They harked back to a time that many British preservationists regarded as a golden age for rural life and as a model to be emulated by present developments. For such observers, academic art held greater fascination than any other strain of contemporary visual culture. While modernist works could also refer to past exemplars (the late Turner being a particularly obvious choice) the stylised landscapes of painters like Paul Nash or C. R. W. Nevinson bore less of a resemblance to those models than the naturalistic idiom championed by Burlington House. The latter served as a reminder of what were seen to be better times and suggested that if British artists were still capable of producing such pieces the nation might still be able to establish a more harmonious relationship with nature and return to a simpler rural existence.

Other artists drew attention to shifts in the class system and an associated perceived loss of cultural heritage in an often elegiac mode. The title of Frederick Elwell's 1948 picture

¹²⁷ 'Perspex', 'Transcripts and Translations', *Apollo*, June 1947, Vol. 43, 137.

Another Country House and Contents for Sale is eloquent enough.¹²⁸ It depicts an elegant historical interior cluttered with haphazardly arranged antiques and *objets d'arts*, evidently waiting to be taken away to potential buyers. There is no one to be seen; the buildings' owners appear to have already left it for good. Elwell laments the financial losses of the landed gentry caused by the postwar shortages and the economic reforms of Clement Attlee's government. He appears to associate that class's decline with a dispersal of artistic heritage and, implicitly, with a vanishing culture of patronage and appreciation. The vacated rooms are presented as symbols of a disappearing way of life, one that had been particularly favourable to the consumption of artworks like Elwell's. The painting is a parting glance at this earlier world, one that appears sceptical of the social structures that had seemingly come to replace it.

Conservatives also perceived naturalism as a sign of cultural health. The art that emulated reality was associated with sanity and propriety and was even perceived as a symptom of an artist's physical and mental vigour. This aesthetic approach was frequently contrasted with those of the modernists which were described as marks of spiritual degeneracy and psychological instability. In 1924 the painter E. W. Cook published a book with the eloquent title *Retrogression in Art and the Suicide of the Royal Academy*. It was an enthusiastic diatribe against the institution's decision of 1921 to elect the moderately avant-garde Augustus John and to exhibit some less conventional works at its annual shows. The reader is told that the new artistic trends were against 'all the laws of nature and of common sense'.¹²⁹ The stylised figures characteristic of artists like John and Duncan Grant are explicitly related to physical disabilities:

A badly drawn figure represents an abortion, a deformity or a disease. In the presence of deformed persons every normal man of woman feels great discomfort, but it is modified by sympathy for the

¹²⁸ I have been unable to trace the painting's present location but a reproduction of it is available in the 1948 Royal Academy Illustrated Catalogue.

¹²⁹ E. W. Cook, *Retrogression in Art and the Suicide of the Royal Academy* (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1924), 32.

victims of an unhappy fate. They did not make themselves and they arouse pity which in the case of some mothers is akin to increased love. But when a man presents a figure out of drawing he is creating a deformity, willfully, carelessly or through sheer incompetence, and to exhibit such deformities in public galleries is a grave offence, and any directors of such galleries who willingly exhibit such misshapen eyesores should be given half a century's leave of absence to recover their normality.¹³⁰

Using a rhetoric that was to find an echo in fascist propaganda, the author describes all non-naturalistic pieces as depictions of degeneration and decay. The modernists are compared to malicious deities who create unhealthy bodies that offend all sane observers. These images, it is suggested, are almost as dangerous as the diseases they are said to represent and threaten the public's vigour and aesthetic capacities. 'Perspex' also wrote that the new movements were signs of a 'disease, a malady of the mind', that had gripped a continent which had become 'a prison foul with the air of fear, hatred and despair, of which the Nazis are not the cause but the symptom'.¹³¹ Paradoxically, the critic compares the avant-garde to the contemporary totalitarian regimes despite the latter's persecution of the modernists. Resistance to the novel movements, he claims, is as necessary as that to the fascists and is the duty of all right-minded people. For both writers, it seems, the only antidote to these disturbing trends was the familiar and readily comprehensible approach of the Academy that reinforced existing norms and celebrated upper class ideologies.

Naturalism also benefitted from modernism's association with deviancy and allegedly unnatural sexual preferences. The avant-garde's carefully cultivated eccentricity and relations with the Parisian art world often brought to mind the Aesthetic Movement and dandies of the late nineteenth century. Andrew Eastham and Kristin Mahoney have shown that these late Victorian phenomena remained an important point of reference for the modernists, despite

¹³⁰ Ibid, 45.

¹³¹ 'Perspex', 'Art Notes', *Apollo*, March 1943 Vol. 37, 70.

the latter's attempts to distance themselves from their immediate predecessors.¹³² While he often voiced his distaste for 'aesthetes' and 'effeminacy', Lewis' condemnation of mainstream English culture in *Blast* (1914-1915) had similarities with the dandies' open disdain for conventions. Indeed, Lewis attended one of the banquets organised by the Corvine Society in honour of Baron Corvo, a writer and eccentric who had been a prominent presence in the 1890s art world.¹³³ The surrealists' frequent allusions to sexual themes and love of paradox could also be associated with the provocations of Decadent literature. Additionally, the British avant-garde's sympathy for formalist aesthetics could call to mind the practice of James McNeill Whistler, an outspoken proponent of formalism and a friend of Oscar Wilde. This Victorian subculture was indelibly linked with Wilde's infamous and widely publicised trial of 1895 when he was found guilty of 'gross indecency' and imprisoned. As Vincent Sherry has noted, the artistic circles Wilde belonged to and the aesthetic ideas he advocated became associated with homosexuality and were judged as inherently immoral.¹³⁴ The twentieth-century avant-garde's similarities to the Aesthetic Movement brought it dangerously close to the realm of Wilde's so-called crimes. The new artistic movements could be alarmingly similar to a pattern of behaviour that was linked to sexual 'deviancy'. In this context the academic artists benefitted from their distance from this world. The respectable common-sensical gentlemen of Burlington House were far less engaged with Parisian fashions and hardly ever courted controversy in their public appearances. They also often spoke against the avant-garde and the threats it posed to the national culture. Thus they would have been seen as

¹³² Andrew Eastham, *Aesthetic Afterlives: Irony, Literary Modernity and the Ends of Beauty* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 1; Kristin Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3-12.

¹³³ Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence*, 12.

¹³⁴ Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 23-24.

comfortingly conventional, as proponents of propriety and middle-class family values that provided a welcome contrast to the modernists' provocations.

The nostalgic elements of academic culture can be related to the appeal that the far right had for many in Britain in the interwar period. Dan Stone has examined Nazism's popularity in some of the intellectual and political circles of the 30s.¹³⁵ The xenophobia, racism and nationalism espoused by Germany's new regime were not too different from the conservative stance adopted by many members of the island's aristocracy and middle class. Hitler was seen by them as a legitimate democratically elected leader who was taking his people in the right direction. After a visit to Germany in 1936 the eugenicist and anti-feminist Anthony Ludovici wrote enthusiastically about the party's rallies; to watch them 'was to learn what miracles can still be wrought with the ultra-civilised and often effete population of modern Europe if only they are given a lofty purpose'.¹³⁶ The military historian J. F. C. Fuller was also impressed by the 'national revival' he thought Nazism represented.¹³⁷

These supporters of continental fascism were likely to be attracted to academic visual culture. The National Socialists were known for their preference for naturalistic and classicising art that harked back to Early Modern tradition and was often similar to the objects seen in Burlington House. In 1937 a large exhibition was staged at the newly opened House of German Art in Munich which was meant to celebrate the achievements of the national culture under the new regime. *The Manchester Guardian* critic reported on the prevalence of realistic portraits and landscapes as well as the popularity of peasant themes.¹³⁸ These kinds of art also

¹³⁵ Dan Stone, *Responses to Nazism in Britain 1933-1939: Before War and Holocaust* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 117-149.

¹³⁶ Anthony Ludovici, 'Hitler and the Third Reich', *English Review*, 1936, Vol. 63, 39.

¹³⁷ J. F. C. Fuller, *Towards Armageddon: The Defence Problem and its Solution* (London: Lovat Dickson, 1937), 122.

¹³⁸ 'The House of German Art', *The Manchester Guardian*, 26 July 1937, 9-10.

defined the reviews of the Academy's own summer shows. Eric Michaud has shown that the state-sponsored exhibitions of Third Reich art always contained landscapes that referred to nineteenth-century practices, not too different from those shown on Piccadilly.¹³⁹ The figures of Arno Breker, Hitler's favoured sculptor, could be related to the Academy's own tradition of emulating Classical Antiquity. Additionally, the Nazis shared the RAs' disapproval of modernism, as demonstrated in the official 'degenerate art' exhibitions. According to *The Times* the dictator lashed out against modernism at the opening of the House of German Art:

On that occasion the Führer fulminated against those who, instead of concentrating on the beautiful new types of humanity which are supposed to be in process of creation through the resurgence of Germany and to have been demonstrated at the Olympic Games, draw 'misshapen cripples and idiots, women who can only arouse abhorrence, men who are nearer animals than human beings, and children who, if they were like that in real life, must be regarded as a curse of God.'¹⁴⁰

For the British far right such diatribes and the obvious similarities between Nazi-sponsored art and the RA would have lent the latter great authority. The objects seen on Piccadilly could be perceived as authentic expressions of cultural and racial health in contrast to the suspicious products of the new movements.

I have already examined the nationalistic rhetoric employed by the Academy's supporters and their deep distrust for foreign influences. But Burlington House's links with fascism were occasionally more direct than that, even before Hitler's rise to power. Joseph Kestner has pointed out that Frank Dicksee, President between 1924 and 1928 openly used racist rhetoric in his discourse to the academy's students from 1925.¹⁴¹ The painter argued that artists should promote very particular racial standards:

Our ideal of beauty must be the white man's; the Hottentot Venus has no charms for us, and the elaborate tattooing of the New Zealand Maoris does not, to our thinking, enhance the beauty of the

¹³⁹ Eric Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004), 114-118.

¹⁴⁰ 'Art Purge in Prussia. No 'Decadence' in the Galleries. Grass must be Green', *The Times*, 4 August 1937, 14.

¹⁴¹ Joseph Kestner, 'The Male Gaze in the Art of Frank Dicksee,' *Annals of Scholarship* 7 (1990), 183.

human form; so, in spite of some modern tendencies, if we have to bear ‘the white man’s burden,’ in Heaven’s name let us at least keep his ideals!¹⁴²

Apparently Dicksee practiced what he preached: he produced many depictions of heroic white males, such as *The Funeral of a Viking* (1893) or *The Two Crowns* (1900) that seem to celebrate the perceived superiority of European masculinity. Indeed, in Gladys Storey’s memoir *All Sorts of People* (1929) we are told that the painter was an avowed admirer of Mussolini.¹⁴³ Throughout the first half of the twentieth century the Academy remained disturbingly close to ideologies that can be described as fascist and its characteristic idealisation of the British past and countryside were not too dissimilar to the Führer’s own preferred idioms.

‘Socialist ideology... is realist’

Yet naturalism and its academic champions also had supporters on the left of the political spectrum. The progressive Artists’ International Association which existed between 1933 and 1953 had several RAs like Muirhead Bone and Algernon Newton among its members.¹⁴⁴ Its 1935 exhibition ‘Artists against Fascism and War’ included works by Laura Knight and Ethelbert White. While it is true that by 1935 the Association had come to avoid overtly Marxist rhetoric it remained explicitly opposed to the far right and maintained contacts with left-wing artists throughout Europe. Additionally, in 1938 it hosted a discussion about the respective merits of naturalism and surrealism and their utility in socialist politics. According to the *Left Review* the event proved realism’s superiority:

...they [the realists] carried the day, not by what they said (for they said very little), but by their humility and honesty. These qualities at any rate were present in the paintings they produced, which

¹⁴² Frank Dicksee, *Discourse to the Students of the Royal Academy on the Distribution of the Prizes* (London: Clowes, 1925), 13.

¹⁴³ Kestner, ‘The Male Gaze in the Art of Frank Dicksee’, 181.

¹⁴⁴ Robert Radford, *Art for a Purpose: The Artists’ International Association 1933-1953* (Winchester: Winchester School of Art Press, 1987), 7. See also Robert Radford and Lynda Morris, *The Story of the Artists’ International Association 1933-1953* (Oxford: The Museum of Modern Art, 1983).

seemed to confess that the artists were conscious that painting, losing its social function and value, had lost all technical balance, and they were quite humbly and quietly starting to rediscover the traditional practice.¹⁴⁵

For this critic, only naturalist art could adequately engage a wide public and serve the needs of progressive politics. He contrasted it with the surrealists' reliance on complex verbal explanations and attention-seeking novelty. This valuation of humble commitment and suspicion of theory parallels the RAs' style of self-presentation and brings to mind the rhetoric of diligent common sense evident in the academicians' biographies.

Furthermore, in the 1930s the Soviet Union adopted socialist realism as its official aesthetic. At the 1934 Writers' Congress in Moscow this approach was described as the one most suitable for socialist literature and was eventually imposed on the other arts as well.¹⁴⁶ In a book about Soviet visual culture published in Britain in 1944 Jack Chen described realism as an organic development from Marxist theory:

The Soviet artist maintains that socialist thought is based on the philosophy of dialectical materialism. This philosophy enables man to achieve an understanding of things that is a closer approximation to ever-changing reality than was ever before possible. The vast increase of scientific knowledge that this makes possible enables man to control historical development in a way that was previously impossible. Socialist ideology therefore is realist and creative in the deepest sense. Its artistic expression therefore cannot but be realist.¹⁴⁷

This artistic approach is here presented as the natural visual expression of materialism and the best way to articulate the Marxist commitment to truth and justice. The party's decision to sanction realism as its official preference is said to be inevitable and supported by the majority of Soviet artists. For those sympathetic to the Soviet project this would have lent naturalism unquestionable legitimacy. The Russian Communist Party was widely perceived as

¹⁴⁵ Randall Swingler, 'What is the Artist's Job?', *Left Review*, April 1938 Vol. 3, 930-932.

¹⁴⁶ Brandon Taylor and Matthew Cullerne Brown, 'Introduction', in *Art of the Soviets: Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in a One-Party State 1917-1992*, eds. Brandon Taylor and Matthew Cullerne Brown (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 10-11.

¹⁴⁷ Jack Chen, *Soviet Art and Artists* (London: The Pilot Press Ltd., 1944), 71.

a guiding light by the British Left between the wars and its endorsement of realism meant that this idiom came to be intimately associated with progressive politics.

Given this commitment to naturalism, it is probable that leftwing observers in Britain perceived some of the Academy's practices as a potential model for the socially committed art they envisaged. It seems unlikely they were unaware of the institution's promotion of bourgeois ideology and its dependence on upper-class patronage. However, Marxism, then as now, advocated a dialectical critique of capitalist culture, one that was capable of both negating its oppressive structures and recognising its positive achievements. Burlington House's accessible and technically accomplished naturalist art could be seen as worthy of emulation even by those who opposed the British establishment. It is worth noting that the *Left Review* was often hostile to the avant-garde: in 1937 it described abstract painting and surrealism as a 'non-intelligible code' and in 1938 it presented the modernists' interest in 'naïve and childlike' art as a symptom of the 'anti-intellectual leaning in bourgeois circles'.¹⁴⁸ The Academy's exhibitions could be perceived as a more useful, if ideologically problematic, source from which to draw on in the creation of socialist visual culture.

Furthermore, some objects at Burlington House itself carried distinctly progressive messages. The 1936 Summer Exhibition included Knight's Diploma work *Dawn*, submitted at her election to full membership of the Academy in the same year. She was the first woman to become a full member of the institution since Angelica Kauffman and Mary Moser, two of the eighteenth-century founder members. The painter chose to commemorate the occasion with two female nudes depicted against a bright blue sky, hair stirred by the breeze. The image exudes a freshness and optimism that had hardly been seen in earlier depictions of the nude

¹⁴⁸ Graham Bell, 'Escape from Escapism: Paintings in the London Group', *Left Review*, December 1937 Vol. 3, 666; Toros, 'The Naïve and the Sophisticated', *Left Review*, April 1938 Vol. 3, 927.

at Burlington House. The title evokes a new and promising beginning, apparently in celebration of the first female RA. Despite their nudity, the two figures appear confident and more interested in the fresh air and light surrounding than in any male gaze that may be directed at them. As Timothy Wilcox has pointed out, the picture also draws attention to the fact that, with the exception of some private schools, aspiring women artists were still not allowed in life classes.¹⁴⁹ The image could be read as a challenge to this discriminatory system and a proof that women could depict nudes as effectively as any man. *Dawn* was apparently conceived as a feminist manifesto that celebrated the first election of a woman RA and demonstrated her artistic prowess in a genre that was usually perceived as male territory.

Wars and Commemoration

The perceived national character and democratic appeal of academic painting and sculpture made them uniquely suited to some of the tasks faced by the British art world in the first half of the twentieth century. Soon after the start of the First World War C. F. G. Masterman, head of the state department for propaganda, sent a number of artists to the front lines who were to depict the British army's activities.¹⁵⁰ Painters and draughtsmen like Bone, Orpen and Lavery were expected to produce detailed yet not too distressing accounts of the battlefields and the soldiers' lives which would be exhibited and disseminated at home. Additionally, Francis Dodd was employed to create portraits of the country's generals which were later published in newspapers and special volumes. As James Fox has observed, one of the reasons for these official commissions was the widespread belief that artists were important witnesses who could document the army's experiences more accurately and sympathetically than the

¹⁴⁹ Timothy Wilcox, 'Laura Knight Becomes the First Woman Elected RA', *The Royal Academy Summer Exhibition: A Chronicle 1769-2018*.

¹⁵⁰ Harries, *The War Artists*, 9.

allegedly purely objective photographers.¹⁵¹ In relation to Nevinson's war pictures J. E. C. Flitch wrote:

Appearance is not reality. Appearance may be observed but reality, to be known, must be experienced. That is why the report of the official artists has more value than the report of the official photographer. For the camera observes everything and experiences nothing. It is inhumanly impartial and cannot speak the language of the spirit. Concerning the things that we most wish to know it is dumb. We ask for the truth, the whole truth, and it gives us nothing but the facts.¹⁵²

Here the artist's subjectivity is presented as a guarantee that his works would reflect the army's experiences better than a camera's perceived scientific precision. The very imperfection of his creations is seen as a proof of their authenticity, a view that persisted long after the war. More than a decade later the critic Richard Parker still claimed that 'the mind and soul of man is higher and keener than the camera... the artist is the one who sees the most'.¹⁵³

Despite this valuation of the painters' personal experiences the close observation of outward reality was expected of all official pieces. The works were, after all, presented as objective accounts of front-line activities. In a letter of 1917 Bone called his drawings 'splendidly generalised armies of dutiful details' associating realistic depiction with efficient military performance.¹⁵⁴ Most of the practitioners chosen were either associates or full members of the Academy and were well-versed in the naturalistic idiom. Sue Malvern has pointed out that the matter-of-fact realism employed by artists like Bone also reflected the central aims of the government's propaganda department.¹⁵⁵ In its first report the War Propaganda Bureau stated that it had determined to 'present facts and general arguments

¹⁵¹ Fox, *British Art and the First World War*, 95-98.

¹⁵² J. E. C. Flitch, *The Great War, Fourth Year: Paintings by C. R. W. Nevinson* (London: Grant Richards Limited, 1918), 7.

¹⁵³ Richard Parker, 'Art Galleries and the Public', *The Listener*, 13 March 1929, Vol. 1, 329.

¹⁵⁴ Muirhead Bone, Letter to Gertrude Bone, 18 August 1917, Imperial War Museum.

¹⁵⁵ Sue Malvern, *Modern Art, Britain and the Great War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 18.

based on facts.¹⁵⁶ It was decided to avoid overtly emotional rhetoric in favour of a discourse that appeared dispassionate and objective. The government's propaganda was meant to seem rigorously factual and as unbiased as possible in order to convince the public at home and the potential US allies that the British cause was just. Bone's descriptive, unglamorous idiom was perfectly suited to this kind of strategy; his drawings present themselves as faithful recordings of his surroundings that eschew dramatic statements and overt sloganeering. Naturalism served the government's aims by framing its propaganda as an exercise in detached observation.

It seems likely that this preference was rooted not only in the perceived objectivity and representational accuracy of the idiom but also in the wide appeal it allegedly possessed. If the state's messages were to be effective they had to be easily decipherable by the majority of viewers. In 1921 Edith Fry wrote about Herbert Hughes-Stanton, RA:

To his studies of the battlefields in France and Flanders he brings his cardinal virtue of single-minded sincerity. Content to lose himself in the effort to depict with simple realism what he sees, he manages to catch something that is universal, to reawaken the emotion common to every human being whose eyes have rested upon those scenes of desolation.¹⁵⁷

According to this critic, the images' naturalism enabled them to speak to the multitudes and to move every viewer in the appropriate way. Academic art is praised for its power of transmitting simple unambiguous messages. The institution's visual culture was apparently thought to have a highly important function which the avant-garde was rarely seen as able to perform: that of informing the public of the army's exploits in a trustworthy and accessible manner.

¹⁵⁶ Philip Taylor, *British Propaganda in the Twentieth Century: Selling Democracy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 36.

¹⁵⁷ Edith Fry, 'H. Hughes-Stanton, RA', *Drawing and Design*, February 1921, 11.

It is useful to refer here to James Fox's argument about the role that visual art came to play during and immediately after the First World War. He has shown that in this period artists sought to prove that art was important to the nation's life even during its darkest hour of struggle. Visual culture attempted to make itself useful to the war effort and succeeded in engaging the public in a way it rarely had before. It should be pointed out that academic art has a central place in Fox's argument. I have already mentioned that the majority of official war artists were RAs. The culture of Burlington House also permeated the most widely distributed images during the war. James Clark's famous allegory *The Great Sacrifice* (1914) was informed by academic naturalism and narrative discourse. The painting depicts the body of a generalised British soldier lying in the trenches with an image of the Crucifixion hovering above it, suggesting an equivalence between Christ's salvific martyrdom and the lives claimed by the war. It became one of the defining pictures of the conflict and prints made after it proved immensely popular.¹⁵⁸ The government's propaganda was also redolent of Piccadilly. In a widely distributed poster printed by the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee a soldier gestures towards an image of the English countryside and the words 'Your Country's Call. Isn't this Worth Fighting for? ENLIST NOW' The picture is based on the pastoral landscapes that had been a staple of the Summer Exhibitions since the early nineteenth century. Evidently, the Academy's artists were thought to have depicted an essential aspect of the country and the nation's mentality, one that was cherished enough to encourage men to risk their lives. The products of Burlington House were pivotal in the popularisation of art during the Great War and the attempts to demonstrate that it can engage a wide public and help shape its understanding of one of the country's most difficult periods.

¹⁵⁸ Fox, *British Art and the First World War*, 123.

Realism's wide appeal played an equally important role during the Second World War. James Chapman has shown that in this period much of the state-sponsored cinema sought to deemphasise class differences and present British society as an egalitarian democratic community, one that was contrasted with the continental dictatorships.¹⁵⁹ In widely distributed documentaries like *Britain Can Take It* (1940) and *The Heart of Britain* (1941) the efforts of civilians of all social classes were celebrated and presented as integral to the war effort.¹⁶⁰ In *The Heart of Britain* an industrial worker is interviewed as he prepares to do his duties at the Air Raid Precautions even after a hard day of work while a group of mill girls bravely prepare for another raid. Radio broadcasts of the period also sought to emphasise the achievements of the lower classes: in 1940 programs like *We Speak for Ourselves* and *Everyman and the War* workers were asked to talk about their experiences in their own words while the 1942 program of popular songs *I am John Citizen* was hosted by a previously unknown factory worker.¹⁶¹ Such films and broadcasts were meant to imply that the state valued and respected the lower classes, that the country was a bastion of equality and liberty that preserved these ideals against the threats of German despotism. The war with Hitler was presented as the 'people's war' in which all British citizens were invested and united. Furthermore, the famous Beveridge Report of December 1942 sought to provide the blueprint for a postwar society that would curb class privilege and 'abolish want'.¹⁶² The Report and the public debate it initiated seemed to promise a future in which all citizens would be united in building a fair and generous new state.

¹⁵⁹ James Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda 1939-1945* (London: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 1998), 161-178.

¹⁶⁰ *Britain Can Take It* was a shorter version of the film *London Can Take It*, the latter being distributed in the United States.

¹⁶¹ Siân Nicholas, *The Echo of War: Home Front Propaganda and the Wartime BBC 1939-45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 238-239.

¹⁶² Ibid, 249-250.

An artistic idiom that was seen to meet the needs of the wider public would have received support from this egalitarian rhetoric. Unlike the experiments of the avant-garde naturalism was thought to be comprehensible to the majority of gallery-goers. At a time when the state presented itself as the protector and champion of the ‘common people’ viewers were more likely to see academic visual culture as patriotic and reflective of the national spirit. While the work of the modernists could be open to charges of solipsism and irrelevance the realistic art of Burlington House was usually thought to satisfy the wider public and serve its interests. This kind of painting and sculpture could fit neatly into the narrative promoted by wartime propaganda and be presented as part of the shared national culture that was taking shape.

In both world wars naturalism was favoured by the commissions related to the home front. Catherine Speck has examined at length the contribution of women artists to the world wars’ imagery and the official patronage they received.¹⁶³ In 1917 the Imperial War Museum established the Women’s Work Subcommittee which was charged with collecting pamphlets, manuscripts as well as art documenting women’s activities during the conflict. Speck’s findings show that the subcommittee preferred realist artists like Anna Airy and Victoria Monkhouse.¹⁶⁴ Apparently, they had the same reasons as those who commissioned images from the front lines, namely, the alleged reliability and wide appeal of this aesthetic idiom. The War Museum considered it important to assemble a detailed account of what were seen as the exceptional feats of women who performed ‘unladylike’ tasks and the products of academic artists could satisfy the institution’s requirements better than those of the modernists.

¹⁶³ Catherine Speck, *Beyond the Battlefield: Women Artists of the Two World Wars* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014).

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 20-21.

A similar policy was adopted during the second global conflict when the War Artists' Advisory Committee relied on painters like Dora Meeson and Knight to provide convincing descriptions of the home front. In 1943 Knight was even allowed in an airbase that operated bombing raids over Germany. There she produced a group portrait of a bombing crew about to leave on a mission, carefully recording the cockpit and the equipment it contained. A particularly interesting example of her work in this capacity is the famous picture of Ruby Loftus (1943). The sitter was an exceptionally skilled factory worker who was said to have mastered in mere months instruments with which most professional engineers struggled for years. The image was meant to encourage women to join the industries by inspiring them with Loftus' achievements. Significantly, almost half of the canvas is taken up by a highly detailed depiction of the machine the woman operated. Knight always aimed to give as faithful account of her subjects as possible, even insisting on setting her canvas in the factories she painted.¹⁶⁵ This aspect of the portrait not only guarantees its authenticity but also suggests that the artist had gained some understanding of this technology. The careful delineation of the objects entails at least the kind of basic knowledge one can acquire through prolonged observation and, perhaps, acquaintance with the sitter who used the devices. A painter who presumably had little experience of factory work had managed to comprehend Loftus' tools to a certain extent. And if such a person had achieved it, the image seems to imply, then so can any British woman. Perhaps this explains the success of the piece, colour posters of which were distributed to factories around the country. The numerous viewers were told that any woman was capable of contributing to the wartime industries and the message was articulated through Knight's mastery of the naturalistic idiom.

¹⁶⁵ Fox, *Laura Knight*, 101.

Arguably, the predilection for realism in war art was also linked to its perceived lack of formal interest. Critics often contrasted this idiom with the modernist approaches that foregrounded the satisfying arrangement of lines and colours. In his influential book *Vision and Design* (1920) Roger Fry stated that the former aesthetic had no interest for the Post-Impressionists and their followers:

Now, these artists do not seek to give what can, after all, be but a pale reflect of actual appearance, but to arouse the conviction of a new and definite reality. They do not seek to imitate form, but to create form; not to imitate life, but to find an equivalent for life.¹⁶⁶

Fry seems to claim that the two approaches are mutually exclusive and that the academic one is detrimental to the development of visual beauty. Other observers also commented on the lack of formal appeal in naturalistic art: in 1932 *The Times* noted that the royal portraits shown at Burlington House were effective 'likenesses' but failed 'in combining this first requirement with some relevant pictorial interest'.¹⁶⁷ More positively, a 1911 article on John Duncan Ferguson's paintings asserted:

Nothing is further from Mr. Ferguson's mind than to trace pretty arabesques and put together pleasing mosaics. Terms of decoration are of value to him only in so far as they help him to record with emotional emphasis his personal experience.¹⁶⁸

Significantly, the author suggests that the quest for formal perfection is of secondary importance and is potentially detrimental to an artwork's emotive appeal. J. B. Manson was even more explicit:

Art, as a means of expressing emotion, as an educative, and enlightening influence on society, has given place to an art which has for its highest aim the display, sometimes brilliant, not seldom banal, of mere technical triumphs, the painting of attractive surfaces and textures in a dexterous manner. It is to the influence of the dogma of 'art for art's sake' that the present waywardness of art is due.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁶ Roger Fry, *Vision and Design* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 167.

¹⁶⁷ 'Royal Academy. A Consistent Exhibition. Art and the Public', *The Times*, 30 April 1932, 13.

¹⁶⁸ 'The Portrait Paintings of John Duncan Ferguson', *The Studio*, December 1911, Vol. 54, 204.

¹⁶⁹ J. B. Manson, 'The Paintings of Mr. William Rothenstein', *The Studio*, June 1910, Vol 50, 37.

The critic was apparently convinced that visual attractiveness undermined painting's ability to engage the viewers' feelings. What Manson and the writer quoted previously seem to call 'emotion' is the empathetic experience which the naturalistic representation of people could provide, an aesthetic category that was often termed 'human interest'. By focusing on attractive shapes and colours artists allegedly neglect this quality and fail to produce convincing accounts of psychological states. Many of formalism's champions also described this kind of practice as lacking in empathy although they saw this as an advantage: J. E. C. Flitch suggested that only artists who could distance themselves from ordinary 'human passions' could create beautiful compositions.¹⁷⁰ He claimed that most war painters have failed to overcome their mundane reactions and praised Nevinson for preserving his 'integrity as an artist' and concentrating on visual pleasure.¹⁷¹ However, the absence of emotive appeal could be seen as a major problem in war art as the officially commissioned pieces were expected to arouse the observers' sympathies and even stir them to action. In 1939 Kenneth Clark, renowned art historian and head of the recently established War Artists' Advisory Committee, wrote:

The War Artists collection cannot be completely representative of modern English art, because it cannot include those pure painters who are interested solely in putting down their feelings about shapes and colours, and not in facts, drama, and human emotions generally... It would be a pleasure to see the names of these fine painters among those of the War Artists, but it is very doubtful if they would do as good work on war subjects as they are continuing to do on the subjects which they have made their own.¹⁷²

While Clark was sympathetic to the novel trends he presents some of them as unsuitable to the task of recording the army's experiences and engaging the public emotionally. Formalist experiments, we are told, occupy an autonomous realm which can have little in common with

¹⁷⁰ Flitch, *The Great War*, 8-9.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 9.

¹⁷² Kenneth Clark, 'War Artists at the National Gallery', *The Studio*, January 1942, Vol. 123, 586.

the nation's wartime aspirations. What was needed was an idiom free of concerns with visual pleasure, one which would capture the viewers' hearts and not merely titillate their aesthetic sensibilities. As I have shown above, naturalism was often perceived in such a way, a fact that made it perfectly suited to the tasks of official war imagery. The academicians were provided with a good reason to promote their own efforts and to claim they were of national significance.

It is important to note here that not all academic artists were hostile to formalism; indeed, many practitioners and supporters of the institution showed a marked interest in this aesthetic. Nor was realism always seen as incompatible with an attention to formal values. This is a subject that will be treated more thoroughly in the second chapter. So far, I have argued that some critics perceived a tension between the demands of naturalism and formalism and that the latter was rarely welcome in official war imagery. However, there were other contexts in which this aesthetic was encouraged and even expected.

When discussing state propaganda, one should also mention art's role in boosting morale. In 1918 *The Athenaeum* published the following praise of pictures' power to move the viewer:

Did you desire to stir quiet, homeloving [sic] men to go abroad and fight for the liberties of Europe? Or brace delicately nurtured women to work out-of-doors and work for the good of the nation? After logic and exhortation were tried, the artist, with his imaginative presentiment and visual appeal, was discovered to be the best man at those miracles of moral transformation. Did you wish to persuade people to be sparing at meals? In vain you wrote on every wall in large letters: DON'T WASTE FOOD. But explain the situation to an artist and he draws a picture of shipwrecked mariners which touches the heart even of the glutton.¹⁷³

The article states that images are supremely effective in reminding people of their duties and in inspiring patriotic sentiments. Visual culture is even said to be more motivating than rational arguments as it addresses itself more directly to the observers' conscience. As a literary

¹⁷³ V. Branford, 'Art and Life', *The Athenaeum*, May 1918, 226.

periodical *The Athenaeum* would have been particularly eager to prove that the arts could contribute to the war effort, that they were not superficial ornaments that could be discarded at a time of national crisis. Its article was, in part, a plea for continuing funding for the arts and the journals that promoted them. *Drawing and Design* had a similar argument, claiming that recruitment presented 'a chance for Art to make as powerful an appeal to the nation as the most fluent of orators or the greatest of statesmen'.¹⁷⁴ The critic presented it as indispensable to government propaganda and thus as an important element of domestic policy. However, it is clear that only an idiom capable of engaging the widest possible public could perform these functions and, as I have demonstrated, naturalism was seen in this way.

One of the ways in which academic art served the needs of propaganda was through disseminating images of generals and officers. In a letter of 1916 C. F. G. Masterman wrote:

From districts like California and South America I get letters at frequent intervals asking why on earth we make no display of our Generals, whereas the Germans are always boozing theirs as geniuses which are unconquerable. We cannot help the ordinary people having more interest in personality than in principle, and we must use this as the Germans have used it, with skill.¹⁷⁵

The head of the propaganda department was clearly convinced of the need to inspire confidence and respect for the army's commanders. Accordingly, Francis Dodd, a regular exhibitor at the Academy, was employed to produce portraits of generals, chaplains and medical officers which were published in newspapers and special volumes that contained biographical information. The books were meant to present the subjects as highly talented yet relatable, dependable leaders in Britain's hour of need. Additionally, in 1915 the Fine Art Society hosted an exhibition of portraits of 'British Commanders Taking Part in the War on Sea and Land.' *The Queen* enthused:

¹⁷⁴ Mary Pitcairn, 'War Posters', *Drawing and Design*, August 1915, 80.

¹⁷⁵ C. F. G. Masterman, Letter to Francis Dodd, 21 December 1916, Imperial War Museum.

...there is not one that we do not look at with pride and satisfaction, and there are several, as is well known, who have already been canonized as popular heroes.¹⁷⁶

Most of the works on view were by academic painters which was hardly surprising given the perceived pre-eminence of Burlington House in portraiture. Apparently, the institution was trusted to produce ideologically reliable and visually convincing images of the military elite.

The perception that naturalism characterised the British tradition would have been particularly important during the two world wars when the pressure to create appropriately ‘national’ art was very strong. As I have pointed out, most of the official war artists of the first global conflict were associated with the Academy and that was also true of many of the practitioners engaged by Kenneth Clark’s Advisory Committee. Significantly, the two United Artists’ Exhibitions that were organised during the wars both took place at the Academy. The shows allowed figures from all corners of the British art scene to present their work and were seemingly conceived as a patriotic gesture on behalf of an institution that welcomed all countrymen in times of struggle. As Herbert Read put it, the 1940 show was ‘an exhibition that should be visited as an act of virtue rather than as a form of indulgence’.¹⁷⁷ Apparently, the academicians wished Burlington House to be perceived as the very heart of the country’s artistic scene, as an inspirer and preserver of nationalistic sentiments. The RAs’ war-time activities would have strengthened their creations’ reputation as reflections of the fatherland’s spirit.

Academic art’s traditionalism and respect for history were also perceived as comforting and reassuring during the global conflicts. In *The Studio* review of the 1915 summer show we read:

There is happily scarcely any suggestion in the present Exhibition of the Royal Academy that everything is not as usual with the world. Certainly there is no hint given by the show that this country

¹⁷⁶ Randall Davies, ‘The World of Art’, *The Queen*, 16 January 1915, 110.

¹⁷⁷ Herbert Read, ‘The United Artists’ Exhibition’, *The Listener*, 11 January 1940, Vol. 23, 67-70.

is going through an experience almost without precedent in its history and is engaged in what is actually a struggle for existence.¹⁷⁸

The critic was apparently relieved to find a space where the realities of war-torn Europe were momentarily forgotten and where one could enjoy soothing reminders of life before the conflict. *The Times* had similar views on the 1941 exhibition:

...what could be better than to find it all still there, the glow and the gloss, the presentation portraits and the mixed bunches of summer flowers, the corners of the countryside and Continental views, the engaging young women gazing upwards from among an expensive swirl of paint, the pictures meant to puzzle, the weighty moral, the soft allegories of the coming of spring?... This is certainly not the moment to wish for any sort of change.¹⁷⁹

This writer seems particularly attracted to the most familiar and even banal features of the show, those that had been present for decades and have come to define academic culture. The old institution that resisted most calls for change and persevered in its aesthetic commitments here represents the hope that British culture as a whole would weather the storm and preserve its core values however those were defined. Even the Academy's inadequacies are perceived as charming anachronisms that emphasise its historical roots and ability to evoke a shared identity. Its adherence to the past was apparently thought to bring comfort at a time when the country's future was in question.

Interestingly, naturalistic drawing was sometimes also thought to have a soothing effect on soldiers in the field. In a letter to *Drawing and Design* published in 1916 Signaller Ellis Silas wrote:

Only men who have experienced those weary hours of waiting between parades in the Army can understand what it means to have nothing with which to occupy the mind. It was often thus in my case in camp, on the transport, and at the front, and it was only then that I fully realised how much my pencil meant to me... It [drawing] has enabled me to give a record of those many sidelights on war, of the heroic deeds and fortitude of brave men, a record which I think impossible to describe in any other manner.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ 'The Royal Academy Exhibition 1915', *The Studio*, June 1915, Vol. 65, 25.

¹⁷⁹ 'The Royal Academy', *The Times*, 3 May 1941, 5.

¹⁸⁰ Signaller Ellis Silas, 'The Value of Sketching to the Soldier', *Drawing and Design*, June 1916, 29-30.

Here drawing is described as welcome respite from the boredom and horror of war. Given the author's talk of 'record' it seems he practiced (or attempted to) a realistic approach and found comfort in concentrated observation and in perfecting his technique. Apparently, the absorption demanded by any attempt at emulating the visible world could occasionally distract one from the pressures of life in the army. In 1940 the artist Sydney Jones also recollects that during the First World War the production of art 'did not cease either at home or in the field' and that it brought 'consolation to suffering and troubled humanity'.¹⁸¹ While he did not explicitly mention naturalism it seems likely that most amateurs at the front practiced this method and, like Ellis Silas, found that this kind of concentrated effort offered a measure of forgetfulness.

Yet not all academic art was devoted to escapist fantasies or celebrations of the war effort. In his Diploma work, submitted in 1916, Charles Sims used the Academy's traditional idioms to convey a far less sanguine message. *Clio and the Children* depicts the muse of history sitting in front of a group of children in contemporary dress. Instead of offering edifying lessons, however, the dejected figure holds a bloodied scroll in her lap and appears lost in her own mourning. Originally Clio was shown reading aloud but Sims changed the composition in 1915 after his eldest son was killed in the war.¹⁸² The finished work suggests that history cannot offer a rational explanation for the unparalleled bloodshed of the conflict and can provide no inspiring rhetoric for the next generation. The piece also seems to question the ability of narrative painting, which until recently had been one of the Academy's favoured genres, to account for such events or even form a coherent narrative. Sims does not even

¹⁸¹ Sydney Jones, 'On Art in Wartime', *The Studio*, January 1940, Vol. 119, 6.

¹⁸² Stevens, *The Edwardians and After*, 137.

attempt to represent the chaotic realities of the battlefields; he merely shows us a mute despairing figure that seems unable to talk about the unfolding disasters.

The painting's effect depends on the conventional idioms it employs. The naturalistic depiction of a bucolic English landscape and a group of healthy well-dressed children refer to a long academic tradition of similar images. They bring to mind serene pictures of middle-class content which would have been very familiar to the visitors of Burlington House. These parts of the work create certain expectations which the figure of Clio starkly subverts. The reassuring fantasy of a family's repose in the countryside is interrupted by a reminder of the current catastrophes. The painting reflects the manner in which the war was perceived by many of the British upper classes: as an unparalleled and unexpectedly brutal outbreak of violence that profoundly affected the relatively stable social system from which they have profited for a long time. This eloquent contrast of a familiar idyll with references to the national turmoil was made possible by Sims' use of naturalism and traditional academic imagery. The idiom allowed him to create a deceptively unproblematic composition in which the presence of a bloodied scroll is all the more disconcerting. The artist performs a critique of the conventional scene that surrounds it by employing the very idiom that defined the era which ended in 1914.

William Orpen's paintings of the Paris peace conference of 1919 also utilise realism to subvert official militaristic rhetoric. Angus Trumble has pointed out that in these images the figures are dwarfed by the opulent interiors that surround them.¹⁸³ Although the British government had commissioned group portraits, in *The Signing of Peace in the Hall of Mirrors* one's eyes are rather drawn to the detailed depiction of Versailles' famous room which takes

¹⁸³ Angus Trumble, 'The Soldier, the King and the Proconsul: An Edwardian Processional', in *Edwardian Opulence: British Art at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century*, eds. Angus Trumble and Andrea Wolk Rager (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), 11.

up most of the canvas. The masterfully rendered mirrors and ornaments demand our attention in a way the monotonous dark group at the bottom does not. This effect is even more conspicuous in *A Peace Conference at the Quai d'Orsay* in which the artist seems to have been far more interested in the elaborate sculptures above the sitters' heads. The latter's features are hard to discern and they almost appear as tourists who had come to admire the opulent Parisian building. Trumble has shown that these pictorial decisions were based on Orpen's distaste for the politicians who decided the war's outcome without ever coming close to the battlefields.¹⁸⁴ He wrote in a letter:

All the 'frocks' did all their tricks to perfection. President Wilson showed his back teeth; Lloyd George waved his Asquithian mane; Clemenceau whirled his grey-gloved hands like windmills; Lansing drew his pictures and Mr Balfour slept. It was all over. The 'frocks' had won the war. The 'frocks' had signed the Peace. The Army was forgotten. Some dead and forgotten, others maimed and forgotten, others alive and well – but equally forgotten.¹⁸⁵

The painter believed that the political elite had appropriated all of the soldiers' achievements while neglecting the millions who had actually given or risked their lives. Depicting the diplomats as figures belittled by grand spaces was a way of expressing his view about their true significance as the critics recognised when the pictures were shown in London. In 1921 *The Manchester Guardian* even opined that Orpen's portrait of Hôtel Chatham's chef was more respectful than his pictures of the peace negotiations.¹⁸⁶

This emphasis on the lavish interiors depended on the artist's mimetic skills that rendered these parts of the images believable and attention-grabbing. Less detailed descriptions of Quai d'Orsay's decoration would not have been as effective at distracting us from the sitters. The realism also imparts an air of observational detachment to the works; they scrupulously imitate the visible surfaces and the sitters' appearance. Orpen seems to

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 11-14.

¹⁸⁵ William Orpen, *An Onlooker in France 1917-1919* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1921), 119.

¹⁸⁶ 'The New Royal Academy', *The Manchester Guardian*, 2 May 1921, 8.

claim that he was unaffected by the event's grand rhetoric and the participants' enthusiastic promises, that he resisted the urge to conform and produce the laudatory pictures the government expected. We are encouraged to think that he remained objective and merely painted what he saw: small people in great halls.

The significance of realism in the First World War was also affected by the widespread destruction of material heritage. Both Britain and its enemies were responsible for such acts but British propaganda focused on what was described as German 'barbarity'. In 1918 the Liberal MP Charles McCurdy wrote that Germany aimed

...to destroy the monuments of a Christian civilization which the Germans have never themselves possessed, a civilization which they hate... [as] they have exhibited in the destruction of churches and cathedrals.¹⁸⁷

The Entente claimed to be particularly appalled by the burning and looting of the Belgian town of Louvain in 1914 when numerous prized buildings and rare manuscripts were needlessly destroyed.¹⁸⁸ British intellectuals feared that many of the continent's famous artworks would be lost in the assaults of the 'Huns'. Before the United States joined the war many British and American artists and literati wrote to President Woodrow Wilson bringing to his attention the Germans' perceived crimes against culture.¹⁸⁹ Material heritage also played a role in official rhetoric of the Second World War. In 1939 the Ministry of Information began compiling a list of famous British churches attacks on which could be used in propaganda, particularly in the still neutral US.¹⁹⁰ Additionally, a significant number of the artworks collected by the War Artists' Advisory Committee showed damaged or destroyed historic buildings.¹⁹¹ The enemy

¹⁸⁷ Charles McCurdy, 'The Devil's Miscalculation', *Reality*, 17 October 1918, 2-3.

¹⁸⁸ John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 38-42.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 255-256.

¹⁹⁰ Foss, *War Paint*, 47.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 44.

was said to pose a serious threat to the British heritage and the values it was thought to represent.

Given these concerns reproductions and images that recorded the appearance of traditional architecture would have been seen as highly important documents. The Academy had a rich tradition in the genre of *vedute*. Early in its history, the institution had exhibited numerous Italian cityscapes that appealed to former and prospective Grand Tourists while artists like Turner and David Roberts popularized other parts of the continent. In the early twentieth century RAs like Albert Goodwin, Ernest George and Charles Cundall were still producing depictions of well-known European destinations like Florence, Rome or southern France. Such images would have had an added poignant significance at a time when much of this architectural heritage seemed to be at risk and the British government assured the public that the German army threatened the very foundations of European civilisation. Of course, most of the places that interested British artists had been photographed often but, as I pointed out earlier, draughtsmen and painters were thought to capture aspects of reality to which the camera had no access. The academic cityscapes and architectural studies were potentially seen as records of a world that was being consumed by the global conflicts.

Artists were equally interested in recording the threatened national landscape, in both world wars. Walter Thomas Monnington's 1944 paintings of aerial combat depict airplanes attacking flying bombs over pastoral South British scenery which would have been seen as quintessentially English. The idyllic images record the country's traditional look while reminding viewers that it has come under threat as the flying vehicles attest. The pictures preserve an aspect of the national environment and heritage that was often evoked in motivational wartime propaganda. Monnington draws attention to the landscape's beauty but also to its fragility in an effort to inspire contributions to the war effort. However,

depending on the viewer's needs, the familiar rustic scenery could have also been perceived as a comforting reminder of the persistence of English tradition even in the face of danger. No matter what the German army attempted, it could be seen to say, 'there will always be an England'.

Academic art also proved important to the commemorative projects undertaken after the First World War. The years following the great conflict saw the production of numerous officially or privately commissioned memorials in honour of the fallen soldiers. J. A. Black has shown that there was a widespread demand for a highly realistic kind of sculpture which would eschew idealised figures even in the case of largely allegorical images that portrayed no specific individuals.¹⁹² In 1925 General Ian Hamilton criticised artists for picking handsome models and creating aestheticised works which, he claimed, bore little resemblance to actual British troops.¹⁹³ However, he praised Charles Sargeant Jagger and Philip Lindsay Clark for their works' uncompromising realism.¹⁹⁴ The central committee of the Royal Artillery Regiment similarly demanded 'realism' for their monument; they asked for a bronze group 'such as will be unmistakably recognisable as an Artillery Memorial'.¹⁹⁵ The naturalism promoted by the Academy was perfectly capable of meeting the needs of such observers and was almost always preferred to the stylised figures that modernists like Jacob Epstein or Frank Dobson produced.

Apparently, artists were expected to preserve fresh not only the memory of the fallen soldiers but also that of the places that saw their demise. Sue Malvern has written about the

¹⁹² J. A. Black, 'Ordeal and Re-Affirmation: Masculinity and the Construction of Scottish and English National Identity in the Great War Memorial Sculpture 1919-1930', in *Memory and Memorials: The Commemorative Century*, eds. William Kidd and Brian Murdoch (London: Ashgate, 2004), 75-85.

¹⁹³ Ibid, 84.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 85.

¹⁹⁵ Stanley von Donop, 'Royal Artillery War Memorial Unveiling and Dedication Ceremony', *Journal of the Royal Artillery*, 1926, Vol. 52, 476.

numerous tours that were organised in the interwar decades which led visitors to the battlefields and British war cemeteries in France and Belgium.¹⁹⁶ This pilgrimage was meant to stir patriotic feelings, to channel collective mourning and acquaint those who had not fought with the conflict's ravages. The visitors were offered guided tours as well as guidebooks that listed local military events. Some believed that no words could adequately describe the devastation of the front lines; the journalist and intelligence officer C. E. Montague wrote that 'no eloquence has yet conveyed the disquieting strangeness' of the Somme battlefield.¹⁹⁷

You can enumerate many ugly and queer freaks of the destroying powers... But no piling up of sinister detail can express the somber and malign quality of the battlefield landscape as a whole.¹⁹⁸

It was necessary to see the sites to perceive something of the horror and strangeness of the soldiers' experiences. Montague's quote is taken from a publication of Bone's war drawings, *The Western Front* series published in 1917. Bone's works, like those of the other official war artists, were meant to present to the public at home this crucial visual information that was irreducible to language. In pieces like *A Soldiers' Cemetery at Lihons* (1917) his attention to detail would have been thought to guarantee the image's reliability and its value as an objective report. Additionally, its sketchy character and its nervous ragged lines would have created the impression that the drawing had been created in haste, on the spot, confirming the impression that it reflected its maker's original impressions. After 1918 such works could also function as substitutes to the Continental trips which remained expensive in the early post-war period. Importantly, this kind of art represented landscapes that were rapidly being transformed; many veterans visiting France and Belgium in the following decades observed that the rejuvenated and repopulated areas no longer resembled the places of their

¹⁹⁶ Sue Malvern, 'War Tourisms: 'Englishness', Art and the First World War', *Oxford Art Journal* 24, issue 1 (2001), 47-66.

¹⁹⁷ C. E. Montague, *The Western Front Vol. 1* (London: Country Life, 1917), 'The Somme Battlefield.'

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

memories.¹⁹⁹ Art like that of Bone could preserve the look and, as Montague argued, the feel of military desolation even as the European countryside was returning to its peacetime activities. However, only images in the naturalistic idiom were widely thought to possess the authority of objective accounts as the government's patronage of Bone shows. Detailed renderings of the battlefields like his were seen as a disturbing but necessary reminder of the sacrifices made in the Great War.

'Records of our time'

The commemorative function of art treated above was closely related to the purpose mentioned in the introduction, that of preserving the look of the age for posterity and of forming a visual historical archive. Academic pictures were often discussed in such terms: an article in *Apollo* presented John Lavery's portrait interiors as 'records of our time and significant commentaries upon that reckless changing thing called 'good taste''.²⁰⁰ His *Van Dyck Room, Wilton* (1921) depicts both the famous seventeenth-century portraits of the house and the sitters' descendants who appear to be perfectly at ease in this grand setting. The image emphasises historical continuity, suggesting that the contemporary family members and their ancestors are all part of a tradition that has a certain future. The artist also seems to be implying that his work could serve the same purpose as the creations of the renowned master: as Van Dyck's works were consulted by those who wished to learn about his time so would Lavery's interiors be relied upon as accounts of early twentieth-century Britain. The painter can be seen to claim that pictures like his were the modern equivalents of the venerable canvases at Wilton House and that they might similarly engage the imagination

¹⁹⁹ Malvern, 'War Tourisms', 57.

²⁰⁰ Desmond MacCarthy, 'Sir John Lavery: Portrait Interiors', *Apollo*, November 1925, Vol. 2, 267.

of future generations. At the beginning of the Second World War Kenneth Clark wrote that the official painters of the previous global conflict had created an invaluable ‘record of the war which the camera could not have given’.²⁰¹ Apparently, Lavery sought to do the same for the daily life of the British aristocracy.

The naturalistic interest in documenting is also evident in the pictures of collections of various kinds that were exhibited at Burlington House. Frederick Elwell depicted collections of porcelain and paintings in canvases like *The Last Purchase* (1921) and *The Birthday Party* (1936). Charles Spencelayh was well-known for his images of elderly men in interiors full of old mementos, curiosities and bric-a-bracs as seen in *Listening In* (1933) and *A Lover of Dickens* (1947). The horses seen in so many of Alfred Munnings’ works can also be perceived as coveted collectibles and these pictures were highly appreciated by horse breeders and owners. Academic painters could provide collectors with detailed visual accounts of their cherished possessions that allowed them to survey the groups of objects at a single glance. This visual availability enhanced the owners’ sense of mastery by including all items in a single, easily manageable image. These canvases were often of a relatively small format and could be easily displayed in a living room and shown to guests. There the pictures could advertise their owners’ wealth, good taste as well as their willingness to patronise contemporary artists. Perhaps such paintings were also conceived as metaphors of naturalistic art making itself. Those who practiced this idiom could present themselves as collectors of visual impressions who brought them together for the viewers’ delectation much as a collector of actual objects would. In any case, the pictures demonstrated realism’s ability to provide detailed studies of objects that attracted a large number of clients.

²⁰¹ Kenneth Clark, ‘The Artist in Wartime’, *The Listener*, 26 October 1939, Vol. 22, 810.

Clearly, the Academy were thought to be adept at reflecting present realities and preserving them for posterity, a fact which is not as surprising as it may initially appear. The institution's supporters could make the case that these artists were perfectly positioned to produce memorable accounts of the world around them. They were expected to be intimately familiar with the history of their practice, with the Western pictorial tradition. This means that they were also thought to possess excellent knowledge of the portraits and genre scenes that had both depicted their respective periods and stood the test of time. One could argue that the establishment practitioners were thus uniquely qualified to create pictures which would document the age and provoke the interest of future generations.

It is likely that this perception was also tied to the views about naturalism's importance discussed above. If this aesthetic approach was seen as the most accessible one by the contemporary public it is plausible that it was also thought to be the one most likely to attract the attention of the nation's descendants. After all, the idiom had been the *lingua franca* of Western European visual culture for nearly five centuries and its masters had proved worthy of posthumous admiration. It is worth reminding the reader that the critic Herbert Furst expected 'the humbler painters of portraits, landscapes and even of still-life', the artists who were normally seen as the most likely to emulate reality, to intrigue future viewers most intensely.

Additionally, for some viewers, naturalism could reveal aspects of the world that were usually hidden to us. In his book *Realism: A Study in Art and Thought* (1918) Arthur McDowall argues that the masters of this idiom could teach us to see our surroundings more clearly than we otherwise do. He claims that realism could

...make us see more keenly. In some, as with Holbein and the greater Dutchmen, art guides our rather groping vision and fixes it with an intense distinctness on the mass and colour of objects which the

painter has so much more clearly seen; which stand out for us, then, with an individuality that, for want of attention and 'eye', we seldom discover in the real.²⁰²

For this author, the study of naturalism's masterpieces can increase our awareness of the visual particularities and peculiar presence of the objects around us. Realist painting, he argues, offer lessons in visual sensitivity that could enrich our experience of the everyday. In an article of 1923 the critic Jessica Walker Stephens also claims that such art could teach us to see better.²⁰³ Those who shared such views were even more likely to perceive academic art as an adequate record of present reality. If naturalism could reveal things we normally overlook it was one of the most trustworthy and important witnesses of historical change. Realism thus described could transmit a kind of knowledge of visual reality that the written word could not convey. This type of painting was thus an essential part of any project of recording the twentieth century.

'The subject first'

An aesthetic concept closely related to that of naturalism was that of 'subject' and the 'subject picture.' It was often used in reviews of the Summer Exhibitions and referred to paintings in which the object depicted was thought to be of greater importance and interest than the manner in which it was depicted. These were almost always realist works that could present intriguing narratives or portray famous individuals or charming corners of the countryside. In all cases the pictures were meant to function as windows onto something that could be deemed interesting or pleasing regardless of any aesthetic values the picture itself might possess. In 1939 *The Times* described such pieces as the very essence of academic culture:

²⁰² Arthur McDowall, *Realism: A Study in Art and Thought* (London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1918), 41.

²⁰³ Sam Rose, 'Formalism, Aestheticism and Art Writing in England c. 1918-1939', (doctoral thesis, Courtauld Institute of Art, 2014), 31.

...the Academy has a positive tradition of its own. Its nature may be suggested by saying that somewhere about the middle of the nineteenth century the subject stole the picture and has remained in possession of it ever since. This is not to say that earlier painters neglected or despised subject interest... The difference is that whereas these earlier painters adapted the subject to the picture the Academy tradition adapts the picture to the subject. Sometimes successfully and sometimes not. But at worst the intrinsic interest of the subject remains, and that is the glory of the Academy tradition and the source of its deserved popularity.²⁰⁴

The writer claims that academic painters were mostly concerned with eliciting empathy from the viewers through the people and situations they represented rather than provoke aesthetic pleasure through skillful formal compositions. The *Apollo*'s critic seems to have agreed; he or she wrote that the pictures of Frampton and Spencelayh

...are primarily literature, and nearly all the pictures in the Academy are that, especially the portraits. How do I make that out? Because one sees everywhere the subject first.²⁰⁵

The depicted objects' import, the associations they provoked and the stories they told were frequently thought to eclipse the works' other aspects and to emphasise their value as illustrations of real or imaginary events, people and places.

Like naturalistic art in general, subject pictures were widely seen as having great appeal for the general public. In 1926 *The Times* opined:

Every institution must be judged on its own merits, and it would be foolish – though perhaps fashionable – to deny that the Academy has very definite merits of a kind deeply rooted in the prejudices and limitations of the majority... the peculiar excellence of the Academy, that is to say, subject interest expressed in terms of intimacy.²⁰⁶

The newspaper stressed that this bias reflected the masses' alleged ignorance and inability to enjoy disinterested contemplation. The report on the visitors' reactions at the 'Art for the People' exhibition I mentioned earlier also foregrounds these issues:

Subject pictures have relative values either as examples of human desirability or as something that immediately touches the spectator's intimacy or curiosity. Pictures in which the fashions are ten years out of date invariably repel women visitors...²⁰⁷

²⁰⁴ 'The Royal Academy', *The Times*, 23 April, 1939, 15.

²⁰⁵ 'The Royal Academy', *Apollo*, June 1939, Vol. 19, 300.

²⁰⁶ 'Royal Academy', *The Times*, 1 May 1926, 15.

²⁰⁷ John Gordon, 'Likes and Dislikes', *The Studio*, February 1940, 35.

The viewers are said to have largely ignored the images' status as artworks and concentrated on the attractiveness of the people they showed. The wide public was usually thought to be intrigued by narratives and relatable subject matter that could please those who rarely visited galleries.

Clearly, the subject picture became something of a Jungian shadow for many critics who projected on it everything that was deemed unaesthetic and vulgar. Yet the effacement of the artist's hand that characterised much of naturalistic art suggests that many academic painters did prefer to foreground the depicted object instead of their own pictorial agency. A piece like James Gunn's portrait of Neville Chamberlain (1938) presents a flawless smooth surface that encourages the viewer to focus on the Prime Minister's features rather than on any formal or painterly choices made by the artist. It derives most of its interest from the sitter's social position rather than from its aesthetic merits which is reflected in the fact that it now hangs in the Carlton Club in London rather than in any art gallery or museum. Apparently, many academicians were not afraid to be seen as recorders of famous people and beautiful picnic spots rather than as inspired composers of form or masters of bravura brushwork. Indeed, this kind of unpretentious self-presentation was in tune with the down-to-earth professional persona projected by the RAs' biographies. These artists often preferred to claim that they could recognise and do justice to a subject valuable in itself rather than pose as creators of value.

Questioning Naturalism

So far, this chapter has presented academic artists as highly confident and proud of their pictorial heritage and, indeed, this was the image that they usually sought to project. Some practitioners, however, used the Academy's dominant discourse to interrogate its own most

basic assumptions. Meredith Frampton had a particularly idiosyncratic approach to naturalism. At first glance his pictures appear as meticulous and highly detailed accounts of observable objects, as faithful renderings of actual people and interiors. Yet a more careful examination of the canvases undermines this initial impression. In pictures like *A Game of Patience* (1937) or the portrait of Sir Clive Forster-Cooper (1945) the determined attention to detail conspicuously fails to correspond to ordinary visual experience. All objects are placed under careful scrutiny and are depicted with extraordinary clarity that admits of no impediments to the artist's eye. In *A Game of Patience* one can almost perceive each separate lock of hair on the woman's head. The pictorial space seems pervaded by an all-encompassing bright light that makes few allowances for the penumbral ambiguities produced by sunlight or most kinds of artificial lighting. John Bland-Sutton, one of Frampton's clients, seems to have noticed this peculiar quality of his art as in a letter of 1922 he wrote:

As soon as I saw the picture of Lady Frampton I realised that you had a style of your own, and though I may not have an ideal portrait of my wife I have secured a remarkable picture, and I am perfectly satisfied with the commission.²⁰⁸

Bland-Sutton did not question the artist's expertise but his remark that the work fell short of being a perfect depiction of his spouse suggest that it failed to correspond to his visual expectations. Some critics were equally perplexed by the artist's style: in 1941 *The Times* noted:

...Mr Meredith Frampton has painted Sir Charles Grant Robertson with exactly the same kind of literal treatment of detail and even the same licked surface of paint as Mr Salvador Dali [sic] uses for his surrealist collections of incongruous objects. The effect is almost as disquieting, which seems to suggest that Mr Dali knew what he was about when he developed this technique.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁸ John Bland-Sutton, letter to Meredith Frampton, 26 April 1922, Tate Archive.

²⁰⁹ 'The Royal Academy', *The Times*, 3 May 1941, 5.

The observer presents the pictures' exaggerated clarity and high finish as an uncanny reminder of avant-garde practice. 'Perspex' would have agreed with this assessment; he described a group portrait exhibited in 1943 in the following terms:

These three men in an office seem to be so real, so exactly like nature, that you almost hear them speak; but you also, most irrationally, feel that if they were so much as to breathe they would ruffle the surface of his impeccable paint. The truth is that, for all his meticulous realism, Mr Frampton is an *abstract* painter, as you may see in his 'Still Life', his *Diploma work*. This, in spite of his meticulous and prerafaelite [sic] precision, is sheer and rather unattractive, because incomprehensible, surrealism...²¹⁰

Once again, the artist's superlative technique is praised but, instead of providing reassuring familiarity it is thought to produce unsettling compositions that hover uneasily between the life-like and the fantastical.

Frampton developed an austere, refined style that conformed to the academic requirement for naturalistic depiction. Yet in his quest for representational accuracy and precision he created images that failed to correspond to many viewers' perception of the real. His very literal pursuit of clarity and faithful emulation resulted in works that could hardly be seen as mirrors of nature. Indeed, the pictures' high finish and exquisite detail foreground the artist's proficiency and lead one to admire his technique rather than concentrate on the depicted people and spaces, an interpretation confirmed by the praise for his mastery found in the press. These ambiguous canvases provoke the viewer to question the reliability of the naturalistic idiom itself. If the careful and competent rendering of visual data fails to amount to a convincing illusion realism's very *raison d'être* seems to be undermined. Frampton's virtuosic exercises put in doubt this idiom's claim to a special connection with the world 'as it is'. This approach is made to appear simply as one artificial creation among others, as one way to approach the visual that provides no direct, unfiltered access to the 'real'. By pushing the

²¹⁰ 'Perspex', 'Art Notes', *Apollo*, May 1943, Vol. 37, 114.

requirement for faithful emulation in the direction of its logical limit, the painter exposed naturalism's shortcomings and its incapacity to duplicate the complexities of actual experience. This destabilization seems to have been deliberate. Occasionally the artist even employed explicit references to surrealist practice like the title of *Trial and Error* (1939) or the incongruous assemblage of objects of *Still Life* (1932), his Diploma work. These nods to the avant-garde, which did not escape the critics' attention, emphasised the intentional challenge to expectations.

Yet, despite the references to modernist practice, Frampton's idiom was firmly rooted in well-regarded academic precedents. His impeccable surfaces and meticulous details recall the pictorial approaches of David and Ingres or, closer to home, Frederick Leighton, all figures that had been closely associated with the artistic establishment of Paris and London. The cool precision of Frampton's portraits evokes images like that of Madame Moitessier at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. (1851). These stylistic similarities suggest that for Frampton the uncanny elements in naturalism were inherent in the academic tradition itself rather than simply borrowed from surrealism or other contemporary developments. His paintings and their somewhat surprising failure to reflect the public's visual experiences can be read as subtle critiques of the limitations of academic approaches, their rhetoric of universality and their alleged firm basis in reality. In this context the classical ruins and dented vase in *Still Life* acquire additional meanings: they seem to refer to the decay of an ancient tradition, one which can no longer be relied on in the same way. The tree stumps in the background also seem to evoke a severed continuity, especially when we consider the significance of organic metaphors in the talk of tradition's champions (as seen in A. K. Lawrence's interview mentioned earlier in this chapter). The picture appears as a respectful but resigned epitaph for a moribund academic practice. More generally, Frampton's approach

to painting implies that careful observation and good technique do not guarantee effective mimesis, a provocation that goes against the grain of some of Burlington House's most cherished aesthetic convictions.

William Orpen also put naturalism's claims to veracity under question. Lucy Cotter has argued that he created an innovative brand of self-portraiture that relied on ambiguity and questioned the genre's reliability.²¹¹ She has demonstrated that in works like *The Dead Ptarmigan* (c. 1909) or the self-portraits from the battlefield (1917) he undermines the images' trustworthiness through the sitter's exaggerated theatrical postures and quizzical facial expressions. In these paintings the figures look as if they have donned costumes in order to perform complex and ambiguous roles that reveal little about the artist's genuine identity. Orpen is often shown staring at the observer as if trying to share the joke or provoking her to guess his true intentions. In *Ready to Start* he contemplates his own melancholic reflection in a mirror, seemingly questioning the appropriateness of his military uniform and subverting the title's message. These images are never presented as windows into their maker's character but as records of different behavioural archetypes imposed by society or chosen by the subject himself. As Cotter points out, the pieces cast in doubt not only the artist's reliability but also the validity of the genre in general and the possibility of depicting anyone's 'true self'.

What Cotter has not discussed is the significance of the works' realistic look. Orpen may have occasionally employed a rather loose brushwork but these pictures retain the appearance of objective accounts that also characterised his highly successful society portraits. It is likely that the images' naturalism was meant to emphasise their opaqueness, their refusal to yield to traditional interpretative strategies. This idiom normally led early

²¹¹ Lucy Cotter, 'William Orpen: Towards a Minor Self-Portraiture', *Visual Culture in Britain* 13, issue 1 (March 2012), 25-42.

twentieth-century observers to expect transparent and easily readable descriptions of reality. By confounding these expectations, the artist rendered the portraits' ambiguity all the more striking. Even the details that appear most realistic can be shown to be misleading. The carefully described protruding lip and wrinkled forehead of *The Dead Ptarmigan* might initially impress one as honest soul-searching depictions of Orpen's imperfections. However, as Cotter has shown, contemporary photographs and his acquaintances' testimonies suggest that his appearance was very different and that he was deliberately exaggerating his features.²¹² His self-portraits elicit bewilderment and surprise, an effect which would have been lost if he had used one of the less conventional modernist approaches which were not usually associated with objectivity and transparency.

Perhaps Orpen's most trenchant critique of naturalism's ability to mirror reality can be found in the pictures he produced during the First World War. As an official war artist in France he created numerous depictions of the battlefields and the towns occupied by the British army. What is striking about many of those is their surprisingly mild appearance and seeming lack of engagement with the suffering of those portrayed or the potential dangers of the painted landscapes. *German Planes Visiting Cassel* (1917) is a good example: the threatening presence of enemy aircraft is here only registered, in a cool objective manner, as a number of white spots in the halcyon blue sky. The image creates the impression of adequately reproducing the soldiers' visual experience yet pointedly fails to register the dread that such a sight could have inspired or the violence it could have heralded. The artist is made to appear as a detached bystander unwilling or unable to capture the event's true significance. *Dead Germans in a Trench* (1918) functions in a similar way: this sunbathed composition of

²¹² Ibid, 33-34.

harmonised warm colours seems to obscure rather than reveal the soldiers' fate or the reaction their bodies might provoke in an onlooker.

In images like these Orpen seems to be making a statement about the limits of the naturalistic idiom. It is presented as an adequate method for reproducing optical data but as incapable of engaging with the represented people's inner worlds. This interpretation is corroborated by the painter's war memoirs in which he meditates on his craft's futility and his guilt for not participating more directly in the country's struggle:

There I sat in the car, her nose pointing away from danger, and they walked past in the other direction to Hell... They looked at me, but they never uttered a word – yet those looks made me crouch, and in shame cover my eyes with my hands.²¹³

The war pictures visualise this perceived irrelevance and foreground naturalism's superficiality and its failure to depict personal experience. Of course, the artist could have employed some conventional tools to make his pictures darker and more dramatic by depicting clouded skies and relying on murky colours; he did just that in *Zonnebeke* (1918). But his general avoidance of such banal motifs suggests that he believed they were insufficient in tackling the catastrophes he witnessed. Relying on what was seen as objective observation was more acceptable than histrionic rhetoric. Orpen seems to have preferred an admission of naturalism's limitations, as he perceived them, to a reiteration of its tired clichés. His pictures from the war constitute a resigned critique of the Academy's favoured idiom by one of its most prominent practitioners.

John Singer Sargent appears to have been equally dismayed by the conflict and he also employed naturalism to articulate his views. David Lubin has argued that the grand canvas *Gassed* (1919) was meant to suggest that the soldiers, indeed the entire nation had lost its

²¹³ William Orpen, *An Onlooker in France: A Critical Edition of the Artist's War Memoirs* (London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2008), 45.

sight during the war.²¹⁴ Lubin relates the work to the British and American propaganda posters of these years. The famous Lord Kitchener and Uncle Sam posters both depicted authoritative male figures who gazed at the observer. The ubiquitous images created the impression that the citizens were constantly monitored by the state that expected 'every man to do his duty' and to emulate Kitchener's alleged resolve and readiness for sacrifice. As Lubin suggests the Secretary of State's penetrating gaze was associated with virile masculinity and military might.²¹⁵ The picture spoke of the foresight of the British army's leaders as well as of their ability to detect all perceived cowardice and reluctance to serve.

Sargent's painting presents a very different statement. It depicts two groups of soldiers blinded by mustard gas that constitute a striking contrast to the well-known poster. In place of the confident all-seeing war chief we see a mass of powerless subordinates who cannot even walk without assistance. The penetrating gaze is replaced by communal loss of sight. Lubin contends that the artist was deliberately referring to the well-known piece of propaganda and subverting its bellicose message.²¹⁶ Sargent was sceptical of the conflict from its beginning and his distaste only grew through the years. According to Lubin, *Gassed*'s maker was comparing the painted victims with the British people as a whole and asserting that the latter had blindly followed their elites who had hardly shown greater foresight than the masses. He was suggesting that, far from being the potent males celebrated in official visual culture, the army's leaders resembled the medical orderlies seen in the picture: confused men desperately trying to guide a decimated population. Significantly, it is likely that the

²¹⁴ David Lubin, 'Losing Sight: War, Authority and Blindness in British and American Visual Cultures 1914-1922', *Art History* 34, issue 4 (September 2011), 796-817.

²¹⁵ Ibid, 806.

²¹⁶ Ibid, 796-817.

composition was inspired by Pieter Bruegel's *Parable of the Blind Leading the Blind* the title of which sums up Sargent's attitude to the contemporary political situation.

The painter's naturalistic approach interacts interestingly with his message. Like all works in this idiom the picture seems to affirm the reliability of the maker's sight, a maker who is able to perceive and record the world around him. His vision also empowers the viewers by giving them access to absent objects and events assuring them of their own ocular prowess. Access to reality is made to appear unproblematic and straightforward. Yet, if Lubin is right, the image's commentary on the Great War undermines this claim to trustworthiness. If the artist was implying that society had lost its sight it is unlikely that he was sanguine about the public's ability to discern the truth even when aided by naturalistic images. It is conceivable that his use of this idiom here was rather meant as an ironic remark about the observers' vision and the power of British propaganda. The latter was known for its clear matter-of fact style that was supposed to give the impression of impartial description and to contrast with the emotional rhetoric of German official sources. The War Propaganda Bureau had stated in a report that its aim was to 'present facts and general arguments based on facts'.²¹⁷ Sargent was possibly reminding the public that even such seemingly objective accounts can be profoundly misleading. Perhaps he was also contending that realistic pictures, like his own, could not be completely trusted either. Suspicious of the war as he was, the painter must have been uneasy with the government commission he had received. Coupling his naturalistic approach with an indirect critique of official narratives might have been his subtle way of articulating this discomfort. Of course, the artist did deliver what was expected of him and the canvas was duly pronounced Picture of the Year at the 1919 Summer

²¹⁷ Taylor, *British Propaganda in the Twentieth Century*, 36.

Exhibition. However, he did hint at the problematic character of such pieces and perhaps not all gallery goers were reassured by what he had to say about recent events.

This chapter has explored the numerous functions performed by naturalism at the Academy and the critical discourses that influenced the public's responses to it. This idiom was a marker of tradition and respectability but could also be a flexible tool for addressing some of the needs of the twentieth century. It enabled academic artists to adopt a populist stance, to present their art as an accessible common-sensical practice that could engage the average Englishman in a way the avant-garde could not. Additionally, realist art was useful to the nationalistic propaganda of the two world wars and preserved some important nineteenth-century tropes of Englishness that were evoked by official rhetoric. Naturalism's perceived ties to the national tradition and the tastes of 'ordinary people' made it a desirable asset that was claimed by both reactionary and progressive circles in their attempts to influence the public. Finally, this idiom was also used by artists who wished to subvert its claims to veracity and unproblematic legibility and sometimes criticised the political establishment. It appears that naturalism owed its continued relevance past the Edwardian period to its flexibility and potential to address different and often contradictory aesthetic and political impulses. The apparent stylistic uniformity at Burlington House often belied the tensions between its pictorial language's various meanings.

Chapter II. Formalism

In the first half of the twentieth century academic art was often seen to contrast with the avant-garde and everything it stood for.²¹⁸ Modernism's champions frequently criticised the Academy's perceived conservatism and reluctance to engage with the alternative idioms proposed by younger practitioners. The two camps were usually described as polar opposites that embraced completely different aesthetic ideals. The *Apollo*, for instance, contrasted the Academy's accessible visual culture with the 'research students' of modernism who were engaged in adventurous experiments that rarely appealed to the multitudes.²¹⁹ The perception that academic art had little in common with that of the avant-garde seems to have persisted in the secondary literature. The two traditions are still rarely discussed together and the relationship between the two does not attract much interest.²²⁰

However, a more thorough investigation of the critical discourses surrounding Burlington House reveals that they had more in common with the modernists than the latter usually allowed. It appears that the Academy was highly interested in an aesthetic approach championed by many of the period's avant-garde artists, namely, that of formalism. Reviews of the annual Summer Exhibitions in the century's first few decades frequently described the works seen there as compositions of lines and colours that possessed a purely visual appeal. A substantial number of those who exhibited there confirmed the validity of these interpretations in their writings and emphasised the importance of formal attractiveness. The

²¹⁸ A short part of this chapter was published online in a slightly modified form. Vassil Vesselinov Yordanov, '1911 Formalism and Naturalism', The Royal Academy Summer Exhibition: A Chronicle, 1769-2018, accessed 27 February 2019, <https://chronicle250.com/1911>

²¹⁹ 'Art and Art Critics: Still at It!', *Apollo*, February 1940, Vol. XXI, 43.

²²⁰ Some important exceptions are Corbett's *The Modernity of English Art* and Fox's *British Art and the First World War*.

previous chapter explored the Academy's difference from the modernists but the former also sought a partial *rapprochement* in certain areas of its practice. The line between these segments of the art world was often blurrier than is usually assumed.

Here the term 'formalism' refers to an aesthetic discourse that had its origins in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790) where he argued that 'pure' judgments of taste about 'free' beauty were made 'according to mere form.'²²¹ Some theorists of the early nineteenth century like Johann Friedrich Herbart and Madame de Staël came to use Kant's definition of 'free' beauty as a model for the adequate appreciation of all art.²²² This line of thought was first popularised in Britain by the painter James McNeill Whistler in the late nineteenth century and was eventually championed in the influential writings of Roger Fry and Clive Bell.²²³ Its adherents valorised the pleasing arrangements of shapes and colours that Bell famously named 'significant form.'²²⁴ Other critics used the terms 'decoration', 'design', or 'rhythm of line.'²²⁵ This discourse prioritised visual pleasure and was usually dismissive of pictorial narratives or overt didacticism. Formalist appreciation was often presented as the best way to approach and assess the visual culture of almost all societies and periods. While writers proposed a variety of accounts of how exactly formal relations provoked aesthetic responses, it was widely assumed that the contemplation of satisfying compositions could produce intense experiences which were highly meaningful in themselves. In the interwar

²²¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 66-69.

²²² Sam Rose, *Art and Form: From Roger Fry to Global Modernism* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019), 6.

²²³ Deanna Marohn Bendix, *Diabolical Designs: Paintings, Interiors and Exhibitions of James McNeill Whistler* (Washington, D.C: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 12-13.

²²⁴ Clive Bell, *Art* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1914), 9-10.

²²⁵ 'Royal Portraits at the Academy', *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 3 May 1913, 4; P. G. Konody, 'Royal Academy', *The Observer*, 1 May 1921, 13; 'Royal Academy', *The Times*, 12 May 1924, 19.

period these ideas became a dominant presence in British art-critical writing and determined the thinking and practice of many artists.²²⁶

In this chapter I will examine the significance of formalism in the Academy's visual culture. I will argue that it was far more prevalent than is usually assumed, indeed, that it was one of the defining terms of the establishment's aesthetic. This part of the thesis also explores formalism's relation to naturalism and the reasons for the institution's continuous support for both approaches. I will contend that formalism was valuable for providing access to the high-cultural discourse of 'art for art's sake' while naturalism was widely viewed as a wholesome antidote to the disturbing 'foreignness' of the avant-garde's non-realistic idioms. By promoting both aesthetic ideals, the Academy could occupy both the prestigious space of 'disinterested' contemplation and the cozy realm of post-Victorian nationalism. Furthermore, the artists of Burlington House could claim that their pieces possessed a greater aesthetic richness and provided multi-layered experiences based on the pleasures of realistic depiction as well as formal appeal. The Academy offered a certain alliance of the two concepts that remained the norm within its walls until the 1950s. I will also examine some artists and critics who did not explicitly refer to formalism but employed the related notions of 'beauty' and the 'ideal'. Such practitioners often argued that art should not be confined to the strict reproduction of the real and should seek to emphasise or even embellish its truly valuable aspects. This discourse linked academic culture to its roots in Reynolds' writings but also to some strands of modernism.

²²⁶ Sam Rose, *Art and Form*, 39-47.

'The poetry of form and colour'

In *The Modernity of English Art 1913-1930* David Peters Corbett has established that by the end of the First World War formalist appreciation had become a cornerstone of British critical practice and was regularly employed in discussions of the less radical 'chastened' modernism that gained popularity in the 1920s.²²⁷ However, he has not treated in much detail the role this discourse played in evaluations of academic practice. Reviews of the Summer Exhibitions frequently employed formalist criteria; critics often commented on the pieces' value as arrangements of volumes and hues and their makers' ability to create satisfying compositions.

In 1911 *The Art Journal* was impressed by the 'delicate and harmonious colour scheme' of Charles Sims' canvas *Legend* while *The Times* praised two pictures by Val Havers for their 'lucid design'.²²⁸ Similar judgments were articulated throughout the first half of the twentieth century: in 1921 P. G. Konody remarked that in Glyn Philpot's painting *The Journey of the Spirit* 'the grandeur and aloofness of the theme are conveyed by the forms of the design and by the direct appeal of colour'.²²⁹ Almost two decades later *The Yorkshire Post* observed that Cézanne's influence was quite noticeable at the Academy, the French master being usually associated with the radical formalism of the Bloomsbury Group and its successors.²³⁰ Numerous other examples of this type of criticism could be provided; the writers made use of a relatively limited stock vocabulary. While this was by no means the sole kind of criteria employed by writers it was present in the majority of reviews of the summer shows between 1910 and 1951.

²²⁷ Corbett, *The Modernity of English Art*, 67-85.

²²⁸ 'The Royal Academy: The Pictures', *The Art Journal*, June 1911, 169; 'The Royal Academy', *The Times*, 29 April 1911, 11.

²²⁹ P. G. Konody, 'Royal Academy', *The Observer*, 1 May 1921, 13.

²³⁰ 'The Academy Exhibition', *The Yorkshire Post*, 1 May 1939, 7.

One might be tempted to suppose that this formalist discourse remained external to the Academy; that it was only used by critics who imposed it on pieces that had been produced with different intentions. However, many of the artists who showed their works in Burlington House also expressed an abiding interest in formalism. In 1911 C. M. Q. Orchardson exhibited his picture *A Problem in White*. As Pamela Fletcher has noted, the title seems to refer to Whistler's well-known 'symphonies' in white of the late nineteenth century.²³¹ The familiar scene of a woman watching over a sleeping child is here reframed as a compositional exercise that encourages viewers to concentrate on its visual appeal rather than its narrative import. In an interview of 1937 William Reid Dick, whose sculptures were consistently praised for their formal attractiveness, defined aesthetic experience as an 'appreciation of perfect line and form, as well as harmony of colour'.²³² In his autobiography *The Life of a Painter* (1940) Lavery articulated a similar commitment: he wrote that in the early twentieth century he had regarded Whistler's formalist manifesto *The Ten O'clock Lecture* as 'the Gospel of Art'.²³³ Knight also valued this artistic approach as this account of her depictions of dancers suggests:

With all my ballet notes in front of me, I experimented further in pure line, and drawing a scrawl haphazard on a piece of paper, allowing my tools to tell me what other lines used in conjunction would happily fill a space – greatest fun; lots of ideas came that way. I found the value of what I called rhythm, repetition of line, accented beat and cross rhythm, as in music.²³⁴

For all her interest in capturing the visual excitement of the capital's theatres the painter also insisted on the pieces' effectiveness as intriguing linear arrangements. Evidently, formalism was popular amongst the Academy's regular exhibitors and was often one of their primary aesthetic goals.

²³¹ Fletcher, *Narrating Modernity*, 109.

²³² 'What Do You Mean when You Say Artistic?', *Daily Sketch*, 16 March 1937, 15.

²³³ Lavery, *The Life of a Painter*, 108.

²³⁴ Knight, *Oil Paint and Grease Paint*, 234.

Orchardson's picture and Lavery's autobiography appear to suggest that formalism's popularity in the early twentieth-century Academy can be traced, at least to some extent, back to Whistler. He was hardly the only figure associated with the Aesthetic Movement to champion this aesthetic approach but he was by far the most visible one. The American painter was famously vocal in his support for formalism, frequently explaining his principles in published responses to unsympathetic critics. The widely publicised trial in which Whistler sued John Ruskin for describing one of his pictures as 'a pot of paint flung in the public's face' provided him with an excellent platform from which to present his views and argue against the naturalism and didacticism that Ruskin favoured.²³⁵ While Whistler had little regard for Burlington House and did not exhibit there his statements were well-known in the London art world and seem to have influenced the next few generations of painters and critics.

However, one should note that in the late Victorian period formalism also had its advocates within the Academy. Frederic Leighton, who was President of the institution between 1878 and 1896, had his own brand of classicising formalism. His elegant paintings of figures in antique attire were meant to impress viewers with their refined linearity and mellow autumnal colours. In his 1879 address to the Academy's students he spoke about the various ways in which art can be approached:

On one end of the scale there will be men vividly impressed with and moved by all the facts of life, and a powerful vitality will lend light and charm to their works; on the other hand we may expect to find men who are more strongly affected by those qualities in which art is most akin to Music, and in their works the poetry of form and colour will be thrown as a lovely garment over abstract ideas or fabled events.²³⁶

Leighton made it clear that he belonged to the second category and that his works were more like symphonies than novels. Significantly, he was supportive of artists who had espoused the

²³⁵ Bendix, *Diabolical Designs*, 30-37.

²³⁶ Lord Leighton, *Addresses Delivered to the Students of the Royal Academy* (London: Kegan Paul, 1896), 28-29.

art-for-art's-sake ideology, promoting Edward Burne-Jones' election as an Academy Associate and publishing some of his own drawings in the first issue of *The Yellow Book*.²³⁷ As is well known the Aesthetic Movement was highly sympathetic to formalism and Leighton's involvement with it is further proof of his commitment to this cause. While the RA President was not as adept at self-publicity as Whistler he was an influential and formidably well-connected socialite. His views are likely to have been well-known in the capital's artistic circles and apt to make an impression on younger practitioners.

The institution's interest in formalism only grew between 1910 and 1951 as it gradually became more sympathetic to avant-garde practitioners. In 1921 Augustus John was elected Associate which was seen as an unparalleled concession to modernist trends and provoked the ire of E. W. Cook:

They [the Royal Academicians] have probably reached the limits of their artistic insight and foolishly think this decadent 'art' has come to stay, and is to be the art of the future. All the laws of nature, and of common sense, make it absolutely certain that presently there will be a violent reaction against this degrading folly, and then instead of having put the Academy at the head of an upward trend, they will have placed it at the tail of a discredited movement bankrupt in public interest, in artistic credit and in finance.²³⁸

John's election reflected the respectability that some of the new movements gained in the 1920s; Corbett has pointed out that in that decade the less radical types of formalism such as those of Duncan Grant or Mark Gertler came to be more widely approved by critics.²³⁹ The establishment's relations with the modernists improved further in later years, C. R. W. Nevinson becoming an Associate in 1939 and Rodrigo Moynihan in 1944. Both practitioners had been praised for their formalist talents. As 'Perspex' noted in 1947:

²³⁷ Anna Gruetzner Robins, 'Leighton: A Promoter of the New Painting', in *Frederic Leighton: Antiquity, Renaissance, Modernity*, eds. Tim Barringer and Elizabeth Prettejohn (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 315.

²³⁸ Cook, *Retrogression in Art*, 32.

²³⁹ Corbett, *The Modernity of English Art*, 67-85.

...among the Elect (and therefore Exhibitors by right absolute) are Ethel Walker, Wadsworth, Nevinson, Moynihan, John, Eurich, Dunlop, and the sculptors Dobson and Lambert, to name some whose pioneering has taken them far beyond the academic fold.²⁴⁰

The number of avant-garde pieces by non-academicians also grew throughout these four decades. By 1943 *The Times* was able to claim that 'in recent years the Royal Academy has been making a determined effort to get its annual exhibitions more representative of serious English painting'.²⁴¹ The gradual appropriation of avant-garde artists and the presence of some less orthodox works at the Summer Exhibitions suggest that through those decades the importance of formal aesthetics only grew in the English institution. Naturalistic painting and sculpture predominated in the first half of the twentieth century but the increasing visibility of novel representational idioms that encouraged formalist appreciation indicates that the more traditional pieces were also judged by such criteria. Indeed, in 1932 the critic E. G. Warland described two architectural works by the academic sculptor William Reid Dick as an embodiment of formal inventiveness and aesthetic modernity. Writing about Dick's recently completed sculptures for Unilever House in London, he enthused:

It takes but a small stretch of the imagination to see in this building and its sculptures a mirror of the times this country is passing through. In the cleanliness of line and freedom from trivial detail the building seems to express the getting back to hard essentials.²⁴²

While the Academy remained largely opposed to the new movements it proved willing to recognise some of their achievements and appropriate them for its own purposes.

Significantly, the modernists who joined the institution in this period were often said to subscribe to, rather than oppose, the Academy's aesthetic. When Nevinson was elected A.R.A. in 1939 *The Studio* implied that this was a natural choice:

²⁴⁰ 'Perspex', 'The Middle of the Road', *Apollo*, June 1946, Vol. 43, 125.

²⁴¹ 'The Royal Academy', *The Times*, 1 May 1943, 5.

²⁴² E. G. Warland, 'Architectural Sculpture: The Sculptures at Unilever House, Blackfriars', *Building*, May 1932, 233.

Academic principles are, after all, irreproachably classicist and Nevinson is a born classicist... No picture of his could be described as a riot of colour, or a riot of anything, for his art is an art of self-discipline.²⁴³

The writer suggests that the Academy has always supported a certain kind of formal values and that formalist artists of a particular stripe would be at home within its walls. Burlington House was linked not only to naturalism and story-telling but also to a certain sense of restraint and order in compositional technique that could be exemplified by less strictly realist art. *The Times* made a similar point about Frank Dobson in the year in which he joined Burlington House, claiming that his *Girl Undressing* had an 'academic design'.²⁴⁴ What the critic meant may be gauged from his praise of the same sculptor's portrait of Ann Dobson which, we are told, was

...so reserved, so content to rest within the framework of a placid though vital design, that it may easily be overlooked. It is, in fact, alive but quiet, too rare a quality in sculpture...²⁴⁵

Apparently, the institution was widely associated with some types of formalism and the inclusion of more avant-garde practitioners was not necessarily deemed as a rupture with tradition.

In the interwar period the presence of modernist works at the Academy was prominent enough to merit suggestions that the new movements should consider a reconciliation with the artistic establishment. In an article of 1930 a critic using the pen name 'Bernard Gui' argued for a *rapprochement* between the two camps:

Let the scores of artists who do not ('of course') send work to Burlington House, do so, and risk a few refusals. Thus, in time, they may create an institution that approaches their ideal. The amount of good done cannot be measured in terms of any particular artist's success and, if the Royal Academy had fewer destructive detractors and more constructive champions, much would undoubtedly be achieved.²⁴⁶

²⁴³ T. McGreevy, 'C. R. W. Nevinson A.R.A.', *The Studio*, May 1939, 193.

²⁴⁴ 'The Royal Academy', *The Times*, 2 May 1942, 5.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 5.

²⁴⁶ 'Bernard Gui', 'The Royal Academy and the Public', *The Studio*, June 1930, Vol. 99, 388.

Apparently, the institution had become hospitable enough to think that all modernists could one day comfortably exhibit there. Burlington House was becoming a site where tradition and modernity could credibly complement each other.

These developments were also evident in the new approach to hanging that the Academy adopted in the interwar period. The earlier practice of displaying a vast quantity of pictures in immediate proximity to each other gave way to displays that brought all works closer to eye level and provided some room between them. These innovations had been pioneered by the Grosvenor Gallery in the 1870s, a venue that was widely thought to oppose academic values, yet in the early 1920s the changes were adopted by Burlington House itself.²⁴⁷ P. G. Konody commented in 1921:

A reactionary aged Royal Academician was heard on Varnishing Day to exclaim: 'This is rank Bolshevism!' when he found that a progressive Hanging Committee had not only admitted art of pronouncedly modern tendencies, but had so ruthlessly thinned out the works submitted that the residue could be placed in single or double line, with spaces of bare wall separating the frames and removing each picture from the often disastrous fight with neighbours of higher or lower pitch...²⁴⁸

This novel approach increased each picture's visibility and allowed visitors to examine carefully the majority of exhibits. The greater visual accessibility implicitly suggested that the works' purely visual qualities were of particular importance, that observers should savour the details of line and colour that might have remained out of reach under the earlier hanging regime. Gallery goers were encouraged to consider the pieces as optical experiences which could have also made them more attentive to their formal aspects. Konody also tells us that the new way of hanging angered a 'reactionary aged' RA associating it with innovation and forward-looking modernity. Apparently, the Summer Exhibition's new look was meant to

²⁴⁷ Colleen Denney, 'The Grosvenor Gallery as Palace of Art: An Exhibition Model,' in *The Grosvenor Gallery: A Palace of Art in Victorian England*, eds. Susan Casteras and Colleen Denney (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 21-23.

²⁴⁸ P. G. Konody, 'Royal Academy', *The Observer*, 1 May 1921, 13.

foreground the Academy's willingness to adapt to a changing art world as well as its interest in formalist aesthetics.

Why did academic artists embrace this relatively novel aesthetic approach? Apart from the visual pleasure it may have provided, formalism was often perceived as a bearer of substantial cultural capital. As Benjamin Buchloh has pointed out, this type of visual culture has usually been associated with the idea that art is an autonomous activity independent of historical contingencies, one that transcended the ordinary social world.²⁴⁹ This view is confirmed by the writings of Whistler, one of formalism's major champions:

The master stands in no relation to the moment at which he occurs – a monument of isolation – hinting at sadness – having no part in the progress of his fellow men. He is also no more the product of civilisation than is the scientific truth asserted dependent upon the wisdom of a period. The assertion itself requires the man to make it. The truth was from the beginning.²⁵⁰

The painter claimed that true art, which for him signified compositions of lines and colours, was not influenced in any way by social and political realities but provided access to a superior realm of transhistorical value that could be compared to objective scientific truth as perceived by Victorian positivism. Fry had a similar understanding of this practice as his account of the aesthetic appreciation of a Song dynasty bowl attests:

Those who indulge in this vision are entirely absorbed in apprehending the relation of forms and colours to one another, as they cohere within the object... But in all this no element of curiosity, no reference to actual life comes in; our apprehension is unconditioned by considerations of space or time; it is irrelevant to us to know whether the bowl was made seven hundred years ago in China, or in New York yesterday. We may, of course, at any time, switch off from the aesthetic vision and become interested in all sorts of quasi-biological feelings; we may inquire whether it is genuine or not, whether it is worth the sum given for it, and so forth, but in proportion as we do this, we change the focus of our vision; we are more likely to examine the bottom of the bowl for traces of marks than to look at the bowl itself.²⁵¹

²⁴⁹ Benjamin Buchloh, *Formalism and Historicity: Models and Methods in Twentieth-Century Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2015), 17-20.

²⁵⁰ J. M. Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (London: William Heinemann, 1890), 155.

²⁵¹ Fry, *Vision and Design*, 34-35.

Like Whistler, Fry linked formalism to disinterested contemplation and argued that it created intense experiences uninfluenced by mundane concerns. He argued that this kind of viewing released the observer from the normal confines of the self by letting her forget her daily preoccupations in the enjoyment of the artwork. This quasi mystical rhetoric proved to have a wide appeal and must have seemed intriguing to at least some of the Academy's regular exhibitors. By borrowing some of its tenets they could present themselves as high-minded creators concerned only with their art's perfection. They could claim to add something entirely different to human experience, something that could not be reduced to any other sphere of activity. Thus the practitioners were able to argue that visual culture played a unique role in civilised life and deserved support for its irreplaceable achievements.

Furthermore, the Academy's association with formalism could be used against those who suggested that Burlington House merely pandered to popular tastes. As I have shown naturalism was usually thought to appeal to the wide public more than any other kind of art. While this perception had its important advantages for the institution it also enabled critics to present it as an unambitious commercial venue that had little interest in the progress of high art. Formalism, on the other hand, was not often thought to resonate with the majority of viewers. The Academy's interest in this kind of aesthetic demonstrated its willingness to embrace idioms that would not necessarily prove popular.

In the first chapter I argued that academic artists sought to project a modest down-to-earth image that avoided the rhetoric of autonomy and aesthetic transcendence. This style of self-presentation dominated the artists' biographies and autobiographies as well as their self-portraits. However, the academicians' use of formalism could complicate this message and suggest that their works offered more than the familiar experiences of the most widely comprehended idioms. While their official personas of common-sensical professionals were

meant to appear reassuringly accessible the RAs' aesthetics of line and colour evoked the realm of refined 'disinterested' contemplation. Thus Piccadilly could claim to avoid both the excessive obscurity of the avant-garde and the vulgar mass appeal of popular entertainment. Later in this chapter I examine in more detail the institution's balancing act between the competing claims of the highbrow and lowbrow.

Another advantage of formalism was its perceived universality. Many of its supporters argued that the art of almost all ages and cultures had been concerned with the creation of pleasing formal compositions. In 1929 the critic Ana Berry wrote that '[t]he aesthetic sense connotes a responsiveness to fundamentals of form, line and colour irrespective of country or period'.²⁵² Fry also assumed that these criteria had informed the products of civilisations as diverse as those of sub-Saharan Africa, Han China and *trecento* Italy. The claims about formalism's eternal validity had obvious attractions for artists and indeed many modernist practitioners like Jacob Epstein and Moore eagerly embraced them. In 1941 Moore wrote about the fundamental principles he thought underlay all of non-Western as well as prehistoric and medieval Western art:

...underlying these individual characteristics, these featural peculiarities in the primitive schools, a common world-language of form is apparent in them all; through the working of instinctive sculptural sensibility, the same shapes and form relationships are used to express similar ideas at widely different places and periods in history, so that the same form-vision may be seen in a Negro and a Viking carving, a Cycladic stone figure and a Nuknor wooden statuette.²⁵³

Academic painters and sculptors could also profit from this discourse: it enabled them to relate their creations to a tradition much wider than that of Early Modern and nineteenth-century Europe, their institution's classic locus of interest. This option was particularly valuable when considered in the context of the exhibitions of art from different parts of the

²⁵² Ana Berry, 'The Appreciation of Art', *The Studio*, February 1929, Vol. 97, 124.

²⁵³ Henry Moore, 'Primitive Art', *The Listener*, 24 April 1941, 599.

world, including Persia and China, that Burlington House hosted between the wars. The shows coupled with the academicians' formalist commitments encouraged gallery-goers to perceive these artists as dedicated students of all artistic traditions who learned from the achievements of multiple periods and cultures. Some observers were convinced: in 1945 H. G. Fell wrote about Dick:

In his work will be found elements absorbed from the Greek, the Gothic and the Renaissance, often quite distinct and clear... in scholarly combination, but with originality and resource and always with a modern accent.²⁵⁴

Evidently, the royal institution could credibly claim to promote the emulation of not only the Early Modern heritage but of the greatest creations of all periods and nations.

This alleged universality of formalist aesthetics should be interpreted in the context of British colonialism. The volume edited by Andrew Thompson in 2012 has shown that the concept of empire remained one of the defining features of British identity in the first half of the twentieth century.²⁵⁵ The two world wars were presented as imperial efforts that engaged and represented the interests of all the colonies.²⁵⁶ For an empire that controlled vast territories outside of Europe it was important to claim that its elites were capable of understanding and even appreciating non-Western cultures. The colonisers posed as agents of epistemic superiority that was meant to legitimise their rule. The British ruling classes claimed to understand native non-Western populations better than they understood themselves and thus present the violent appropriation of their land as 'natural' and inevitable. In this context an aesthetic discourse that sought to provide a unitary explanation for all visual cultures would have been highly useful. In a classic article of 1985 Hal Foster discusses

²⁵⁴ H. G. Fell, *Sir William Reid Dick: Sculptor* (London: A. Tiranti, 1945), v.

²⁵⁵ Andrew Thompson, ed. *Britain's Experience of Empire in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²⁵⁶ Andrew Thompson and Meghan Kowalsky, 'Social Life and Cultural Representation: Empire in the Public Imagination', in *Britain's Experience of Empire*, ed. Thompson, 255.

modernism's appropriation of non-western visual cultures as an extension of the colonial project.²⁵⁷ The avant-garde's use of so-called 'primitive' art in the construction of its pictorial vocabularies was one more way to assert the coloniser's ability to comprehend and thus control its other. Foster points out that formalism played a particularly important role in this process.²⁵⁸ Formalism positioned the twentieth century Western artists and critics as the privileged interpreters and connoisseurs of a world tradition that could be comprehended and explained only through the vast anthropological collections of the European capitals. Twentieth-century formalist art could thus be described as the pinnacle of a long development that had become possible through Western colonial endeavour. Colonialism could be legitimised as an effort in understanding and assimilating the world's cultures, an attempt to bring them together and account for them via the centralising influence of the empire's major centres of power. Formalism would have been an appropriate ideological tool for an institution like the Academy that sought to cater to the empire's elite and glorify its rule. It would have been particularly welcome in the first half of the twentieth century when London's grasp of its colonies was becoming ever more tenuous. It is usually the case that in times when the status quo is challenged the establishment's legitimising rhetoric becomes even more prominent and is produced with increased fervour. Formalism would have strengthened the dominant culture's rhetorical position and was accordingly adopted by the academicians and their clients.

This aesthetic approach was also thought to provide intimate access to an artist's psyche. In his doctoral thesis of 2014 Sam Rose points out that artworks' formal properties were widely seen as a way into their creators' emotional world and as a unique opportunity

²⁵⁷ Hal Foster, 'The 'Primitive' Unconscious of Modern Art', *October* 34 (Fall 1985), 45-70.

²⁵⁸ Ibid, 47-52.

for direct empathy with genius.²⁵⁹ In 1910 Konody wrote about the French Post-Impressionists:

Colour and form became symbols for them for the expression of their personal emotions. An art that is based on such fundamentally sound principles is not to be dismissed with derision and cheap jokes, even if the application of these principles is in turn extravagant, incompetent, and insane.²⁶⁰

We are told that a picture's formal properties can be used for the articulation of the maker's private experiences and the critic's approval for this principle suggests that he believed they could be quite effective in this regard. An article published in *The Studio* in the same year makes a similar claim:

There are two large sections into which the great mass of landscape painters can be divided – the men who paint nature as she is, faithfully and in detail, and the men who use her suggestions as the foundation for pictorial abstractions in which strict reality is subordinated to the expression of a personal sentiment.²⁶¹

Again, the practitioners who produce stylised depictions are said to give vent to their emotions, inscribing their subjective states into their pieces. Given this belief in the expressive power of lines and colours, it is not unreasonable to suppose that for writers like Konody formalist works could provide insights into their makers' personalities. If compositions embody the artist's experiences then they can reveal much about his or her perceptions and attitudes thus being of great value to those who wish to know more about the selves of their producers. In the previous chapter I discussed the perception that formalist art was devoid of emotive appeal. While many were suspicious of its ability to provoke empathy for the depicted people and events it seems it was also believed to provide privileged access to the makers' inner world. These two views of formalism did not necessarily contradict each other; one could argue that such works were windows into artists' souls but not onto their surroundings. It

²⁵⁹ Rose, 'Formalism, Aestheticism, and Art Writing in England', 9-15.

²⁶⁰ P. G. Konody, 'Art Notes: Post-Impressionists at the Grafton Galleries', *The Observer*, 13 November 1910, 9.

²⁶¹ A. L. Baldry, 'The Art of Mr. Albert Goodwin', *The Studio*, March 1910, 85.

appears that Fry had such convictions: he was famously opposed to literary narratives and sentimental subjects in painting yet also considered it a vehicle for self-expression. This aesthetic approach could be viewed as unsuitable to most forms of communication, such as wartime propaganda, but, in a different sense, as profoundly emotive.

During the first half of the twentieth century many people appear to have been interested in the stories of academic artists; I have already referred to the biographies and autobiographies by and about such individuals that were published at the time. These books both responded to and increased the public's fascination with the personalities of those who had gained official recognition and press coverage through the Summer Exhibitions or state commissions. In this context artworks that were widely thought to disclose their creators' psyche would have been particularly welcome and would have acquired a strong mystique of their own. Practitioners could employ formalism to present their pieces as vehicles for self-expression that communicated with unparalleled directness. Formalism was valuable to both those who sought intimate encounters with artistic individualities and those who wished to profit from these romantic notions.

Furthermore, this aesthetic discourse could be related to the Academy's own heritage. No less an authority than Reynolds himself championed an artistic doctrine that could be associated with formalism. In his *Discourses*, based on lectures delivered at the institution between 1769 and 1790, the painter wrote about 'ideal beauty', a concept derived from continental theorists like Giovanni Pietro Bellori and Johann Joachim Winckelmann that the first PRA made central to his own thinking. In the third discourse he offered a definition:

All the objects which are exhibited to our view by nature, upon close examination will be found to have their blemishes and defects. The most beautiful forms have something about them like weakness, minuteness, or imperfection. But it is not every eye that perceives these blemishes. It must be an eye long used to the contemplation and comparison of these forms; and which by a long habit of observing what any set of objects of the same kind have in common, has acquired the power of discerning what each wants in particular. This long laborious comparison should be the first study of

the painter, who aims at the greatest style. By these means, he acquires a just idea of beautiful forms; he corrects nature by herself, her imperfect state by her more perfect. His eye being enabled to distinguish the accidental deficiencies, excrescences, and deformities of things, from their general figures, he makes out an abstract idea of their form more perfect than any one original; and what may seem a paradox, he learns to design naturally by drawing his figures unlike to any one object. This idea of the perfect state of nature, which the Artist calls the Ideal Beauty, is the great leading principle by which works of genius are conducted.²⁶²

Reynolds advised artists to improve upon the objects they represented rather than merely produce faithful copies. He recommended editing and modifying as a way to create more satisfying figures and compositions. In privileging visual pleasure over verisimilitude ideal beauty was similar to the formalist aesthetic developed in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Not unlike Reynolds, formalist critics urged artists to avoid naturalism and create highly stylised depictions. Significantly, Clive Bell himself wrote that he was happy to use 'beauty' as a synonym for 'significant form', the key phrase of his theory.²⁶³ Fry associated formalism with Reynolds even more directly in his introduction to a 1905 edition of the *Discourses*. In this text he interpreted Reynolds' preference for unity and general effect and distaste for superfluous detail in distinctly formalist terms.²⁶⁴ Fry gave Rubens' altarpiece in St Augustine, Antwerp, as an example of a Reynoldsian coherent design:

In such a composition the unity is so self-contained, the lines return so completely into the pattern, that we cannot imagine its being continued outside the limits of the frame. The parts cohere like the atoms in a molecule, so that we feel that the detachment of one part would break up the whole conformation.²⁶⁵

Fry suggested that this formalist analysis of the picture illustrated Reynolds' theory and conformed to his eighteenth-century conception of artistic excellence. Given the similarities between the first President's writings and formalist criticism as well as Fry's interpretation of the *Discourses* it is likely that the artists of Burlington House and the critics also associated

²⁶² Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses* (London: Penguin, 1992), 106.

²⁶³ Bell, *Art*.

²⁶⁴ Roger Fry, *A Roger Fry Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 43-47.

²⁶⁵ Ibid, 43.

these two aesthetic discourses. This would have granted formalism even greater legitimacy in the eyes of the RAs and would have also allowed them to claim that the Academy had anticipated some of the more recent trends in British criticism by a few centuries.

The Middle of the Road

As discussed previously, however, academic artists remained committed to the conventions of naturalistic depiction. Despite the practitioners' interest in formalism the majority of works seen on Piccadilly were far more likely to remind one of Gainsborough and Constable than of Duncan Grant or Moore. The exhibitors of Burlington House usually avoided the stylisations and simplified rendering of objects that characterised avant-garde visuality.

One might think that there was always significant tension between the formalist and realist tendencies in the Summer Exhibitions. In the second chapter I discussed at some length the perceived differences between the two aesthetic modes and the potential difficulties in reconciling them. However, the writings of critics and artists suggest that the two approaches were not necessarily seen as incompatible. As early as 1905 the critic E. R. Dibdin remarked that Frank Dicksee's naturalistic paintings also held considerable formal interest:

His delight in rich colour combinations is not more manifest than his propensity to toy with ornament, to introduce decorative detail for its own sake. To him, as much as to a monkish medieval illuminator, or a Maori carver, a plain surface is a provocation almost as irresistible as a well-tailored stranger to a Black Country rough with half of a brick in his hand.²⁶⁶

Dibdin insisted that the painter's passion for fine colour and design never undermined his narrative skills or sound judgment. The 'Lay Figure's dialogues published in *The Studio* make a similar point. In one of them the character of the Art Critic, who is presented as authoritative, argues that practitioners should master both naturalism and formalism:

²⁶⁶ E. R. Dibdin, 'Frank Dicksee (Royal Academician), His Life and Work', *The Christmas Art Annual* (1905), 24.

The strict copying of nature is, by itself, not art at all, it is only a means to an end, and one of the essentials – a very important one, I admit – in a complicated scheme of expression. Art cannot do without nature, but it has an essence of its own which must be plainly manifested in all translations of nature into the terms of art.²⁶⁷

Realism is described as an inferior but necessary aspect of art which should be studied alongside its ‘essential’ core which in a later article the author defines as ‘decoration’.²⁶⁸ The critic T. W. Earp held similar views; in a 1936 article on Ernest Procter’s career he wrote:

...though in his purely decorative work he devised an original convention of figure and colour, the grasp on reality prevented extravagance of form or emptiness of meaning... The rhythmic design of *The Zodiac* is a wonder of pictorial compression, *The Judgement of Paris* is bathed in the light of dreams, yet in neither is there distortion or lack of coherence.²⁶⁹

Here Procter’s adherence to conventional representation is seen to prevent his art from slipping into the kind of unpleasant eccentricity derided by *The Times* and E. W. Cook. Naturalism is perceived as a moderating factor that discourages excessive individualism while allowing the artist to retain his concern for satisfying patterns. Far from viewing the two methods as opposing tendencies, some observers evidently thought they were complementary.

Corbett has demonstrated that the 1920s saw the rise in popularity of a ‘chastened’ formalism that did not stray too far from recognizable visual experience but still employed stylised figures.²⁷⁰ Gertler’s portrait of his wife Marjorie (c. 1925), for instance, captures the sitter’s appearance and conveys a believable sense of three-dimensionality. Yet the cylindrical neck or the exaggerated chiseled nose could hardly be described as naturalistic representation. Many of the modernists who gained wider critical acceptance in the 20s did avoid pure abstraction or the radical distortions seen, for example, in David Bomberg’s *Mud*

²⁶⁷ ‘The Lay Figure’, ‘On the Essence of Art’, *The Studio*, December 1910 Vol. 51, 258.

²⁶⁸ The Lay Figure, ‘On the Foundation of Art’, *The Studio*, April 1912 Vol. 55, 252.

²⁶⁹ T. W. Earp, ‘Art of Ernest Procter. Originality with Restraint. London Memorial Exhibition’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 13 January 1936, 9.

²⁷⁰ Corbett, *The Modernity of English Art*, 66-82.

Bath of 1914. However, they rarely, if ever, adopted a realist approach or described their work in such terms.

What Corbett has not addressed is the Academy's distinctive response to formalism. The majority of the institution's artists of the first half of the century remained committed to the naturalistic idiom. They usually eschewed even the kind of mildly stylised features seen in Gertler. Instead, pleasant arrangements of shapes and colours were created within compositions that could be seen as faithful emulations of the observable world. Viewers were encouraged to bring formalist appreciation to bear on images that continued traditional representational practices.

This manner of combining the two approaches was embodied particularly emphatically by the sculptures of William Reid Dick. Some of his public statues, like those dedicated to the architect John Soane (unveiled in 1937) and King George V (1947), exhibit a sustained attention to formal structures articulated in a strictly naturalistic manner. Both figures are almost completely covered in heavy drapery that envelops them in dramatic folds and conceals most of their bodies. These grand classicising garments reduce the figures to simple silhouettes that display little anatomical detail. While the sculptures are credibly naturalistic depictions of men in ceremonial attire they can also be perceived as satisfying monolithic shapes. In this capacity they bring to mind the stylised works of artists like Dobson and Moore. The latter's *Three Standing Figures*, which was first exhibited only a year after the unveiling of the George V memorial, employs similarly economic contours in making a comparably monumental statement. In his sculptures Dick knowingly alludes to avant-garde practice while demonstrating that some of its aesthetic choices can be effectively translated into a realistic idiom. He makes a claim about the two methods' compatibility and the potential of academically sanctioned tradition to accommodate, at least in part, novel developments.

Perhaps the most prominent example of formalism's appropriation within naturalism is the art of Dod Procter. Her works were extraordinarily well received in the 1920s and for a while she was the most widely admired exhibitor at Burlington House. Critics were particularly interested in her judicious and critical engagement with avant-garde precepts within a realist vocabulary; in 1925 the *Sunday Times* enthused:

...Mrs Dod Procter has more than heard about Cubism. She has understood that, in spite of extravagances, there are useful things to be learnt from the Cubists. With her intelligence and her skill she has put what she has learnt into *The Model*, a figure painting with a strength and volume that smashes all the other figure paintings in the room into smithereens... Look at it well, for this is what the painting of the twentieth century is going to be like.²⁷¹

This observer clearly believed that the artist's stance represented the most adequate response to modernism's challenge and constituted painting's most promising current development. The summer show of 1927 seemed to confirm this prediction: Procter's *Morning* was unanimously proclaimed to be 'Picture of the Year' and was praised by almost all critics.²⁷² The *Daily Mail* purchased the canvas and eventually presented it to the nation after it had been loaned to a number of art galleries around the country.²⁷³ The painter's skillful combination of formalism and naturalism was apparently seen as the most convincing idiom of the early interwar period.

So why did the Academy promote both approaches? As I have shown the radical stylisations of the avant-garde were often perceived as signs of incompetence or mental disorder, as a threatening 'un-British' presence. In contrast, naturalism was seen as a defining feature of the country's tradition and as an adequate expression of the nation's mentality. By employing formalist aesthetics within a realist idiom, academic artists were able to associate themselves with the prestigious ideology of 'art for art's sake' without resorting to the

²⁷¹ Frank Rutter, 'The Academy', *Sunday Times*, 3 May 1925, 10.

²⁷² 'Royal Academy', *The Times*, 30 April 1927, 14.

²⁷³ Elizabeth Knowles, *Dod Procter RA*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Tyne and Wear Museums Service, 1990), 41.

disturbing and seemingly alien distortions of modernism. Additionally, naturalism was thought to be more accessible than the novel experimental approaches and so in harmony with the image of approachable down-to-earth professionals that academic artists cultivated. The RAs sought to address the widest possible public without ignoring the perceived demands of committed art-lovers. They claimed to appeal to both the refined connoisseur and the proverbial man-on-the-street, occupying a peculiar cultural space to which the avant-garde rarely had access.

Furthermore, this duality of academic visual culture was sometimes viewed as a sign of aesthetic richness and complexity. In a letter to John Lavery his colleague James Guthrie set out his views on the art of 'Matisse etc.':

It had never seemed worth following up; at the best sectional, the development of certain qualities at too great a cost, at the worst merely sensational. By this last I do not mean that those who produced it did so consciously only to attract notice at any price, but that it appeals too much to sensation pure and simple and is shallow... To me, nothing that forces one or perhaps two elements in Art, to the exclusion of others, is great. It may compel attention, but it won't wash in the long run.²⁷⁴

The painter evidently believed that the modernists arbitrarily privileged one aspect of their craft at the expense of other qualities that were no less important and no less likely to engage the observer. The avant-garde was, we are told, too one-sided in its unnecessarily restrictive insistence on pure 'sensation'. One encounters a similar opinion in an *Apollo* article of 1947 discussing Walter Sickert's etchings:

Sickert probably saw these subjects purely from the viewpoint of the artist; that is to say, he saw them as light against darks, as thrilling arrangements of lines, as pattern. But I am convinced that he also saw them as records of something he loved, something he encountered in moments of heightened consciousness. Their roots are not only in 'graphic co-efficients' or 'plastic organisation of diffused contours', but in the excitement of the mob emotion which the old music halls engendered as nothing has done since.²⁷⁵

²⁷⁴ Lavery, *The Life of a Painter*, 83.

²⁷⁵ 'Perspex', 'And Life, Some Think...', *Apollo*, January 1947, 2.

The author implies that works which provide both satisfying compositions and convincing depictions of reality are richer and more intriguing than those that concentrate on formal problems alone. While the critic does not question the value of 'pattern' he asserts that Sickert must have found his subject matter equally inspiring and suggests that it can be as fascinating for the viewer. For observers like him the dual orientation of academic aesthetics meant that the works seen at Burlington House could provide multi-layered experiences that combined the pleasures of satisfying compositions with those of life-like realism.

Another reason for the two approaches' coexistence can be found in an intriguing article by Terrick Williams RA of 1935. The artist describes his choice of subjects in the following way:

I find... that the best subjects are nearly always those that last but for a short time – sometimes for a few minutes – and then a rapid pencil note seems the only means of recording the particular arrangement that attracted me... Those who have attempted to paint scenes of boats and water will understand how very rarely one finds a good arrangement which lasts for more than a few minutes.²⁷⁶

He seems to have been interested not only in reproducing sights accurately but also in recording pleasing 'arrangements' that he found in his environment. Williams' mimetic skills are said to have allowed him to capture the attractive compositions that he noticed around him and preserve what could be a temporary confluence of objects and colours. It appears that he was primarily intrigued by formal beauty: he claims that his piece reproduced in the magazine was a response to 'the rich colour of the old quay in the orange and tawny light of the sun'.²⁷⁷ Rather than inventing patterns of his own the painter collected the fleeting visual pleasures of the real world in pictures that offered both satisfying arrangements and accurate depictions. In her 1936 autobiography Laura Knight described her response to visual stimuli in similar terms; she was particularly intrigued by the interiors of London theatres:

²⁷⁶ Terrick Williams R. A., 'Harbour and Fishing Subjects', *The Artist*, March 1935, Vol. IX, 3.

²⁷⁷ Ibid, 4.

While the rest of the show was on, I drew everything: the proscenium, the house, the performers. I then got a knowledge of the construction of it all and the lighting effects: the reflection from the stage on to the gilded cupids and flamboyant ornament of the boxes, the blackish richness of the red plush curtains, the shadow inside forming a background for the light flesh of women's bare necks and arms, the white gloves and men's waistcoats and shirt-fronts, the black of their coats' outline lost in the darkness, and how the shadows from the spot lines interlaced in strange patterns on the stage boards, and the circles of light were edged with polychromatic colour. The crimson drop curtain glowed scarlet below where lit by the footlights and darkened above in gradation to wine colour and blue mystery of immense length of fold.²⁷⁸

Like Williams, Knight was interested in the 'patterns' and pleasing colour combinations she found in her surroundings and tried to capture them in her drawings and paintings. She seemingly believed that visual reality contained enough formal beauty as it was and needed no added embellishments, the artist being only required to reproduce adequately what she saw.

The attempt to reconcile realism and formalism, to avoid the extremes of populist undiluted naturalism and French avant-garde experiments can be related to the perceptions about the national character common in this period. In the first half of the twentieth century the discourse of national character had particularly strong cultural authority. Peter Mandler has described the interwar period and the Second World War as 'the high watermark' of this concept's prevalence in English culture.²⁷⁹ Writers, scholars and politicians often evoked the people's 'natural' dispositions and attempted to define them. One of the traits most regularly ascribed to the nation thus conceived was a preference for balance and compromise, a distaste for political and cultural extremes and a talent for combining the best traits of seemingly opposed factions, theories and ways of life. When invited to give a talk about his adopted country on the BBC in 1934 the German economist Moritz Bonn made the following observation:

²⁷⁸ Knight, *Oil Paint and Grease Paint*, 182.

²⁷⁹ Peter Mandler, *The English National Character: The History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 143-187.

All over the world the forces of a rational civilisation are gaining over the forces of tradition. England is different; she is slowly progressive, but never revolutionary. Her people substitute common sense for logic, steadfastness and tenacity for impetus... Notwithstanding many changes, the successful blending of hoary tradition and purposeful reasoning is still going on.²⁸⁰

The English are here seen as able to learn from both their heritage and cutting-edge modern theory and science, adopting a middle ground that avoids both anachronistic conservatism and the heedless pursuit of novelty. By avoiding one-sided attachments to either the new or the old the nation demonstrates its allegedly characteristic attachment to the golden mean.

This preference for compromise and mediation is evident in many aspects of the country's interwar culture. Rosa Maria Bracco has explored in detail the so-called 'middlebrow' writers of the period.²⁸¹ Authors like Cecil Roberts, R. C. Sheriff and Edward Compton Mackenzie produced accessible clearly written narratives of contemporary Britain that were modeled on Victorian fiction and appealed to a large middle-class public. These works, primarily novels but also plays and memoirs, sold very well and were often present in popular circulating libraries.²⁸² The writers aimed for aesthetic respectability but also avoided the modernists' unconventional stylistic experiments that could put off many readers. They presented themselves as upholders of the tradition of Dickens and Trollope, a tradition endangered by the allegedly incomprehensible and morally ambiguous work of the likes of D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. Nicola Humble has pointed out that this type of fiction paid homage to the texts of the high-cultural canon but was skeptical of the experiments of an avant-garde that was seen as too distant from the wide reading public.²⁸³

As Bracco has put it:

²⁸⁰ Dr Moritz Bonn, 'A Visitor Looks at his Hosts', *The Listener*, 14 February 1934, issue 266, 265-266.

²⁸¹ Rosa Maria Bracco, *Merchants of Hope: British Middlebrow Writers and the First World War 1919-1939* (Oxford: Berg, 1993).

²⁸² Ibid, 10-11.

²⁸³ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 29.

The term ‘middlebrow’ represented a symbol for the centre in more than one sense. It stood in the vast space between lowbrow fiction, designed merely to entertain, and highbrow works, increasingly alienated from a common reference of values. Its authors were from the middle classes and addressed a middle-class audience; they mediated between conflicts and extremes, and balance was their alleged trademark.²⁸⁴

A good example of this kind of fiction is Philip Gibbs’ suitably entitled novel *The Middle of the Road*, a bestseller of 1923. It tells the story of Bertram Pollard, a young unemployed ex-soldier, trying to find his place in the disorienting social and political conditions of post-war Britain. He feels torn between his loyalty to a conservative upper class he belongs to by birth and his sympathies for his friends’ leftwing ideals. Pollard ends up rejecting both extremes of the political spectrum in favour of a sketchily conceived and rather undemanding ‘middle road’ which is never fleshed out in much detail. However, events in the novel seem to justify his convictions as a major miners’ strike that threatens the entire country ends with a peaceful compromise with the Government and mine-owners:

None of those awful things had happened which had been prophesied on the one hand by the Duke of Bramshaw, Lady Ottery and their set, on the other by the parlour Jacobins of the ‘Left Wing’... England was not going to break out in a civil conflict just yet, or ever, if the men were given anything like a fair deal. English character remained the same as he had seen it in the trenches, solid, steady, without passion. It had always chosen the middle of the road.²⁸⁵

Pollard’s political instincts are validated as is the ‘middlebrow’ idiom chosen by the author himself, both avoiding perilous extremes and both being said to harmonise with the nation’s natural disposition.

Lawrence Napper has identified a similar discourse in the period’s cinema. He has argued that many of Britain’s filmmakers were attempting to forge a middlebrow aesthetic that would eschew the mistakes of both American and continental cinema.²⁸⁶ Hollywood’s products were frequently described as vulgar attempts to reach the lowest common

²⁸⁴ Bracco, *Merchants of Hope*, 12.

²⁸⁵ Philip Gibbs, *The Middle of the Road* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1923), 195.

²⁸⁶ Lawrence Napper, *British Cinema and Middlebrow Culture in the Interwar Years* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2009), 24-27.

denominator while the avant-garde experiments of Germany and the Soviet Union were often criticised for being too elitist and incomprehensible for the majority of viewers.²⁸⁷ Napper convincingly demonstrates that in the 1920s British directors and critics were trying to create a mode of storytelling that would find favour with a broad audience without emulating the simplistic clichés of US movies. In 1924 the cinema critic Iris Barry wrote:

The moment has arrived for the British industry to take one road or another: to make films using every resource or technique on which it can lay its hands, while remaining in essence British – or to attempt to imitate the films of other countries in spirit as well as in form... the British producer in considering technique would do well to look, like Janus, in two ways – to California certainly, but to Berlin as well. He may look two ways and move in neither, remaining British.²⁸⁸

The government's Cinematograph Films Act of 1927 which required cinemas to show a quota of films produced in Britain was meant to encourage the development of just such a middlebrow culture, one that would avoid the extremes of the foreign industries.

It seems that something similar to this middlebrow discourse was also present in British music. In 1921 *The Times* music critic discussed avant-garde composers and their scorn for popular taste:

They isolate themselves in little coteries and mutual admiration societies, enjoying the congratulations of one another and encouraging each other in the mutual sense of superiority. They would scorn the idea of writing for the public, yet that is the only antidote to the disease from which they suffer. History shows that all the great music of the world has been written for a public, that it has expressed something which its maker shared with a large mass of human beings.²⁸⁹

The writer argues for the importance of connecting with a larger public, of creating music that would appeal to more than small groups of like-minded artists. Yet she/he (the article is anonymous) is also calling for works that would evoke the traditions of classical music as the references to 'history' and 'the great music of the world' make clear. The article is a call for an art that would both preserve the aesthetic values of a time-honoured practice and be

²⁸⁷ Ibid, 24-27.

²⁸⁸ Iris Barry, 'A National or International Cinema?', *The Bioscope*, 28 February 1924, 29.

²⁸⁹ 'The Return of Schönberg', *The Times*, 12 November 1921, 8.

accessible enough to speak to a broader audience. In 1934 M. D. Calvocoressi wrote in a similar way about the tasks of modern music:

A primary condition, naturally, is that the music should have some kind of attraction, if only potential, for the listener. The next condition... is that it should make some kind of sense. It may be unfamiliar and baffling to a degree, but it must not be quite alien; we must recognize in it something basically similar (although maybe different on the surface) to what music has given us so far...²⁹⁰

This critic was also looking for a ‘middlebrow’ art that would provide stylistic innovation without alienating listeners, distinct from both hermetic high-brow modernism and the banality of commercial popular songs. It is worth noting that the article appeared in *The Listener*, the weekly magazine that published transcripts of many of BBC’s radio broadcasts. One of the main functions of the BBC in its early decades, as often stated in the magazine, was the education and cultivation of the public, partly through acquainting it with and teaching it to appreciate prestigious works of art. J. C. W. Reith, the company’s first managing director, wrote in his 1924 book *Broadcast over Britain* that the BBC was to justify its public funding by improving the listeners’ minds and refining their sensibilities.²⁹¹ Thus it would have been particularly interested in promoting the ideal of a ‘middlebrow’ art that achieved aesthetic distinction without sacrificing its accessibility, a practice that could reach the multitudes while also elevating them. By championing such art forms the BBC could claim to be fulfilling its educational mission and using its influence to shape an organic national culture.

Some of the period’s composers did produce works that aimed to fulfill such critical requirements. Ralph Vaughan Williams, one of the most prominent British composers in the interwar years, created choral works that employed advanced harmonies and other novel

²⁹⁰ M. D. Calvocoressi, ‘The Public and Difficult Music’, *The Listener*, 27 June 1934, issue 285, 1095.

²⁹¹ J. C. W. Reith, *Broadcast over Britain* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Limited, 1924), 17-18.

techniques yet remained within the reach of most amateur singers.²⁹² Vaughan Williams himself wrote:

I think, sometimes, that I ought not to try to do the greatest thing on earth, which no fellow will understand, but to use my skill, such as I have, for doing useful work.²⁹³

Another example of the middlebrow discourse in action is Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes*. Its premiere in June 1945 was widely seen as a major success and said to herald a revival of British opera after centuries in which the country had produced no major examples of this art form.²⁹⁴ The work was genuinely popular with the wider public: *Picture Post* reported that the opening night was enthusiastically received.²⁹⁵ Britten could claim to have obtained the approval of both the critics and the majority of theatre-goers and it seems that this is why his opera was perceived as an important breakthrough. It was a product of high culture that could be positioned in a tradition stretching back to Henry Purcell yet it also appealed to the general public. It was this middlebrow position that made *Peter Grimes* appear so successful.

Academic art of that period seems to have sought to perform a similar function. By adopting a formalist aesthetic within a naturalistic idiom, the artists of Burlington House created works that could appeal to many gallery-goers without relinquishing their claims to a high-cultural aesthetic discourse. They were trying to eschew both the populist appeal of undiluted realism and the uncompromising high-mindedness of a formalism that ignored the public's expectations. Thus academic art inscribed itself into a middlebrow discourse that was a major presence in interwar debates and which could be framed as an expression of the traditional English preference for compromise and mediation. The Summer Exhibitions were

²⁹² Charles Edward McGuire, 'An Englishman and a Democrat': Vaughan Williams, Large Choral Works and the British Festival Tradition', in *The Cambridge Companion to Vaughan Williams*, eds. Alain Frogley and Aidan Thomas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 121-130.

²⁹³ Ralph Vaughan Williams, Letter to Robert Longman, December 1937, Private collection.

²⁹⁴ Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 222-224.

²⁹⁵ Ernest Roth, 'Peter Grimes: A New British Opera', *Picture Post*, 30 June 1945, 16-18.

able to provide experiences which were familiar to readers of contemporary fiction as well as cinema and music audiences, broadening their appeal and affirming their reputation as authentic manifestations of the national genius. This strategy was a defining feature of the Academy between the 1910s and the 1950s.

At this point we should remind ourselves that, as shown in previous chapters, there were important voices that objected to formalism and were suspicious of its coexistence with the more conventional realism. The Academy's relation with the relatively novel approach was never entirely unproblematic. John Souter's picture *Goddess in Portland* (1931) nicely illustrates this tension. It is a highly naturalistic depiction of the sculptor William McMillan working on a stylised and distinctly modernist female figure. It is *The Birth of Venus* which was shown at the same Summer Exhibition as the painting itself. The sculptor, wearing a thoughtful expression, appears consumed by the creative process. The image appears as a respectful salute to modernist artists from a more traditional colleague, one who acknowledges their craftsmanship and the value of their contributions. It presents the avant-garde sculptor as an earnest individual who puts great effort into his work, an image that contrasts with the caricatures of megalomaniac iconoclasts found in the writings of some academic artists and their supporters. Thus Souter's picture can be seen as an endorsement of the formalist aesthetic embodied by the depicted sculpture.

Yet the painting also seems to make a subtle claim about the superiority of naturalism over the other artist's preferred approach. The canvas demonstrates naturalism's power to depict the creative process itself. The piece provides a detailed account of the sculptor's appearance, his tools and the activity that produces the formalist object. Souter suggests that his method can capture creative work in a way that an art less committed to careful observation, such as that espoused by the sculptor, could not. By showing us an image that a

formalist modernism could not produce he foregrounds that idiom's limitations and his own method's irreplaceability. While the piece acknowledges the worth of an alternative aesthetic practice it also contains it within a naturalistic framework. The painting embodies the contested position of formalism in academic culture of the time and reaffirms the values of the institution's traditional approaches.

'That feeling for beauty'

Closely related to formalism were the concepts of 'beauty' and the 'ideal' which had an important place in the critical literature of the early twentieth century. Like the discourse of formalism, these concepts were associated with visual appeal and the belief that art should offer more than mere realistic depictions. In 1945 Algernon Newton wrote:

Art in its relation to truth is a searching after the fundamental principles of beauty and perfection, a striving to express and show to others that beauty which is hidden from mortal eyes... There is always beauty to be found in everything one sees, one has only to look for it. A gasometer can make as beautiful a picture as a palace on the Grand Canal, Venice, it simply depends upon the artist's vision.²⁹⁶

According to this text painters should be able to render more explicit the beauty inherent in all places and situations. Not content with what he calls 'realistic transcription' Newton urges his colleagues to emphasise the attractive features of ordinary sights or present them in a unique and unfamiliar fashion.²⁹⁷ The artist here employs a rather vague vocabulary that does not refer directly to formalism and only defines 'beauty' negatively as that which surpasses the ordinary. It is likely this reticence reflects a belief that beauty could not be explained verbally and that the aesthetic experience is fundamentally uncommunicable. However, it seems clear that in this text 'beauty' is associated with visual pleasure and stylised depiction which makes it a close relative of the formalist aesthetic.

²⁹⁶ Newton, 'Art in Relation to Truth', 74-75.

²⁹⁷ Ibid, 74.

Many observers were intrigued by the peculiar atmosphere permeating Newton's images; the stillness of his deserted streets and his landscapes' quiet luminosity inspired some pertinent comments. According to *The Queen* (1925) his art was 'truthful' and 'matter-of-fact' yet 'steeped in the wistful poetry of reality'.²⁹⁸ The critic James Laver was also impressed:

...Mr Newton is a painter of singular charm, rising sometimes, and ever more often as his art proceeds, to a beauty so calm and still that he seems to be holding his breath.²⁹⁹

The painter is said to surpass ordinary realism and imbue his pictures with a certain beguiling *je ne sais quoi* that more faithful transcriptions lack.

The artist's writings provide an interesting context for the interpretation of the stillness and numinous atmosphere pervading his paintings. In 1945 he finished a rather sentimental short story entitled 'It Happened in Whitby' that was to remain unpublished.³⁰⁰ The work is an idiosyncratic take on the subject of the Second Coming, an escapist fantasy that imagines the undoing of the horrors of two world wars. Germany ceases all hostilities while the narrator witnesses a crippled child being restored to health and a fallen sailor returning to his family. All around the protagonist people come to feel relieved of all suffering and gradually realise that 'God's love has descended upon earth'.³⁰¹ The onset of these miracles is marked by a strange epiphany that everyone in the small town of Whitby seems to share:

As I stood gazing up at the sky a great stillness that could be felt seemed to descend upon the harbor and envelop it in golden light.

The quayside and the distant streets were suddenly silent, as though all traffic had stopped and everyone was standing perfectly still to listen to some monotonous announcement from a loud speaker.

I looked up and down the quay and across to Woolworths facing me on the other side of the street, and everyone was standing quite still, as though they were all waxwork images. I could not see a hand or a head move among all the people standing along the quayside or in front the shops across the street.

As I stood spellbound watching this uncanny spectacle, a wonderful feeling of bodily fitness and physical well being [sic] came over me, together with a wave of happiness and a complete absence of

²⁹⁸ 'Royal Academy', *The Queen*, 13 May 1925, 18.

²⁹⁹ James Laver, 'The Paintings of Algernon Newton', *The Studio*, October 1926, Vol. 403, 235.

³⁰⁰ Algernon Newton, 'It Happened in Whitby', 1945, Tate Archive.

³⁰¹ Ibid, 22.

fear of any kind. This strange phenomenon could not have lasted more than ten seconds, and then I saw the quayside come to life once more, like a film that had been suddenly stopped for a few seconds and then turned on again.³⁰²

The supernatural sense of quiet peacefulness described in the story conspicuously resembles the stillness that pervades so many of Newton's canvases and intrigued the London critics. The clear 'golden light' that suddenly envelops the harbor also brings to mind landscapes like *The Avenue* (1944). While the scene described above is considerably more populous than most of his images it creates a very similar impression and it is likely that the artist had his own pictures in mind when writing the tale.

In his narrative the silent epiphany is experienced as a joyful event that brings a 'wave of happiness' in its wake and negates all fear. It signals the onset of a divine revelation that magically heals the world and makes all problems disappear. Considering the similarities between the harbor scene and Newton's paintings it seems likely that the latter's evocative stillness was also meant to inspire a sense of content in the beholder and suggest a numinous and benevolent presence at work in the quasi imaginary depicted realms. They can be seen as depictions of moments of quiet bliss like the one described in *It Happened in Whitby* and as invitations to share their maker's experience of such states.

Many observers sympathetic to the Academy shared Newton's belief that art should exceed ordinary visual experience. In an article on J. W. Waterhouse of 1911 we read:

There has grown up of late years a certain tendency towards materialism in pictorial art, a tendency not altogether wholesome to insist upon and exalt the ugly and commonplace and to choose the bald facts of modern existence as subjects for study... [Waterhouse] strive[s] earnestly and persistently to keep alive that feeling for beauty, for nobility of thought and subtlety of suggestion which has guided the masters of all ages.³⁰³

³⁰² Ibid, 6-7.

³⁰³ A. L. Baldry, 'Some Recent Works by Mr J. W. Waterhouse, R. A.', *The Studio*, August 1911, Vol. 53, 175-176.

The author laments the lack of ideality in contemporary art and praises the painter for supplementing naturalism with a concern for elevating imagery. Francis Bickley put forth similar claims in 1914:

The realists, in kicking aside the shards of romanticism, ignored the jewel, romance, a permanent and necessary quality of art. It is, in Synge's phrase, 'what is superb and wild in reality'. The realists concentrated on the drab and uneventful. Their muse lived in a back-parlour with the windows shut. But English art has always flourished best in the open. So there has been not a reaction but an inevitable and blessed development. Realism is still very much alive – its day is far from being over – but it has come out into the sun.³⁰⁴

Bickley believed that naturalism had to be supplemented by an undefined appeal to the imagination and fulfill a yearning for the extraordinary. Interestingly, he claimed that this step beyond daily life placed art 'in the open' suggesting that it gave artists greater freedom to experiment.

It is worth noting that these critics never argued for a complete renunciation of naturalism. The artworks championed by the writers, such as those by Newton and Waterhouse, are all based, to a greater or lesser extent, on the conventions of realistic depiction. These commentators assumed that art should retain a foothold in ordinary visual experience even while attempting to move beyond it. The call for 'beauty' and the 'ideal' could be answered by academic artists. Indeed, these concepts provided an important tie to the Academy's historical origins. I have already referred to Reynolds' theory of 'ideal beauty'; proponents of formalism made use of it in their attempts to legitimate their aesthetic vocabulary. The critics quoted above offered an even more direct link to the terminology of the Academy's founders and suggested that their legacy was still relevant in the twentieth century.

³⁰⁴ Francis Bickley, 'Vernacular and Cant', *Colour*, August 1914, 28-29.

The aesthetic of the ideal also contributed to the consolatory functions that visual culture often assumed during the First World War. James Fox has shown that in this period images that provided imaginary escape from the harsh realities came to be seen as particularly valuable by many critics and proved popular with the general public.³⁰⁵ Many observers embraced art's perceived ability to transport one away from harsh reality and offer momentary respite from fear and mourning. Fox singles out Tom Mostyn's painting *The Garden of Peace* (exhibited in 1915) as a particularly good example of this soothing type of art. In a caption in *Bibby's Annual*, which produced a print after the work, we read:

...no cries of pain and anguish disturb the calm and only things that are lovely and true can come. From our world of strife and hatred, and base desire, and cruel hope, we look wistfully into this oasis of peace, and would fain escape awhile and enter in.³⁰⁶

Significantly, in a 1912 article Mostyn was presented as an enemy of all 'gross and vicious materialism' and was praised for his 'imaginative accomplishment of the highest type'.³⁰⁷ The painter specialised in idealised dreamy landscapes that were evidently thought to go beyond mere naturalistic depiction. It seems likely that the otherworldly nature of his images was what led observers to believe they constituted an 'oasis of peace' that could provide escape from everyday existence. Artworks that were seen to surpass reality, such as those of Waterhouse and Newton, were apparently considered to be particularly effective at comforting viewers. Laura Knight described her picture *Spring* (finished in 1920) as 'Nepenthe in a holocaust of hate that engulfed young, life and hope'.³⁰⁸ In Greek mythology nepenthe was a drug that was said to erase bad memories, an apt metaphor for the idealised pictures that aimed to offer forgetfulness to a country ravaged by war.

³⁰⁵ James Fox, 'Conflict and Consolation: British Art and the First World War 1914-1919', *Art History* 36, issue 4 (September 2013), 810-833.

³⁰⁶ *Bibby's Annual*, 1916, 33.

³⁰⁷ A. L. Baldry, 'A Painter of Romance: Mr. Tom Mostyn', *The Studio*, May 1912, Vol. 55, 270.

³⁰⁸ Knight, *Oil Paint and Grease Paint*, 205-206.

This chapter has traced the multiple meanings of formalism and the associated concept of the ideal in academic culture. Formalism was a central feature of the critical discourses surrounding Burlington House and the artists' own thinking about their practice. It allowed the Academy to engage with certain sections of the avant-garde and brought it closer to modernism's discourses than is usually assumed. Formalism was appropriated within the naturalistic idiom that characterised the Summer Exhibitions and allowed the works there to function on several perceptual levels. This *rapprochement* between two pivotal aesthetic concepts enabled the Academy to claim a middle ground between popular entertainment and the allegedly arcane and solipsistic products of the modernists. Thus the institution could inscribe its art within a more general, and highly influential, trend in interwar British culture that privileged compromise between aesthetic extremes. Artists were also drawn to the closely related concept of the ideal which formed a link with the Academy's eighteenth-century heritage and allowed them to present formalism as inherent to their own tradition.

Burlington House emerges as an ambiguous site where modernism was resisted but also learned from and which had appeal for a surprising variety of critical voices. As the self-proclaimed middle ground of the national art scene the Academy could make claims about the general course that the British school should take. The RAs could pose as arbiters of taste who had derived the best from both the naturalistic traditions and the formalist experiments of younger artists. In many ways, this was an enviable position that helps explain the continuing interest that the institution had for critics and the wider public.

Chapter III. Landscapes, Portraits and the Persistence of Narrative

For much of the Academy's history narrative paintings were one of the central features of the Summer Exhibitions. Reynolds claimed that history painting was the most elevated genre of his art and in the late eighteenth century practitioners like Benjamin West and Henry Fuseli exhibited many examples. In the nineteenth century pictures that depicted stories and events from contemporary life, popularised by David Wilkie and William Powell Frith, among others, became a staple of the annual shows, often attracted the most attention and were regularly declared 'Pictures of the Year'.

By the early interwar period, however, narrative paintings had become far less conspicuous. In 1921 *The Times* critic noted:

The proportion of subject pictures to landscapes and portraits grows smaller year by year, the old Academy pictures, 'Moses in the Bulrushes' or the 'Execution of Mary Queen of Scots', even the old allegory, is dying fast.³⁰⁹

Such images no longer provoked the critics' interest as often as they used to and, when they did, the reviews were rarely favourable. H. G. Fell's response to Russell Flint's *Lemnians* of 1924 is characteristic of narrative painting's fall in prestige:

There is no evidence that anything is taking place beyond an elaborately staged arrangement of *poses plastiques*. These exquisite satin-skinned women, with their new-laundered draperies, these posturing men tearing at their garments, cannot make us believe in the reality of the scene, so that there is a corresponding loss of drama, and so of interest.³¹⁰

Fell was not convinced by this evocation of the grand manner which had been so important in the Academy's early decades. The scenes from contemporary life that had fascinated Victorian

³⁰⁹ 'Academy Opens To-day', *The Times*, 2 May 1921, 9.

³¹⁰ H. G. Fell, 'Art and Artists: The Royal Academy I', *The Queen*, 7 May 1924, 8.

audiences hardly fared better than the *Lemnians* after the First World War. By 1945 *The Yorkshire Post* could ask rhetorically:

But where are the nymphs of yesteryear, the problem pictures, the stunt pictures? This is an Academy mainly of portraits... It is also one of landscapes, of the works of official war artists and of many exquisite flower paintings.³¹¹

The classical subjects and genre scenes had almost disappeared. It seems that in the first half of the twentieth century many reviewers lost their faith in painting's power to move the public through story-telling.

As the critics quoted above pointed out, portraits and landscapes acquired a new prominence as they increased both in number and perceived value. Ann Bermingham, Andrew Hemingway and Stephen Daniels, among others, have traced the importance that landscape painting acquired in Britain in the early nineteenth century.³¹² In the post-Edwardian era the genre became even more central to academic culture. In 1937 Anthony Blunt wrote that the Academy 'can almost always make more of landscape than of the other genres, and this is as true this year as in any other.'³¹³ In an *Apollo* review of the 1947 summer show we read:

The whole exhibition might with advantage be transshipped to America to attract visitors and their dollars to this island, for it portrays almost every corner of the country in the sentimental beauty which, in fact, exists...³¹⁴

The author highlights the central position of landscape painting and praises it for capturing the appeal of British nature and carefully recording its many highlights. Their power is described as a proof of the island's actual attractiveness and potential to lure wealthy tourists. In an article of 1922 *Drawing and Design* also stressed 'the importance of the modern school

³¹¹ H. W. 'The Last Academy of the European War', *The Yorkshire Post*, 5 May 1945, 4.

³¹² See Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition 1740-1860* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987); Andrew Hemingway, *Landscape Imagery and Urban Culture in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Stephen Daniels, *Fields of Vision: Landscape Imagery and National Identity in England and the United States* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993).

³¹³ Anthony Blunt, 'The Royal Academy', *The Spectator*, 7 May 1937 Vol. 158, 861.

³¹⁴ 'Perspex', 'Transcripts and Translations', *Apollo*, June 1947, Vol. 43, 137.

of landscape' and listed a number of contemporary academic practitioners of the genre who had 'contributed so much that is nationally distinctive'.³¹⁵ The Academy's interest in landscape painting was consistent throughout the first half of the twentieth century. These pictures were a prominent and numerically significant presence at the Summer Exhibitions and regularly attracted the attention of reviewers. As I mentioned in the first chapter the genre was particularly closely associated with the country's pictorial tradition and its prestige was boosted by its ties to many renowned nineteenth-century masters. Landscape painting was perceived as a monument to both the nation's heritage and the island's inherent charms.

Despite the significance of landscape, this was not the most prominent genre at the annual shows. The place of honour was reserved for portraiture. Marcia Pointon has examined the importance of portraiture in the Academy's early decades and has shown that this kind of art became central to the institution's identity.³¹⁶ In the first half of the twentieth century this type of pictures retained much of its popularity with clients and gallery-goers. The genre was so ubiquitous that in 1932 Paul Nash described it as the very essence of the English pictorial tradition:

The English are by nature portraitists. For many years they seem to have regarded not man and woman only but all phenomena with a portrait eye; this indeed, accounts to a great extent for our popular conception of what a picture should be and the obstinate opposition encountered by the few imaginative artists England has produced.³¹⁷

The RAs were usually seen as the greatest masters of this kind of painting and the annual shows presented numerous examples of their craft. In 1929 R. H. Wilenski opined that the

³¹⁵ 'The Month's Happening', *Drawing and Design*, June 1922, Vol. 3, 38.

³¹⁶ Marcia Pointon, 'Portrait! Portrait!! Portrait!!!,' in *Art on the Line*, ed. Solkin, 77-92.

³¹⁷ Paul Nash, 'The Pictorial Subject', *The Listener*, 17 February 1932, 227.

plethora was so excessive that ‘no portraits... should be admitted’ in the following year.³¹⁸ As

late as 1945 *The Times* critic observed:

This year’s summer exhibition of the Royal Academy which will be open to the public to-day, is largely dominated by portraits. The frank emphasis which these get is all to the good, since they are, after all, the staple product of many painters who have gained their recognition by works exposed on these walls.³¹⁹

Each year the academicians were expected to produce large official depictions of the royal family which provoked much interest and were regularly discussed in the press. *The Manchester Guardian* described these pieces as ‘the price that the Academy had to pay for its free site and royal patronage’, suggesting that portraiture lay at the very heart of the institution’s identity.³²⁰

As Nash’s text suggests, portraiture was perceived as one of the pillars of the British visual tradition. Landscape painting was seen to have a similarly important role. In the preface to the catalogue of the 1934 exhibition of British art at Burlington House William Llewellyn, the current PRA, observed:

Special honour is done to the portrait and landscape painting of Hogarth, Reynolds, Gainsborough, Raeburn, Lawrence, Turner and Constable; and it is with a natural feeling of pride that the Royal Academy sees on its walls so many masterpieces of men who have studied and taught in its Schools, and have taken an active part in its establishment and administration during the first century of its existence.³²¹

The two genres are presented as the defining achievements of the national school and as constitutive of the Academy’s own tradition. The successes of landscape and portraiture are said to have formed the institution’s most prominent claim to historical importance.

³¹⁸ R. H. Wilenski, ‘The Royal Academy. The Personal View of a Modern Critic’, *The Studio*, July 1929, Vol. 98, 472.

³¹⁹ ‘Royal Academy. Summer Exhibition Open To-day. Portraits of the King and Queen’, *The Times*, 5 May 1945, 2.

³²⁰ ‘The New Royal Academy’, *The Manchester Guardian*, 2 May 1921, 8.

³²¹ W. G. Constable, *British Art: An Illustrated Souvenir of the Exhibition of British Art at the Royal Academy of Arts* (London: William Clowes and Sons Ltd., 1934), viii.

In this chapter I will discuss these two genres both of which played central roles in academic visual culture. This part of the thesis attempts to explain why these kinds of painting retained their prominence throughout the first half of the twentieth century and how contemporary debates shaped the public's perception of them. I will consider their engagement with naturalism and formalism and the associated aesthetic categories addressed in the previous two chapters. Academic landscapes acquire interesting new meanings when approached in the context of the contemporary movement for the preservation of English nature or that of perceptions of the 'designed' character of the national countryside. Portraits are treated in the light of the collections of the National Portrait Gallery and assessed as a continuation of nineteenth-century practices that still performed important functions after 1910. I will also attempt to explain narrative painting's decline in popularity while also acknowledging its continued presence. While fewer in number such pictures continued to play some important roles at the Summer Exhibitions. All three genres had deep roots in the Academy's history yet they were also called to meet the new needs of the twentieth century.

The reader would have noticed that all three genres discussed in this chapter were primarily associated with painting and the graphic arts. Sculpture rarely presented detailed narratives and landscape was thought to be completely beyond its competency. While portrait busts and memorials were an important presence at the Summer Exhibitions they were never as numerous as the portrait pictures nor did they attract as many patrons. As I pointed out in the introduction, sculpture always received less critical attention than painting and occupied considerably less space at the annual shows. This imbalance is partly explained by the assumption, widespread in this period, that Britain could boast of a great pictorial tradition but had produced no major sculptors. None of the famous native artists of the past who were

celebrated in books and exhibitions had devoted much time to modeling or carving. Thus painting came to be perceived as more characteristic of the national genius than its three-dimensional sister art. Accordingly, the Academy, which presented itself as a bastion of the British tradition and everything it stood for, would have had less incentive to encourage sculpture than painting. Furthermore, some of the most prominent figures of the avant-garde were sculptors. Epstein, Moore and Hepworth were some of the most widely discussed practitioners of the new idioms and their works were often lampooned or praised in the press. These artists were united in their interest in non-Western sculptural traditions and the sculptural collections of the British Museum played a pivotal role in their development. I have argued that the Academy was not inimical to all aspects of modernism but it usually maintained a distance from it. Thus it would have had little reason to prioritise an art form that was increasingly seen as characteristic of the new movements and the foreign traditions they admired. The institution would have rather drawn attention to a practice that was thought to embody the values of the British tradition instead of one that was emblematic of distant cultures and radical experiments.

'England of the field and hedgerow'

Landscape painting was important not only because of its place in Britain's artistic tradition; such pictures were also valued because of the role that the English countryside itself had in the national culture. In his classic study *The Country and the City* Raymond Williams showed that the English countryside and particularly the landscape of Southern England came to occupy a highly prominent place in the national imagination from the late Victorian period onwards.³²² Williams pointed out that 'there is an almost inverse proportion, in the twentieth

³²² Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1993), 248-249.

century, between the relative importance of the working rural economy and the cultural importance of rural ideas'.³²³ Even as the actual population and productivity of villages reached its all-time low the idea that the English had a special emotional and spiritual connection to their countryside became central to their self-perception. In 1933 and 1934 the BBC ran a series of radio talks on the national character. In one of them historian Arthur Bryant argued:

By far the most important fact about our English civilisation in estimating its effect on the national character is that it grew in the country. To this, I believe, half our present troubles are due. Our industrial discontent, the restless, unsatisfied state of our family life, the discomfort, ugliness and overcrowding of our towns, may well spring from the fact that every Englishman is so certain that the only lasting utopia for him must lie in a rose garden and a cottage in the country, that he can never settle down seriously to making himself comfortable in a town.³²⁴

The countryside is described as the natural home of a nation which feels truly happy only when surrounded by the domesticated, carefully tended landscapes widely associated with Southern England. The people are presented as a 'nation of gardeners', highly sensitive to and proud of its island's beauty. In an essay of 1935 novelist Ernest Raymond described the following epiphany:

The other day I was looking from a train window... and an exciting thing happened. It seemed to me that I saw England. I do not mean that I saw a far-spread view of her meadows and woods and hills, though this was a big part of the vision, but that I saw (or thought I saw) in one quick, sudden conspectus all, or much, that she is, or stands for, and will continue to be, as long as she is a power in the world at all... I saw a country of patterns, miniature and manifold; a country very green because it was largely pasture and the cheeks of her hills were so thickly wooded; a country that rolled more than most, so that one village did not easily see the spire of the next; a country that owed much to two things – to the humidity of its atmosphere which sooner or later healed the scar of every garish building by covering it with lichen and moss, and to the lazy good-nature of its people who threw their hedges and their roadways where they wanted them, left their villages to muster as they would, and lost every battle but the last.³²⁵

³²³ Ibid, 248.

³²⁴ Arthur Bryant, 'The Englishman's Roots in his Countryside', *The Listener*, 11 October 1933, issue 248, 531.

³²⁵ Ernest Raymond, 'Novelist', in *What is Patriotism?*, ed. MacDonald, 142-143.

Here the villages, woods and pastures of England are said to constitute its very essence. Big cities, industry and busy motorways are completely excluded from this vision. The nation's spirit is said to reside in a timeless rural idyll fenced off from the forces of modernity.

It is hardly surprising that in this context landscape painting came to be seen as a central component of English visual heritage. The importance that the recording of the countryside could assume is nicely illustrated by the case of the painter Samuel John Lamorna Birch. He adopted the name of the Cornish village Lamorna where he settled and which he depicted in many of his paintings. His Diploma piece, submitted in 1934, was also a rendering of its surroundings. Birch consistently associated himself with that location and presented himself as a dedicated recorder of its attractions. He wished the place to be related to his work in a way Dedham Vale and the Stour Valley were to that of Constable. The painter was also emulating the practice of his friend Stanhope Forbes who became known for his images of nearby Newlyn. Apparently, Birch believed that landscape painters should devote themselves to the study of their country's existing natural beauty and architectural heritage, particularly those of relatively little-known spots like Lamorna. He spent most of his career as a populariser of this part of Cornwall and his election as member of the Academy suggests that the strategy paid off.

However, the rustic harmony extolled by such landscapes was not necessarily taken for granted. As I have already pointed out, in the first half of the twentieth century the view that the spread of new technologies threatened the island's nature came to be highly influential. In his 1931 book *Forgotten England and Other Musings* H. E. G. Rope lamented the disappearance of 'old-world peacefulness... that peacefulness which the motor and its concomitants are fast destroying'.³²⁶ He wrote:

³²⁶ H. E. G. Rope, *Forgotten England and Other Musings* (London: Heath Cranton Ltd., 1931), 26.

However much it irks industrial magnates and expansionists, the fact remains that England, the England of history, the England that endures, the England that the name brings before us is rural England, Little England if you like to call it so, but always England of the field and hedgerow, of the church and manor, the farmstead and the cottage. Industrial England is but of yesterday and will hardly be of to-morrow. If rural England perishes, England perishes altogether. If rural England survives and recovers, England will recover. In any case industrial England will perish sooner or later, and probably sooner, 'unwept, unhonoured, and unsung'.³²⁷

Obsessively repeating his country's name, Rope asserts that its essence is located in the historical pastoral scenery depicted by Constable and Crome and that the encroaching influence of industry is a dangerous and fundamentally alien presence. Apparently, this sentiment was shared by many others as 1926 saw the establishment of the Council for the Protection of Rural England which proved to be an active campaigner for ecological and architectural preservation.³²⁸ As Patrick Abercrombie, one of the organisation's founders, put it, their ultimate task was 'to arouse and educate public opinion in the use of the country for work and for play, for permanent and passing purposes'.³²⁹ In the following decades similar groups were set up on a more local scale such as the Friends of the Lake District (1934). They were all united in their belief that the nation needed to be reminded of the value of its natural environment and of its fragility.

It seems that visual culture was thought to be an important ally in this struggle. In the early 1930s Constance Smedley published a series of articles in *Colour* on the aforementioned Council's behalf. The first one calls on artists to help in the organisation's mission:

Have the Landscape Painters of England no concern with Rural England?... Is there anyone on earth to whom the preservation of England's loveliness is of more vital and profound importance?... *Colour* hopes to take an active part in enrolling and mustering the artist of England – not merely of London – in this most modern war. The 'Artists' Rifles' did not lag behind when their country needed them; will they be behind-hand now in defense of the countryside?³³⁰

³²⁷ Ibid, 25.

³²⁸ Trevor Rowley, *The English Landscape in the Twentieth Century* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), 212.

³²⁹ Patrick Abercrombie, *Town and Country Planning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 229.

³³⁰ Constance Smedley, 'England Preserved', *Colour*, December 1930, 18.

Painting is here said to be a key weapon in the campaigners' arsenal. The reader is told that artists should be intimately interested in the survival of the pastoral ideal and that their help is indispensable. In a later article the author suggested that a large exhibition of English landscapes should be organised which would 'set afire the love of beauty' and provoke viewers to take part in the Council's efforts.³³¹ Abercrombie had also written that 'the Public must be roused from its indifference'.³³² These writers believed that images could accomplish that by displaying the island's 'loveliness' and recording the nation's heritage.

Significantly, the articles in *Colour* recommended that the proposed exhibition take place in Burlington House. Smedley seems to have considered the Academy as the institution most likely to aid her cause and this is hardly surprising considering the number of landscapes which were shown there every year. These pictures' relative realism seemed to guarantee their wide appeal while also encouraging the public to see them as truthful records of the countryside's charms rather than as Arcadian phantasies. They would have been perceived as more or less objective accounts of British nature, ones that could move the greatest possible number of viewers. Additionally, it appears that Smedley already had some potential allies at the Academy: as early as 1915 Ernest Board had sent an allegorical image of the endangered countryside to the Summer Exhibition. The painting depicts a sad-faced personification of Nature retreating at the sight of an expanding town; *Drawing and Design* described it as a 'poignant cry against the encroachment of cities upon virgin country'.³³³ Furthermore, in June 1931 the Academy's Council wrote to Ramsay MacDonald, the current Prime Minister, asking that authorities consult 'competent artistic opinion' in projects that affected the country's

³³¹ Constance Smedley, 'England Preserved', *Colour*, January 1931, 21.

³³² Patrick Abercrombie, *The Preservation of Rural England: The Control of Development by Means of Rural Planning* (London: Liverpool University Press, 1926), 53.

³³³ 'The Royal Academy', *Drawing and Design*, May 1915, 6.

landscape.³³⁴ The Prime Minister duly replied that he shared the artists' anxiety at the 'destruction in recent times of so much of the beauty of our countryside.'³³⁵ Gestures like this and paintings like that of Board would have encouraged Smedley as well as the broader public to perceive the institution as a possible supporter of the Council for the Protection of Rural England, as a place which inspired artists to fight in 'this most modern war'. This aspect of the Academy's identity seems to have remained important throughout the period covered here.

It is also worth considering the role that formalism could play in landscape painting. In the interwar period some prominent theorists of urban and rural planning came to emphasise the artificiality of the English landscape. They described it as a largely man-made environment where the labour of many generations had perfected nature and shaped it in accordance with society's utilitarian and aesthetic needs. In Thomas Sharp's influential book *English Panorama* (published in 1936) we read:

...the English countryside... is certainly the most definitely designed landscape in the world. And because it is the most designed it is the most humanised of landscapes. And it is upon this humanisation that its charm, both for its own inhabitants and for foreigners, almost entirely depends. For no other landscape has the friendliness of the English landscape, none its satisfying quality of security.³³⁶

The author saw this artificiality as a great virtue and as the reason for the land's popularity with tourists. Apparently, he believed that nature could become truly beautiful only when carefully guided by human hands. The novelist Sheila Kaye-Smith would have agreed; in 1937 she wrote:

...the countryside is a work of art rather than of nature, of man's inspired planning and cultivation. The English countryside is beautiful not by virtue of its natural contours, but by virtue of man's improvement of it – the woods and orchards he has planted, the fields he has enclosed, the lanes he has trodden out between the hamlets, the churches and houses he has built.³³⁷

³³⁴ Letter from H. G. Vincent to the President of the Royal Academy, 13 July 1931, Royal Academy Archive.

³³⁵ Ibid.

³³⁶ Thomas Sharp, *English Panorama* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1936), 14-15.

³³⁷ Sheila Kaye-Smith, 'Laughter in the South-East,' in *Britain and the Beast*, ed. Clough Williams-Ellis (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1937), 36.

This quote comes from an essay in *Britain and the Beast*, a volume promoting the countryside's preservation, edited by the prominent campaigner Clough Williams-Ellis. Apparently, the view that the English landscape was largely designed could be useful to preservationist efforts. Indeed, the movement valued traditional architecture as much as the nature surrounding it; the two were thought to have a symbiotic relationship. History's traces were seen as part of the island's very fabric and had a central place in conservationist discourse.

Formalist landscape painting was particularly well positioned to reflect the belief in the beneficial power of human intervention. This kind of art was usually based on some observation of the natural world yet organised this visual material in pleasing formal compositions by stylising objects, rearranging them or changing their colour schemes. Such landscape painters could be said to work with the environment but also to shape it according to their aesthetic preferences in order to improve upon the raw data they were given. Thus their images could be presented as the pictorial equivalents of the work of the farmers, architects and town planners who had modified the English landscape through the centuries making it more hospitable and enjoyable. Formalist artists could be said to accomplish similar results by bringing nature to people's homes through the vehicle of representation and by adjusting its appearance to fit their artistic requirements. Sometimes this approach was even thought to do the landscape justice better than pure naturalism: as early as 1910 an article on Albert Goodwin's art claimed:

There is the whole secret of his success as an artist – he loves nature and studies her unceasingly. He sees that to be a servile copyist of concrete facts would be actually disrespectful to her, because it would signify a feeble understanding of her ways and at best a halfhearted appreciation of her teaching.³³⁸

³³⁸ Baldry, 'The Art of Mr Albert Goodwin', 94.

According to this critic mature artists were not content with mere faithful emulation but strove to realise the hidden potential for beauty that any kind of scenery had. Formalist painting continued the English tradition of humanising the environment by studying nature's inherent principles and applying them in original compositions.

'A likeness to the mind'

Portraiture retained much of its historical importance throughout the century's first half. Paintings of this kind were, of course, normally expected to be highly naturalistic and their makers were usually encouraged to produce a detailed likeness of the sitter. However, the demand for realism went beyond outward appearance; good portraits were also thought to depict an individual's character and psychological makeup. The critic Charles Marriott wrote in 1920:

If you want a likeness to the eye, no painter that ever lived could beat a good photograph. If, on the other hand, you want a likeness to the mind, the best photograph is beaten by the most elementary scribble by a child on a slate. Or, to put it another way, the photograph is addressed to the eye as a critic of reality; the painted portrait is addressed to the eye as a channel of perception.³³⁹

Here the visualisation of the internal life of the sitter is presented as the defining feature of the genre, as the trait which makes it superior to photography. Cora Gordon expressed a similar view by calling the academicians 'our best visual psychologists' and their works were discussed in similar terms in many other reviews.³⁴⁰

This aspect of portraiture allowed it to perform what was deemed a very important function: that of recording the facial and intellectual features of many of the country's most prominent individuals. As the critic Frank Rutter observed the success of portrait exhibitions

³³⁹ Charles Marriott, 'Mr Augustus John as a Portrait Painter', *The Studio*, April 1920, Vol. 79, 43.

³⁴⁰ Cora Gordon, 'London Commentary', *The Studio*, August 1949, Vol. 138, 62.

usually depended on the ‘personalities of the people painted’.³⁴¹ According to a 1912 article about George Reid:

There are few men who have taken a foremost place in the making of modern Scotland that have escaped the genius of his brush, and the only possible drawback to such a fact is that the Scottish National Portrait Gallery may complain of an *embarrass de richesses*. And Sir George Reid’s unerring ability to secure the likeness of his sitter – with a certainty that few painters have ever exceeded – is a matter for which the future will not fail to express gratitude.³⁴²

The artist’s works are described as highly important documents which would preserve the appearance of the nation’s cultural heroes. As I pointed out earlier, the perception that painted portraits could depict a sitter’s character would have rendered them far more valuable than photographs and would have made them appear as indispensable tools for those who wished to understand the country’s history.

It is significant that the critic quoted above mentions the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. Both this institution and its English equivalent had been founded in the Victorian period with the intention of commemorating Britain’s worthiest historical figures by amassing a collection of their likenesses.³⁴³ It is likely that after the Edwardian era the Academy’s numerous pictures of the upper classes were seen as a continuation of that nineteenth-century tradition. The grand state portraits which were exhibited each year were highly similar to the ones kept at the National Galleries both in their appearance and in the fact that most of them depicted members of the nobility and *haute bourgeoisie*. They were probably perceived as potential future additions to the famous collections and, indeed, some of them eventually ended up there. This reading is corroborated by observers’ responses to the shows. Charles Marriott, for instance, claimed that Augustus John had created ‘a gallery of living

³⁴¹ Frank Rutter, ‘All the Stars. Sir John Lavery and Shirley Temple. Royal Society of Portrait Painters’, *Sunday Times*, 22 November 1936, 7.

³⁴² A. S. Walker, ‘The Portraits of Sir George Reid, R. S. A.’, *The Studio*, April 1912, Vol. 55, 169.

³⁴³ Charles Saumarez Smith, *The National Portrait Gallery* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 1997), 12.

persons', suggesting that the people depicted were as significant as the pieces' aesthetic worth.³⁴⁴ Similarly, in a letter to Frampton of 1936 George Clausen wrote: 'Let me first offer you my sincere congratulations on your fine portrait of Lutyens. It is *the man...*'³⁴⁵ Clausen described the piece as a veritable equivalent to the famous architect's presence, a reflection of his very essence. Apparently, the royal institution was thought to contribute to contemporary culture in an important way by constructing a record of the country's prominent social leaders which preserved traces of both their physical appearance and intellectual qualities.

In this context it is worth considering the public's interest in celebrities and prominent citizens. The lives of the social elite were avidly followed by the press, particularly by women's magazines like *The Queen*, *Vogue* or *Woman's Own*. These popular publications gave detailed reports of weddings, soirées and other public appearances of the aristocracy and *haute bourgeoisie*, always devoting much attention to outfits. The same social set commissioned portraits from academic artists who had them exhibited at the summer shows. The sitters themselves often visited these events as they took place during the London Season when most of high society resided in the capital. As David Solkin has pointed out, the annual exhibitions became an important part of the high life's routine from their inception and this remained the case in the post-Edwardian era.³⁴⁶ At the shows one could inspect both the latest representations of these people and see them in person, an opportunity which seems to have motivated many gallery-goers. As *The Manchester Guardian* noted in 1917:

...you can see there the latest portraits of people who have been talked about and the representations of scenes – war ceremonials and so on – which are in the public mind, and sometimes even the

³⁴⁴ Marriott, 'Mr Augustus John as a Portrait Painter', 43.

³⁴⁵ George Clausen, letter to Meredith Frampton, 26 April 1936, Tate Archive.

³⁴⁶ David Solkin, 'Introduction. 'This Great Mart of Genius:' The Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House 1780-1836', in *Art on the Line*, ed. Solkin, 4.

adventures in art of a public celebrity. The Academy is not the place for art news, but for what is new and exciting in the lay world.³⁴⁷

The critic was aware of the celebrities' appeal and Burlington House's ability to profit from it. The portraitists were especially apt to provoke the public's curiosity, not least because of their interest in attire. In 1937 Anthony Blunt observed that the painters of Burlington House concentrated 'as much attention as possible on the brilliance of the silk dress or jewels which the sitter is wearing.'³⁴⁸ Less charitably, *The Yorkshire Post* opined that 'Cadogan Cowper paints Society ladies' dresses, with dolls inside them.'³⁴⁹ These works were known to pay at least as much attention to a sitter's clothes as to their facial features. Gerald Kelly's rendering of the Queen Mother (1940), for instance, reveals a greater concern with the sitter's official garb than with her face. The ornate and carefully rendered cloth dominates the foreground in a way that almost distracts from the depicted person. Portraits like this one resembled press accounts of celebrities both in their fascination with clothes and in their allusions to glamorous exclusive lifestyles. The Academy knew well how to address a public captivated with markers of class distinction and eager to get closer to the elite's sparkling world.

The importance that depictions of prominent individuals could assume is interestingly illustrated by Lavery's portraits of Irish social leaders, work on which began in 1916. In his 1940 autobiography the painter recounts how his wife Hazel urged him to take a stand on the current political situation in their native Ireland and 'do something' for his country'.³⁵⁰ The painter decided to produce portraits of well-known proponents of both the nationalist and unionist factions in contemporary politics. He wished to express his hope that there could be productive dialogue even between implacable opponents by turning his studio in 'neutral

³⁴⁷ J.B., 'The Third War Academy', *The Manchester Guardian*, 7 May 1917, 6.

³⁴⁸ Anthony Blunt, 'The Royal Academy', *The Spectator*, 7 May 1937, vol. 158, 861.

³⁴⁹ H.T. 'The Royal Academy', *The Yorkshire Post*, 3 May 1930, 13.

³⁵⁰ Lavery, *The Life of a Painter*, 208.

ground where both sides might meet'.³⁵¹ While the artist was Catholic and had much sympathy for the independence movement he was also a naturalised Londoner who was keenly aware that most of his clients were English. Thus he had good reason to campaign for peaceful dialogue between the two parties. He first invited the politicians John Redmond and Edward Carson on condition that they would allow their pictures to be shown side by side in the Dublin Gallery in a symbolic gesture that would demonstrate their willingness to work together for their nation's interests. They both agreed, Redmond remarking: 'I have always had an idea that Carson and I might some day be hanged side by side in Dublin, and now it has come to pass.'³⁵² Afterwards the artist went on to depict some of the most prominent figures of his hometown Belfast, including Cardinal Michael Logue, Archbishop Frederick D'Arcy and Joe Devlin, hoping that his effort would begin to cure some of the wounds in the northern city's social fabric.

Lavery's project reflected the belief that successful portraits held the essence of the sitters' look and personality and could substitute their actual presence. Exhibiting the images of Redmond and Carson together was apparently conceived almost as an equivalent to uniting the two men. The act reminds one of the practice of keeping a monarch's portraits in government buildings as an evocation of his or her power and authority. The two Dublin pictures functioned in a similar way by standing for the sitters' physical presence and their willingness to consider cooperation. Perhaps it is not too far-fetched to compare Lavery's project to a spell that was meant to foster cooperation between the two factions by employing objects that closely resemble their leaders. Additionally, the painter may have hoped that his pieces could, to some extent, inform the viewers about the politicians' character and ideals. I

³⁵¹ Ibid, 208.

³⁵² Ibid, 208.

have pointed out that many critics of the period believed that good portraits could truly serve this purpose. It is likely that both their maker and at least a portion of the public considered his works as an opportunity to learn something about the two prominent figures and even gain new insights into the causes they served. The artist probably wished that the pieces would lead some observers to understand the party they did not support a little better and thus consider establishing meaningful conversations with people of differing convictions. This would have allowed him to answer his wife's plea to intervene in the country's political life and prove his passion for its wellbeing. Through the project he presented himself as a true patriot and this rhetorical move was made possible by the alleged ability of portraitists to capture a sitter's innermost being.

Here one should acknowledge that modernist portraitists could also claim to address an individual's inner life and to transmit it to posterity. However, as mentioned above, in this period the novel artistic trends were often described as too demanding for the common observer and could thus be hardly expected to function as national monuments in the way the Victorian collections did. Additionally, it seems that for some viewers the faithful rendering of appearance was as important as the psychological analysis: A. S. Walker wrote that the future would be particularly grateful for George Reid's 'unerring ability to secure the likeness'.³⁵³ Academic painting's naturalism was also crucial to the commemorative portraits produced during and after the two global conflicts. At the time prominent portraitists received numerous commissions: Philip de László alone produced nearly eighty depictions of serving officers in the First World War, many of them based on photographs. As James Fox has pointed out, in such cases the clients were particularly eager to obtain highly realistic images; the

³⁵³ Walker, 'The Portraits of Sir George Reid', 169.

works were often seen as a consoling evocation of the departed's physical presence.³⁵⁴

Academic visual culture could satisfy this demand in a way avant-garde works rarely could.

Furthermore, some academic portrait painters seemed to have devised ways to register the peculiarities of contemporary society without abandoning naturalism. In James Gunn's portrait of his wife entitled *Pauline Waiting* (1939) the sitter is depicted in the lobby of an expensive-looking hotel. Instead of the domestic or outdoor settings characteristic of academic portraits of women we see a busy social space. The title suggests that Pauline is there to meet someone, her vacant gaze implying that this someone is neither the painter himself nor the observer. In this picture Gunn seems to define her as a social creature, as a person fully immersed in a fashionable urban culture that was not confined to the domestic sphere. The sitter is presented as an independent and autonomous social agent who feels at home in lively noisy environments. The work appears as an attempt to acknowledge the changes in women's self-perception in the interwar period and to devise a kind of portraiture suitable to the new, more independent, female protagonists. The naturalistic idiom and traditional compositional structure are retained but the unconventional background provides a new context for the interpretation of the sitter's personality. Of course, the painting is hardly divorced from patriarchal modes of perception: the fashionably attired Pauline remains a beautiful object for contemplation and the piece nods to a long tradition of portraits of painters' wives. Yet Gunn does seem to have tried to partially register the new opportunities available to women. He aimed to reflect the novelties of contemporary life within the confines of a conventional academic idiom.

Academic artists also experimented with self-portraiture and its putative ability to reflect the maker's consciousness. In the first chapter I discussed Orpen's self-portraits and

³⁵⁴ Fox, *British Art and the First World War*, 118-120.

their questioning of the genre's psychological transparency and legibility. Spencelayh also examined such pictures' reliability in his work *Part of my Stock-in-Trade* exhibited in 1949. It depicts a room littered with old-fashioned furniture and knick-knacks the likes of which populate the majority of his paintings. In a small mirror the artist himself can be seen, surrounded by the objects that had come to define his approach. His face isn't any more visually prominent than the household items on the floor or the pictures hanging on the wall, the mirror's frame emphasising its similarity with the pictures. The composition suggests that his image is just a part of his 'stock-in-trade', hardly more important than the souvenirs or old newspapers. It is not presented as a special window onto his interior self but as a signifier that is not more central to the picture's meaning than its surroundings. Furthermore, the self-portrait is reminiscent of the generic aged men present in many of his canvases which implies that it only represents a role that the painter has assumed. Given the other objects' number and size, we are almost encouraged to think that they could tell us more about the maker than the image in the mirror. Like Orpen, Spencelayh questions the reliability of portraiture and its claims to unproblematic veracity.

A Story Well Told

Narrative painting's decline in popularity was partly the result of the hostility of many prominent theorists and critics of this period. In his book *Art* (1914) Clive Bell famously declared narrative pictures and other realistic or 'descriptive' pieces aesthetically irrelevant:

They leave untouched our aesthetic emotions because it is not their forms but the ideas or information suggested or conveyed by their forms that affect us.³⁵⁵

³⁵⁵ Bell, *Art*, 17.

In the interwar period this view was adopted by the majority of London critics. In 1926 Sickert complained about the ubiquity of this trend:

Enormous play has been made by writers on painting with the iniquity of the subject-picture. We are offered the axiom that a picture must not be literary. We might rather say that a picture need not be tawdry literature. That the story in paint should be well, and not badly, told. That it should not be lacking in logic. That it should not be both empty and redundant, and so on.³⁵⁶

In such a climate, some academicians would have preferred to avoid an art form that was seen as so hopelessly outdated, particularly because they were often accused of being old-fashioned. Their renouncement of narrative could have been an attempt to demonstrate that they could be critical towards tradition and not simply slavish imitators of nineteenth-century precedents. It should be remembered that in the 1920s and 1930s modernists like Augustus John and Nevinson became associates of the Academy. They could have further influenced their peers and persuaded them to exhibit less genre paintings at the summer displays.

Yet narrative never disappeared from the walls of Burlington House. Many observers continued to see it as a defining element of the institution's image. In 1939 the *Apollo*'s critic could still write that the pictures of Frampton and Spencelayah 'are primarily literature, and nearly all the pictures in the Academy are that.'³⁵⁷ While storytelling never regained the prominence and prestige it had had in the previous two centuries, it remained an important genre at the Summer Exhibitions. Interestingly, a 1930 issue of *The Yorkshire Post* related the persistence of narrative to the new kinds of entertainment that emerged in the twentieth century:

The public, even to-day, perhaps more so since the advent of the cinema, must have its story. The quality of the painting alone does not satisfy or even interest it.³⁵⁸

³⁵⁶ Walter Sickert, 'Manchester City Art Gallery: Holman Hunt and the Pre-Raphaelites', *The Manchester Guardian*, 8 March 1926, 11.

³⁵⁷ 'The Royal Academy', *Apollo*, June 1939, Vol. 19, 300.

³⁵⁸ Francis Watson, 'Future of Academic Art. Some Reflections at Burlington House', *The Yorkshire Post*, 20 May 1930, 8.

The article suggests that the continued popularity of academic narrative art may have owed something to its similarities to modern cinema. Those were indeed substantial. Like cinema, much of academic painting was devoted to relatable narratives that were comprehensible to the greatest possible number of viewers. These pictures were also similar to interwar British films in their themes: they often relied on idealised depictions of middle-class family life and well-known episodes from history. Christine Gledhill has noted that interwar cinema often relied on sources from Victorian and Edwardian popular culture, sources often used by academic painters.³⁵⁹ The canvases were also seen to aspire to the verisimilitude achieved by the camera; academic naturalism was often described as ‘photographic’. Additionally, RAs were often asked to depict important public events such as the opening of the Modern Foreign Galleries at the Tate, recorded by Lavery in a canvas of 1929. Such commissions would have reminded gallery-goers of newsreels which usually covered similar occasions or documentary films by the likes of John Grierson which also claimed to offer accurate representations of the world.³⁶⁰ In the nineteenth century these features of academic art brought it closer to the novel and the press; Julia Thomas, among others, has explored the profound interdependence of visual and verbal in the Victorian period.³⁶¹ However, by the 1920s cinema had become the most popular story-telling medium and Burlington House’s visitors would have had a variety of cinematic experiences to relate to the exhibited canvases.³⁶² More importantly, film’s essential visuality could have rendered it more obviously similar to the Academy’s products than most texts. The carefully staged situations of history paintings could resemble scenes

³⁵⁹ Christine Gledhill, ‘Late Silent Britain,’ in *The British Cinema Book*, ed. Robert Murphy (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 164-164.

³⁶⁰ Ian Aitken, ‘The British Documentary Film Movement,’ in *The British Cinema Book*, ed. Murphy, 177-179.

³⁶¹ Julia Thomas, *Pictorial Victorians: The Inscription of Values in Word and Image* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2004).

³⁶² Allen Eyles, ‘Exhibition and the Cinemagoing Experience,’ in *The British Cinema Book*, ed. Murphy, 78-80.

from the screen and thus be easily enjoyed by a large public. The links between this pictorial culture and the highly popular kind of entertainment seemed to have substantially contributed to the former's success.

However, the significance of the literary frame of reference should not be underestimated. As I have pointed out, Sickert continued to emphasise his work's close relationship with that art form. Gallery-goers also seem to have associated the visual with the verbal. In 1924 *Drawing and Design* organised a competition for essays on the subject 'Does the Practice of Art Improve Literary Ability?'³⁶³ The three winners were published and they all answered the question in the affirmative. The third prize winner argued that visual art and literature were inherently complementary and enhanced each other:

With what added interest do we read the sonnets of Michael Angelo [sic], or gaze upon the drawings of William Blake, from our knowledge of the one as an artist and the other as a poet?³⁶⁴

The writer suggests that the combination of the two art forms provides unparalleled aesthetic opportunities as well as greater access into the maker's personality. Evidently the time-honoured Horatian unity of *pictura* and *poesis* was still relevant in the interwar period and shaped viewers' perceptions of contemporary culture.

Another reason for narrative's continued relevance is its conversational utility. As Pamela Fletcher has observed, in the Victorian and Edwardian periods the popular pictures at the Summer Exhibitions were common topics of discussion at social events.³⁶⁵ An acquaintance with these pieces was deemed necessary for those who wished to participate successfully in polite small talk.³⁶⁶ It seems that this perception survived, at least to some

³⁶³ 'Our Competition Essay: Does the Practice of Art Improve Literary Ability?', *Drawing and Design*, May 1924, Vol. 3, 873.

³⁶⁴ Frank Davey, '3rd Prize Essay', *Drawing and Design*, May 1924, Vol. 3, 896.

³⁶⁵ Fletcher, *Narrating Modernity*, 23.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 23.

extent, after the First World War: in a 1930 issue of the women's magazine *The Queen* we read that the allegorical canvases seen at the summer shows were 'doomed to be discussed from discordant points of view at dinner tables and over the tea-cups.'³⁶⁷ Narrative works were likely to be particularly useful in these social situations. Such pictures often emulate literary forms and invite attempts at verbalisation. Images can only depict fractions of a narrative and thus encourage viewers to imagine the circumstances that caused the depicted events as well as their potential aftermath. Characters can be judged for moral or prudential reasons and compared to other historical or fictional personalities. All these issues are fruitful subjects for debate and contemporary observers were apparently aware of this. Fletcher has treated the discursive potency of Edwardian 'problem pictures' which presented ambiguous situations and actions that were hard to decipher.³⁶⁸ However, more straightforward works could be equally stimulating; their protagonists' worth could be questioned or affirmed and their futures sketched in a variety of ways. While all objects seen at the Summer Exhibitions were meant to provoke debate to a lesser or greater extent, narrative canvases seem to have been particularly apt to provide such experiences. Their close links to literature and relative independence from obscure aesthetic discourses rendered them particularly suitable for the kind of casual conversations in which London socialites were expected to engage.

The Academy's use of narrative can also be related to the biographies and autobiographies of RAs published in this period. These books were usually less concerned with the protagonists' aesthetic ideals and artistic development than with intriguing anecdotes and peculiar plots. For instance, in his autobiography Lavery tells us little about the formal or narrative choices he made when composing his first major canvases, instead concentrating on

³⁶⁷ Guy Cadogan Rothery, 'The Royal Academy Exhibition', *The Queen*, 14 May 1930, 15.

³⁶⁸ Fletcher, *Narrating Modernity*.

his models' stories and behaviour. The painter recounts how the girl posing for the figure of Mary Stuart in *The Night after the Battle of Langside* (1886) caught a chill during a sitting and died soon afterwards while a man posing for Lord Herries almost suffocated in the antique helmet he was asked to wear.³⁶⁹ In her book Knight also spent more pages on the personalities of the ballet dancers she drew than on her own aesthetic thinking.³⁷⁰ These biographies unburdened by excessive theorising seem to have been popular with the general public and some of them sold very well.³⁷¹ They would have strengthened further the association between academic artists and storytelling. In these volumes the practitioners are presented primarily as vehicles for engaging stories, being either the central characters or observers. They are made to appear less as providers of transcendent aesthetic experiences than as creators of relatable stimulating narratives. The biographies' readers would have been led to expect the same experiences from the venues where the RAs exhibited which would have reaffirmed the view that Burlington House excelled at storytelling.

This chapter has examined the three most important genres at the Summer Exhibitions and the way they contributed to contemporary culture. Landscape not only retained the importance it had assumed in the nineteenth century but became the most critically admired type of art at the annual shows. It proved to be an inspiration to the emergent movement for the preservation of the English countryside as it depicted a pastoral ideal that had considerable authority in the first half of the twentieth century. Portraiture also occupied an important position and continued a tradition of picturing the country's elite that had been institutionalised by the National Portrait Gallery. Narrative lost the prominence it had had in the previous two centuries but remained an important presence at Burlington House. Its visual

³⁶⁹ Lavery, *The Life of a Painter*, 57-60.

³⁷⁰ Knight, *Oil Paint and Grease Paint*, 226-229.

³⁷¹ Fox, *Laura Knight*, 93.

storytelling made it attractively similar to popular cinema while its perceived democratic appeal harmonised with the down-to-earth image the RAs sought to project. Between these three genres the Academy established a multifaceted visual culture that could address some of the increasingly complex exigencies of twentieth-century society.

Chapter IV. Modernist Responses to Academic Art

British modernist art is no longer studied in isolation from other aspects of twentieth-century culture. In the last few decades scholars have explored its intimate ties to the period's politics, social transformations and popular culture among other phenomena. Lisa Tickner has explored the work of Sickert and Lewis in the context of the period's popular press and fashionable dance forms such as the tango, flamenco and the apache dance.³⁷² Raymond Williams demonstrated that avant-garde literature was permeated by a political impulse that found expression in both progressive and reactionary commitments that should inform any reading of the aesthetic material.³⁷³ David Cottington has discussed the origins of the very term 'avant-garde' in the late nineteenth-century tensions between different sections of the middle class in London and Paris.³⁷⁴ It is now widely recognised that, far from being the creation of self-sufficient geniuses working in isolation, modern art was conceived and perceived within a complex network of meanings that stretched far beyond the often hermetic realm of the avant-garde.

Yet modernism is still rarely discussed in relation to academic art. As I have already pointed out, it is usually perceived as radically different from Burlington House's output, as lacking meaningful references to the Summer Exhibitions. It is assumed that we can learn little from examining the two traditions together. I have already argued that academic art appropriated some features of the avant-garde and could work productively with its challenges. I will now attempt to show that modernist artists were almost equally interested

³⁷² Lisa Tickner, *Modern Life and Modern Subjects: British Art in the Early Twentieth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 11-47 and 79-115.

³⁷³ Raymond Williams, *Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (London: Verso, 2007), 49-63.

³⁷⁴ David Cottington, 'Modernities and Avant-gardes: London and Paris 1900-1914', in *Art, Politics and Society in Britain (1880-1914): Aspects of Modernity and Modernism*, ed. Trevor Harris (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishers, 2009), 23-40.

in their competitors' products. Many of the new movements' creations were intended as responses to the Academy's art and politics. The avant-garde was engaged in a continuous dialogue with Burlington House in which it both criticised and attempted to emulate certain elements of the institution's culture. Some artists aimed to expose the weaknesses of academic art while others sought to prove that modernism could perform its functions. The avant-garde was interested in both the Academy's history and its contemporary exhibitions and statements. An examination of its engagements with the establishment could deepen our understanding of the way in which modernism presented itself to the public and of its perception of heritage.

Modernism and Tradition

Despite their rhetoric of radical innovation avant-garde artists could often claim to be even more interested in the art of the past than their RA colleagues. In the second chapter I discussed the modernists' fascination with non-European art but also with objects from the Western non-classical Antiquity and Middle Ages. Painters and sculptors began to study historical cultures that had been largely ignored by the academic narratives of aesthetic achievement which usually focused on Classical Antiquity, the Early Modern period and the nineteenth century. Moore often visited the British Museum to admire its collection of Mesoamerican sculpture and claimed there was a 'world tradition' in art that was a constant source of inspiration for him. In an article of 1935 he wrote:

In the last thirty years or so many factors have worked together to call for a review and a revaluation of past periods of art. Easier means of communication and travel, more scientific and systematic conduction of excavations, the development in photographic reproduction, better arrangement and showing of collections in museums, the breakdown of the complete domination of later decadent Greek art as the only standard of excellence – the interplay of such factors as these, together with

the work of the important artists of the last thirty or forty years, in their researches and experiments, has enlarged the field of knowledge, interest and appreciation of the world's past art.³⁷⁵

The sculptor did not hide his excitement at the rediscovery of multiple artistic traditions which had been obscured by the devotion to Greece's classical period. He was hardly alone in his enthusiasm: sculptors like Dobson, Hepworth and Eric Gill often sought inspiration in the work of medieval masters and remote cultures. Gill wrote:

The sculptures of Chartres, the paintings of Ajanta, the idols of Tehuantepec or Gamboon [sic] and the subtle melodies of the ecclesiastical Chant reach heights of expression at least as great as is shown in the works of any individual master or 'old master' we can name.³⁷⁶

I have pointed out that academic artists could also claim a kind of ownership of these alternative periods and traditions by adopting a formalist aesthetic that was frequently presented as universal, as the common outlook of makers from almost all historical periods and parts of the world. Additionally, Burlington House had shown an abiding interest in the Middle Ages since at least the early nineteenth century by exhibiting many scenes from medieval history and literature. However, at the Academy these references as well as all formal compositions were almost always presented within a naturalistic idiom. A painting like Fred Appleyard's *Secret* (1914-1915) may depict Gothic ruins and figures inspired by medieval art but it could never be mistaken for a medieval artwork. Dobson, Gill and their fellow travellers, on the other hand, actively emulated the look of pre-modern sculpture. In its extreme stylisation and lack of naturalistic detail Gill's *Crucifixion* of c. 1913 follows Romanesque models far more closely than any naturalistic image could. Such pieces could be presented as more genuine engagements with prehistoric and medieval cultures, as attempts to assimilate their spirit rather than as mere evocations of their romantic charms within an otherwise modern setting.

³⁷⁵ Henry Moore, 'Mesopotamian Art', *The Listener*, 5 June 1935, 944.

³⁷⁶ Eric Gill, *Work and Property* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1937), 134.

The modernists' persistent attention to these traditions can be seen as an indirect critique of the Academy's narrow field of interest. The expanded sphere of reference of practitioners like Moore and Gill was likely a suggestion that contemporary art should be informed by a broader range of visual cultures than the academic curriculum permitted. These artists believed that a personal style could only be developed through a diligent study of past traditions in all their complexity and variety. Modernism attempted to claim a richer and deeper understanding of heritage than that of Burlington House.

Some of the new movements also claimed a special relationship to British eighteenth and nineteenth-century art, the period most admired by academicians. As Sam Smiles has pointed out, practitioners like Nash, Graham Sutherland and John Piper often invoked the names of predecessors like William Blake, Henry Fuseli and Samuel Palmer, attempting to demonstrate their art's deep roots in the national heritage.³⁷⁷ They claimed to represent a long English tradition of visionary Romantic art steeped in myth and legend and characterised by an imaginative relationship with the landscape and its history. In a volume he edited in 1936 Herbert Read claimed that 'Surrealism is a reaffirmation of the romantic principle', a principle that channeled the creative depths of the unconscious and one which manifested throughout history.³⁷⁸ He claimed both Shakespeare and the creators of English folk ballads as exemplars of this principle and as important forerunners of the new movement in literature. In painting he referred to Turner, Palmer, John Martin and even the Pre-Raphaelites.³⁷⁹ The reader was told that, far from being mere emulation of fashionable Parisian trends, British surrealism was an organic development of qualities inherent in the

³⁷⁷ Sam Smiles, 'Equivalents for the Megaliths: Prehistory and English Culture 1920-50', in *The Geographies of Englishness*, eds. Corbett, Holt and Russell, 199-223.

³⁷⁸ Herbert Read, 'Introduction', in *Surrealism*, ed. Herbert Read (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), 28.

³⁷⁹ Ibid, 58-59.

national visual culture. Such self-presentation could be used to deflect critiques of the avant-garde's foreign origins and domesticate its more unfamiliar aspects. It could serve to boost the modernists' credibility and seems to have helped them enter the cultural mainstream after the Second World War. This rhetoric also demonstrated that the avant-garde was willing and able to engage with all periods of British art and manage the country's heritage at least as well as the RAs. In fact, by emphasising the innovations and non-naturalistic imagery in the art of Turner, Palmer and Blake writers like Read could position the new movements closer to at least some Georgian masters than Burlington House itself.

This rhetoric acquires an additional significance in the context of the Academy's large overviews of different national schools. As mentioned earlier, British, French, Spanish, Italian and Chinese art, among others, were presented in this way. The shows aimed to represent these schools throughout the centuries, charting their development through time. While the RAs' own creations could be related to the Early Modern and nineteenth-century phases of these traditions the modernists could also present the prehistoric and medieval objects as an important influence. They could also claim to understand in greater depth certain elements of the Georgian and Victorian heritage. The avant-garde could argue that it was better equipped to appreciate such historical overviews in their entirety than the very institution that organised them.

Modernism and the Academic Genres

While some artists criticised the Academy's limitations others attempted to prove that modernism could perform and even improve upon some of its traditional functions. In the 1930s Nevinson painted a trio of canvases that were conceived as authoritative statements on modern history and culture. *Twentieth Century* (c. 1935) depicts a figure resembling Rodin's

Thinker looming over depictions of weapons, banner-waving crowds, airplanes and other stock symbols of modernity, many of them derived from Nevinson's earlier renderings of First World War battlefields and post-war New York. *The Unending Cult of Human Sacrifice* (c. 1934) combines similar motifs with Christian imagery while *Pan Triumphant* (c. 1934) ambiguously gestures towards classical mythology. These rather grandiloquent pictures were apparently intended as summative pronouncements on the bewildering complexity and violence of contemporary politics and culture although the two works of c. 1934 also suggest the possibility of redemption. In their attempt to summarise historical experience the pieces bring to mind the ambitious allegorical and history compositions that artists like Benjamin West, Henry Fuseli and James Barry showed at the Academy in the institution's first few decades. Works like Charles Sims' *Clio and the Children* (1915), George Clausen's *Youth Mourning* (1916) and Glyn Philpot's *Journey of the Spirit* (1921) continued this academic tradition in the twentieth century. These academic pictures utilise allegorical figures and more or less vague references to Greek art and mythology to make statements on contemporary history or broader cultural themes. While this kind of pictorial rhetoric was never one of the dominant idioms at the Summer Exhibitions it was a persistent presence and was one of the voices associated with academic culture.

Nevinson's canvases evoke this tradition in an attempt to pose broad questions about contemporary culture. The Rodinesque figure in *Twentieth Century* appears to ponder the violence and chaos that the marching multitudes and gigantic weapons around it evoke. It seems to be a summative representation of modern humanity or at least modern intellectuals. The airplanes and soaring skyscrapers refer to society's increasing reliance on advanced technology and artificial environments. The figure is about to be submerged by the surging waves of people and machinery and two small lines of soldiers appear to be already marching

across its body. The towering buildings and metal beams further constrict the thinker and close off any potential escape route. And yet the figure remains passive, too absorbed in its own ruminations to act out against the forces that threaten to destroy it. The picture seeks to undermine the positivistic narratives of modern progress and questions Western civilisation's ability to solve the problems it has created.

Nevinson here relies on academic precedents yet he also distances himself from them. His canvases' collage-like layering of figures and renderings of contemporary art and technology could hardly find a place within the naturalistic or classicising languages of academic allegories. The painter was demonstrating the new possibilities opened up by his modernist aesthetic, the ways it could move beyond academic models. His overlapping blurry images depicted modernity in a manner not available to the likes of Clausen and the early Sims. Nevinson seems to have been interested in showing how the avant-garde could improve upon academic allegory and expand its range to include the complexity and confusion often seen to characterise twentieth-century experience. Importantly, the artist became an ARA in 1939. After his election it would have been even easier to read the allegories of the 1930s as an attempt to update Burlington House's idioms and re-invigorate them through his quasi-futurist aesthetic. The degree of his success is debatable; most contemporary commentators were unconvinced by his didactic rhetoric. Yet the canvases do register a critical engagement with the Academy's heritage and endeavor to prove its potential relevance.

The avant-garde was even more interested in landscape and portraiture, the genres that dominated Burlington House in the first half of the twentieth century. Spencer Gore's pictures of Letchworth are particularly significant in this respect. In 1912 he temporarily moved to the town with his wife Mollie Kerr to await the birth of their first child.³⁸⁰ The couple

³⁸⁰ Holt, *British Artists*, 113.

spent a few months at the house of fellow artist Harold Gilman where Gore produced seventeen pictures of his surroundings. Paintings like *Letchworth*, *The Road* or *The Beanfield*, *Letchworth* employ a colourful vocabulary derived from French Post-Impressionism to depict a recognisably English rural Arcadia. Their formalist aesthetic allowed them to benefit from the association with the cultivated artificiality of the English countryside that I outlined in the previous chapter. Stylised works like those of Gore could be said to be particularly attuned to the humanised and carefully shaped scenery of the British south, more so than the naturalistic renderings seen at the Academy.

More important, however, was the painter's attempt to blend modernity with traditional rusticity. Ysanne Holt has argued that his images construct an 'ideal modernity', one which reconciles the concepts of town and country, individual autonomy and collective progress.³⁸¹ I have pointed out that in this period many observers felt that the English countryside was threatened by the encroachment of suburbia and motor traffic. Societies like the Council for the Protection of Rural England and the Friends of the Lake District were set up to challenge these trends. Gore, however, suggests that modern developments do not always endanger the pastoral ideal but potentially complement it. His Letchworth pictures position a flourishing rustic community in a modern environment. Letchworth was founded in the Edwardian period as the first garden city, an embodiment of the ideas of social reformer Ebenezer Howard.³⁸² It was meant to combine the advantages of the city and the countryside by keeping industry separate from residential areas and providing numerous green spaces. Gore seems to have believed in the founder's vision: in his canvases the town is presented as a rural utopia. As Holt has shown, these pictures imply that the rustic idyll so prized by British

³⁸¹ Ibid, 113-128.

³⁸² Ibid, 114.

writers at the time can be achieved in modern cities as long as these are thoughtfully planned. Modern architecture and industry are not necessarily inimical to a peaceful existence amid natural beauty and can even make it accessible to a wider public. The painter offers a possible reconciliation between the twentieth century and nostalgic ruralism by depicting the latter flourishing in what was then one of Britain's most recently established communities. This gesture could also be read as a critique of the Academy's landscape imagery which almost always located the countryside's beauty in places untouched by twentieth century architecture or technology. The highly popular works of Benjamin Williams Leader, for instance, avoided all references to the contemporary urban or suburban world. Gore insists that the English pastoral can also be found in new developments and that artists should be aware of this possibility. This rhetoric would have also helped legitimise his innovative pictorial language. If traditional idylls could be found in modern settings than perhaps they could also be depicted by a novel non-naturalistic idiom, even if derived from French precedents. The painter was trying to show that the avant-garde could capture the countryside's appeal as successfully as academic art and even discover it in places where Burlington House rarely looked for it.

Graham Sutherland also attempted to articulate traditional attitudes to the countryside through a modern pictorial vocabulary. His landscapes of the 1930s and 40s often depict large simple brightly coloured masses that bear little resemblance to the artist's favourite locations in Wales. The 1938 *Welsh Landscape* is an almost abstract composition of rounded forms that can only tentatively be identified as a coast and a body of water. Instead of documenting the scenery's appearance such images were meant to express their makers' sensitivity to its perceived beauty and mystery. They present the land as a timeless source of enchanting vigour manifest in its smallest details. In an essay of 1937 Sutherland described

Brimham Rocks in Yorkshire which he had painted for a Shell poster.³⁸³ He perceived the place as a ‘primitive environment’ with a ‘foreboding atmosphere.’³⁸⁴ The piece concludes with a rhetorical question:

This, then, is the outline attempted; but what of the significance of the scene? ‘Is it the natural beauty of proportion... contrasted with the more studied or ecstatic proportion of mental or spiritual consciousness we are accustomed to?’³⁸⁵

The painter emphasised his subtle imaginative response to the scene in a manner reminiscent of the Romantic poets. It is suggested that his depiction of Brimham Rocks is an attempt to translate this subjective state into pictorial form. Kenneth Clark, who wrote an essay for the catalogue of a 1938 exhibition of Sutherland’s paintings, also interpreted them along these lines:

His colour and design are a joy to the eye, but they exist and acquire their force through his magical vision of nature. The strangeness of this vision – and it must seem strange to those who experience it for the first time – is completely unforced, and gradually convinces the spectator, who ends by discovering Graham Sutherland in nature.³⁸⁶

His art was presented as the product of his veneration for the British countryside. As I indicated above, his fascination with the landscape’s more fantastic aspects could be related to a tradition that included Turner, Palmer and Blake, names that Sutherland himself frequently invoked. Sutherland’s landscapes could be framed as a continuation of a long English history of imaginative nature worship that went back to at least the late eighteenth century. Despite the pictures’ avant-garde appearance, they referred to an important strand of the national heritage and claimed to update it for the twentieth century.

The modernists also experimented with portraiture, the genre most firmly associated with the establishment. Jacob Epstein was particularly prolific in this genre, producing

³⁸³ Graham Sutherland, ‘An English Stone Landmark’, in *The Painter’s Object*, ed. Myfanwy Evans (New York: Arno Press, 1970).

³⁸⁴ Ibid, 91.

³⁸⁵ Ibid, the quote is by D. H. Lawrence.

³⁸⁶ Kenneth Clark, *Recent Works of Graham Sutherland* (London: Rosenberg & Helft Gallery, 1938), 2.

numerous busts of prominent society figures and intellectuals. In these works he seems to have been engaging with the belief that portraiture should reveal the sitter's inner self, a perception that, as I have shown, was also promoted by the Academy's champions. He hardly ever relied on naturalism; the sitters' features are usually highly stylised and distorted. Epstein seems to have used this approach to make statements about his clients' perceived character traits, ones usually related to their respective professions. In his depiction of Albert Einstein (1933) the exaggerated wrinkles on the prominent forehead suggest intense cognitive activity. The abnormally large alert eyes of *Ralph Vaughan Williams* (1950) were likely meant to indicate superior insight, the ability to perceive things hidden to others. These traits could not have been rendered as emphatic within an idiom that aimed for strict verisimilitude. Epstein's looser Rodinesque approach to form allowed him to exaggerate certain aspects of his renderings. Many observers were convinced by these stylistic choices: in 1920 the critic John Cournos asserted that 'his busts are now almost universally proclaimed to be masterpieces of the first quality, rare in any age.'³⁸⁷ Epstein's method encouraged viewers to perceive the works as depictions of inner character rather than outward appearance. The sculptor could claim that his portraits were less superficial than those of Burlington House, less engaged with looks and garments and more concerned with psychological interiority. These objects were conceived as an implicit argument that modernist visual vocabulary is better equipped to tackle such studies of the inner self than the academic tradition.

³⁸⁷ John Cournos, 'Jacob Epstein: Artist-Philosopher', *The Studio*, July 1920, Vol. 79, 173.

Modernism and the Great War

The new movements were also competing with the establishment in depictions of the global conflicts. The majority of official war artists employed in the First World War were members of the Academy and the institution was expected to produce an authoritative visual account of the battlefields. However, the depictions of war seen at the Summer Exhibitions were often said to be far less successful than those offered by the modernists. Konody was highly disappointed by the 1915 show: 'It is extraordinary that the profound significance of the world-struggle should have failed to stimulate the imagination of our artists.'³⁸⁸ He found the majority of war pictures full of 'exaggeration and mawkish sentiment.'³⁸⁹ This failure was blamed on the lack of 'personal experience' of fighting itself, a charge that could be used even against the official war artists who were hardly ever given access to the front lines. The *Illustrated London News* concurred:

The war is held at rather more than arm's length by the painters... In no case has the easel been set up within sight of the trenches, and only in one or two cases do you receive so much as an impression of actuality, or come up against things that bear themselves as if they had been seen by the very eyes of the man who sets them down.³⁹⁰

In contrast, the avant-garde's efforts were seen as highly convincing. In 1919 the paintings commissioned by the Ministry of Information and the Imperial War Museum (many of them not by official war artists) were shown at Burlington House. C. J. Holmes, then director of the National Gallery, saw the event as the avant-garde's greatest achievement to that date:

It is no use blinking the facts. The present exhibition at Burlington House marks the arrival of a new artistic movement, as novel and startling as that which began some sixty years ago, when the first works of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood stung a drowsy world into fury. The Post-Impressionists, the Cubists, the Futurists, have indicated for years that change was in the air: and on the Continent, where change is perhaps apprehended more quickly than in England, the younger generation of painters has devoted itself without reserve to exploring the newly revealed possibilities... The Continental work, however able, had little or no substance in it; the small group of experimentalists in England seemed

³⁸⁸ P. G. Konody, 'The Royal Academy', *The Observer*, 2 May 1915, 13.

³⁸⁹ Ibid, 13.

³⁹⁰ 'The War and the Academy', *Illustrated London News*, 8 May 1915, 10.

to have no better fortune. Then came the war, and it occurred to one or two generous and far-seeing minds that here was the missing link between promise and performance – here was the chance for the new men and new ideas to make good.³⁹¹

Holmes believed that the modernist idioms were perfectly suited to the dislocation and trauma of twentieth-century warfare. The distortions and non-naturalistic colours of the new painting seemed to be a better description of extreme confusion and suffering than the placid naturalism cultivated by the Academy. Colin Gill's large canvas *Heavy Artillery* (1919), one of the most talked-about exhibits, displayed a plethora of brightly coloured details in which human limbs and machine parts could be easily mistaken for each other. The complexity of the loud colour scheme was felt to be an adequate illustration of the shocks of the front lines. The image's success may have been partly due to the fact that its maker did see action (he was invalidated in 1918 due to gas poisoning) which encouraged critics to describe it as the authentic expression of a soldier's experience.³⁹² However, it was apparently also perceived as an original and effective solution to the unprecedented pictorial problems presented by modern warfare. Nevinson's works were also praised, *The Studio* commanding the

...deliberate cubic structure and abstract vision in those extraordinarily vivid war-pictures of his which simply compelled us to adopt conceptions of modern warfare and its real significance more convincing than any battle-pictures we had ever seen.³⁹³

The painter's unconventional idiom was said to bring the viewer much closer to the reality of the trenches. The avant-garde competed with the establishment in describing the war and its novel languages came to be seen as the more successful articulation of the century's new terrors.

³⁹¹ C. J. Holmes, 'The Nation's War Paintings', *The Manchester Guardian*, 12 December 1919, 8.

³⁹² Elliott and Llewellyn, *True to Life*, 25.

³⁹³ Malcolm Saloman, 'The Art of C. R. W. Nevinson', *The Studio*, December 1919, Vol. 78, 95-96.

Modernism and the National Character

Another example of the modernists trying to outdo the Academy at its own game is their partial adoption of the discourse of national character. In the first two chapters I showed how Burlington House made use of the widespread belief that the English were practical, down-to-earth and moderate. The avant-garde was able to tap into a different but equally prominent myth about the nation's 'natural' temper. Since the Early Modern period the English had repeatedly described themselves as proudly independent and freedom-loving. Krishan Kumar has shown that this rhetoric originated in the seventeenth century but acquired its modern historicised form in the nineteenth when it entered school curricula and became a central tenet in the establishment's propaganda.³⁹⁴ Writers came to portray the English as passionate defenders of liberty who could not bear despotic rulers and always fought for the right to speak their minds. These qualities were said to have become manifest in pivotal historical events such as the signing of the Magna Carta, the Glorious Revolution and the nineteenth-century electoral Reform Acts. The relative absence of strict press censorship in the interwar period, especially when compared to the situation in the totalitarian regimes of the time, was also invoked as a proof of every English person's will to shape his or her own destiny. In a speech published in 1928 Stanley Baldwin, the current Conservative Prime Minister, wrote:

If I were to be asked what two the root principles are which we should always keep in view in trying to decide on a political issue, in judging of legislation, in judging of political action, I think I should say common sense and the preservation of what always has been the most precious thing in this country – individual freedom.³⁹⁵

As might be expected the victory over totalitarian Germany in 1945 made this self-congratulatory libertarianism even more popular. In 1947 political scientist Ernest Barker

³⁹⁴ Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 202–207.

³⁹⁵ Stanley Baldwin, *Our Inheritance* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Limited, 1928), 10.

edited a collection of essays that celebrated different aspects of the national character.³⁹⁶ In his paper on English individualism Richard Law, MP, asked rhetorically:

What is it, this abstraction for which the Englishman is always ready to fight, and to die? It is not for the power of England. It is not for the riches of England. It is not for ‘the folk’. And most certainly it is not for the rulers of England. What does he fight for? He fights for his liberties, for the right to do as he pleases with his own, within the framework of the laws which he himself has created.³⁹⁷

Individual liberty and the right of self-assertion are presented as the country’s highest values and the ultimate reason for the sacrifices made in two world wars.

The modernists were able to use this belief in English individualism to their advantage. Avant-garde aesthetics often emphasised an artist’s originality and authenticity, her or his capacity to create radically innovative work that broke new ground and stood apart from mainstream visual culture. Practitioners of all corners of the modernist field legitimised their art’s departures from the conventions of naturalism and the interpretative difficulties it posed by describing it as the authentic expression of their innermost selves. In his manifesto ‘Long Live the Vortex!’ published in the first issue of *Blast* (1914) Wyndham Lewis proclaimed:

Blast will be popular, essentially. It will not appeal to any particular class, but to the fundamental and popular instincts in every class and description of people, TO THE INDIVIDUAL. The moment a man feels or realises himself as an artist, he ceases to belong to any milieu or time... We want to make in England not a popular art, not a revival of lost folk art, or a romantic fostering of such unnatural conditions, but to make individuals, wherever found.³⁹⁸

Vorticism does not promote the interests of any social group, we are told, it looks for artists capable of expressing their own uniqueness, their position apart from any form of mainstream culture and from each other. Presumably Lewis saw himself as the individualist *par excellence*, capable of resisting the calls to conform and to forge aesthetic models of his own. For all his

³⁹⁶ Ernest Barker, ed. *The Character of England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947).

³⁹⁷ Richard Law, ‘The Individual and the Community’, in *The Character of England*, ed. Barker, 33.

³⁹⁸ Wyndham Lewis, ‘Long Live the Vortex’, *Blast*, June 1914, 7.

differences from the vorticists Stanley Spencer had similar beliefs; in his private notes of 1932-1937 he wrote:

My figure pictures are painted to suit *my* taste & anyone's taste which happens to coincide with mine. They can be seen with comfort & taken in by the eye & pupil... but their... final object is the world, which I want & wish to be in & which I attempt to create & present by means of these paintings.³⁹⁹

This discourse could be made to fit with the image of robust English independence and love of liberty painted by patriotic writers like Richard Law. Indeed, in such a context the modernists could be presented as more authentically English than their academic colleagues. The latter emphasised their reliance on precedent and tradition, their work's embeddedness in a social consensus. The avant-garde, on the other hand, proclaimed its independence from convention in a manner that could be associated with the nation's vaunted self-reliance throughout history. These artists could be said to possess a set of time-honoured English virtues which were in a certain sense at least as traditional as the values upheld by the Academy.

This chapter has explored the modernists' engagement with academic art and the ways in which it used it to define some of its own practices. I have argued that despite its publicised hostility towards Burlington House the avant-garde found the institution impossible to ignore and often referred to its visual culture. The new movements competed with it in their appropriation of earlier artistic epochs and claimed that they were capable of digesting a wider range of historical material than the RAs who usually concentrated on Early Modern and nineteenth-century art. The avant-garde also sought to adopt and improve upon the genres traditionally associated with the Academy and demonstrate that its innovations could perform these traditional functions better than the naturalism favoured by the establishment. Nevinson experimented with allegory while Gore and Epstein attempted to show that

³⁹⁹ Stanley Spencer, Numbered Writings, c. 1932-1937, Tate Archive.

landscape and portraiture, the genres that came to define the Summer Exhibitions in the twentieth century and that were most closely linked with the British pictorial canon as usually conceived, could be better served by idioms inspired by recent continental experiments. Furthermore, the modernists sought to prove that they could use popular discourses of the national character at least as effectively as the academicians. The innovators could claim that the individualism and independence of mind allegedly exhibited in their works were quintessentially English virtues that were rarely to be found at Burlington House. While the avant-garde's engagements with the Academy were meant to boost its own profile they also proved that the older institution had to be taken into account by anyone who wished to propose a new direction for the country's art.

Conclusion

1951 saw an important turning point in the Academy's policy. In January the exhibition 'L'École de Paris 1900-1950' opened its doors. As the title suggests, it was almost entirely devoted to the avant-garde movements that had flourished in the French capital. It was the first show at Burlington House to focus exclusively on modernism. While the Summer Exhibitions had been presenting works that were described as 'modern' for years these were always isolated examples, vastly outnumbered by traditional naturalistic pieces. In the second chapter I showed that Burlington House shared some of modernism's aesthetic concerns but in the century's first half these were usually contained within a realistic idiom. 'L'École de Paris' marked the first occasion when the institution suggested that the new art merited thorough and detailed consideration in itself. The critics were aware of the event's importance: Nigel Gosling wrote:

The first action of every art-lover as he enters Burlington House to visit the exhibition of the 'École de Paris 1900-1950' must be to raise his hat in salute to the courage of the Royal Academy in showing these works within its premises.⁴⁰⁰

G. S. Whittet opined that 'the educational purpose of the Royal Academy has seldom been better demonstrated' and added that such a comprehensive survey of recent French art had never been seen in England.⁴⁰¹ It appears that the exhibition was thought to have eclipsed in importance even Roger Fry's seminal show of 1910. It is true that by 1951 the French fauvists and cubists were hardly at the cutting edge of visual innovation. They had been replaced by post-war developments such as the abstract expressionism of New York which at the time found no echo in Burlington House. However, the large-scale admission of the Parisian

⁴⁰⁰ Nigel Gosling, 'L'École de Paris', *The Observer*, 14 January 1951, 6.

⁴⁰¹ G. S. Whittet, 'London Commentary', *The Studio*, April 1951, Vol. 141, 120.

twentieth century works on Piccadilly did signal a new openness towards modernism and an admission that the Academy could no longer relegate it to a secondary position.

The change of outlook implied by 'L'École de Paris' proved to be long-lasting. The Summer Exhibitions' engagement with modernism only intensified in the following years and decades. In 1955 'Perspex' noted that the academicians had become more tolerant of pictorial experiments:

...the Hanging Committee has included a token offering of many aspects of painting which would only have arrived there over the dead bodies of certain PRAs, and... instead of relegating these to a room or so at the end... they are much more spread around the galleries.⁴⁰²

In 1959 Whittet observed that each year the Academy was offering a greater variety of modernist art.⁴⁰³ By 1961 David Sylvester could make a confident claim:

The reform of the Royal Academy is not a pious or impious hope. It is – so much is clear from this year's Summer Exhibition – an accomplished fact... What has happened at the Royal Academy is that the prevailing style has ceased to be the parody of colour-photography which is generally taken to be the typical Academy manner of our times. The prevailing style now employs broad simplifications and slight rhythmical distortions (sometimes a bit whimsical in character), the shallow space of Post-Impressionism, and colours all mixed with greys making for an overall neutrality of tone.⁴⁰⁴

Naturalism was no longer the defining idiom of Burlington House. It had been replaced by a mode of pictorial stylisation similar to the work of Duncan Grant and Mark Gertler of earlier decades. Sylvester recognised that this visual language was largely seen as outdated by the 1961 but he described the change as a positive development, bringing the Academy closer to a true appreciation of modern art. The paintings of William Roberts, who exhibited there regularly in the 1950s and was made an Associate in 1958, are a good example of the new academic mainstream. *Trooping the Colour* of 1958-1959 presents a traditional and vaguely patriotic subject through monumental simplified figures that give it some credibility as a

⁴⁰² 'Perspex', 'Current Shows and Comments', *Apollo*, June 1955, Vol. 61, 161.

⁴⁰³ G. S. Whittet, 'Perpendicular Royal Academy', *The Studio*, August 1959, Vol. 157, 55.

⁴⁰⁴ David Sylvester, 'Half a Revolution', *The Observer*, 30 April 1961, 25.

modernist statement. Such mild formalist treatment of inoffensive scenes came to dominate the Summer Exhibitions.

One reason for this adoption of modernism was its acceptance by the state and mainstream media during and after the Second World War. Brian Foss has argued that in this period the British government demonstrated a new willingness to commission avant-garde works and employ them on prominent occasions.⁴⁰⁵ While naturalism was not completely renounced, the state became more tolerant of experimental approaches than ever before as its support for Moore and John Piper, amongst others, shows. Foss suggests that this greater openness to modernism was intended as a demonstration of the authorities' encouragement of unorthodox positions and original ideas.⁴⁰⁶ The establishment wished to be perceived as open-minded and supportive of intellectual minorities, radically opposed to the dogmatic censorship practiced by the Nazis. Britain was to be seen as a land of free thought and expression, the guardian of all the Enlightenment values threatened by Hitler's oppressive regime. The authorities also employed a rhetoric of aesthetic disinterestedness: Kenneth Clark, chairman of the War Artists' Advisory Committee, claimed to support artistic worth only and to shun overt propaganda. The Committee was presented as a democratic proponent of beauty and authenticity that had no interest in buttressing the ruling elite. In this environment in which modernism had come to articulate official ideology the Academy would have had an interest in supporting the newly approved visual languages. This would have allowed the institution to pose as a champion of the same Enlightenment values that the state claimed to have fought for in the war and to have been embodied in the newly formed welfare state.

⁴⁰⁵ Brian Foss, 'Message and Medium: Government Patronage, National Identity and National Culture in Britain 1939-1945', *Oxford Art Journal* 14, issue 2 (1991), 52-72.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid, 52-53.

Charles Saumarez Smith has argued that Alfred Munnings' infamous speech of 1949 acted as a catalyst for change.⁴⁰⁷ In his presidential address at the annual RA banquet, which was broadcast on the radio, the painter issued a rather flowery condemnation of all modern art. He described his own attempts to preserve the Academy's naturalistic traditions:

I said to the students: 'If you paint a tree – for God's sake try and make it look like a tree, and if you paint a sky, try and make it look like a sky...'⁴⁰⁸

Munnings accused some of the other academicians of being too tolerant of new artistic fashions and boasted that the country's social elite was on his side.⁴⁰⁹ In his autobiography he claimed he had received numerous letters in support of the speech but much of the press was less enthusiastic.⁴¹⁰ *The Manchester Guardian*, for instance, compared the speech to the neighing of a horse in a scornful allusion to the painter's numerous depictions of these animals.⁴¹¹ The event was widely seen to present the Academy as an aggressively conservative institution that was completely out of touch with developments beyond its walls. Apparently, a sufficient number of RAs was convinced that a more emphatic change was needed after Munnings' public denunciation of all aesthetic experiments. If the Academy was to prove that it was not obsolete in the postwar art world in which modernism was fast becoming the new mainstream it needed a new direction and a different kind of leadership. In 1950 Gerald Kelly was elected President, a person who, according to *The Observer*, showed 'evidence of a liberal sympathy and tolerance' of modernism.⁴¹² Kelly was to prove this the next year by helping organise 'L'École de Paris'.

⁴⁰⁷ Charles Saumarez Smith, '1949 The Munnings Year', *The Royal Academy Summer Exhibition: A Chronicle 1769-2018*.

⁴⁰⁸ Alfred Munnings, *The Finish* (London: Museum Press Limited, 1952), 145.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 145.

⁴¹⁰ Munnings, *The Finish*, 144.

⁴¹¹ 'Pray Silence...', *The Manchester Guardian*, 30 April 1949, 6.

⁴¹² Nevile Wallis, 'An Unusual Academy', *The Observer*, 30 April 1950, 6.

The 1951 exhibition marked the end of an era for the Academy. In the first half of the twentieth century the institution had remained a bastion of naturalism and a preserver of the nineteenth-century traditions in landscape painting and portraiture. While there had been some changes, particularly when it came to its gradually increasing tolerance for modern art, Piccadilly was mostly consistent in its aesthetic commitments in the decades following the full emergence of modernism in the early 1910s. It had largely maintained the position that realism was the most authentic expression of the national spirit and most adequate response to the achievements of past masters. In this period the idiom was also seen as highly accessible and theoretically uncomplicated which enabled Burlington House to present its art as an appeal to common sense, one that could engage a wide audience. The RAs renounced the pretentious verbosity and claims to genius of the modernists in favour of the persona of the down-to-earth profit-conscious professional. They avoided the allegedly foreign and unwholesome eccentricities of the avant-garde and addressed a large public that was conceived as sane, sober and unequivocally British.

This stance proved highly useful during the world wars when the government required accessible patriotic imagery. Most of the official war artists were members of the Academy and their work was widely disseminated. They also played a key role in the commemorative projects commissioned after the conflicts and helped shape the country's perception of these unparalleled events. Yet among the regular exhibitors at Burlington House there were also artists like Sims and Orpen who sought to undermine the official narratives of sacrifice and duty and those like Frampton and Sargent who employed naturalism to question its own reliability and, by extension, its claims to represent the truth about the wars.

While 1951 was a new beginning for the Academy, it is important to keep in mind that there were also some important continuities in its attitudes towards modernism. As I showed

in the second chapter, academic artists between 1910 and 1951 were highly interested in formalist aesthetics and incorporated them in their naturalistic pieces. This tactic enabled them to appropriate the high cultural rhetoric of formal analysis while still benefitting from realism's association with the national character and common sense. They could claim to create an art saturated with multiple aesthetic meanings, one that could appeal to both the connoisseur and the average middle-class visitor of the Summer Exhibitions. Additionally, this mediation of artistic extremes inscribed the Academy within a larger trend in interwar British culture, one that privileged the middlebrow in literature, cinema and music. This type of cultural production sought to appeal to a relatively large audience while maintaining aesthetic respectability and avoiding the perceived vulgarity of cheap entertainment. The middlebrow claimed to digest contemporary trends in a cautious and thoughtful way in order to form better and more considered responses to their challenges than the allegedly reckless and self-absorbed creations of the avant-garde. In the 1950s the Academy gradually abandoned naturalism and became more open to the stylisations and distortions that had marked much modernist art. But the continuing importance of formalist aesthetics formed a link with the first half of the twentieth century.

In the third chapter I showed how landscape and portraiture became the dominant genres of the four decades following the Edwardian period. Naturalistic landscape painting was presented both as one of the finest fruits of British heritage and as the best medium for celebrating the country's natural beauty. It also came to serve as a reminder of the countryside's need for protection from the potentially destructive forces of modernity and as inspiration to the newly formed preservation societies. Portraiture retained its popularity with patrons and was perceived as a way of forming a historical record of the country's elite.

Narrative art lost much of its authority in this period but remained an important presence at the Summer Exhibitions.

The fourth chapter traced the modernists' engagement with academic art and politics. While the avant-garde widely publicised its distaste for Burlington House the institution proved difficult to ignore and the new movements often referred to its idioms and heritage in their attempts to define their own aims and achievements. The modernists criticised the Academy's readings of past art in order to propose a more eclectic and wide-ranging reappraisal of art from various cultures and periods. The avant-garde also sought to demonstrate that its experiments could improve upon some of the RAs' preferred genres and adapt them to the demands of the twentieth century. Gore and Epstein, for instance, tried to show that their radically non-naturalistic approaches could perform some of landscape and portraiture's traditional functions better than the products on offer on Piccadilly. Additionally, the new movements proved that they could employ the highly authoritative discourse of national character just as shrewdly as the academicians as they fashioned a rhetoric of originality and free thinking that was in tune with some widely held beliefs about the English mindset.

The central aim of this thesis was to show that academic art of the first half of the twentieth century was often seen as an important, even vital, contribution to British culture and to determine what functions it performed. I demonstrated that naturalism was still seen as a highly relevant tool for conceiving the national tradition that could engage the broadest possible public. I argued that formalism played a far more important role at Burlington House than is usually assumed and that academic artists combined the two aesthetic approaches to create a middlebrow idiom that could aspire to high-cultural respectability while remaining accessible. The thesis has shown how landscape painting and portraiture became the

dominant genres at the Summer Exhibitions and why they were perceived as important. Finally, I have established that even the modernists often found it necessary to refer to the Academy's practices and even attempted to perform some of its traditional functions.

My work has offered some new ways to think about naturalism, formalism and the manner in which they could function together. It has suggested that the Academy used them to engage with important debates about twentieth-century culture and to argue for the relevance of tradition in a world that was increasingly difficult to relate to previous experience. The thesis has also introduced some new perspectives on landscape, portraiture and narrative painting and these genres' new roles in the twentieth century. I have suggested that the landscapes at Burlington House were associated with the movement for the protection of the English countryside and that their formalist aesthetic was thought to articulate this scenery's designed character. I have shown that, after the Edwardian period, narrative lost its prominent position but remained an important reminder of the Academy's heritage and came to be related to the increasingly influential film industry. Additionally, my research has drawn attention to the importance that Burlington House had for the modernists and has revealed that the avant-garde often referred to the institution in its practices. Throughout this project my aim has been to offer some new perspectives on this period's visual culture and to reveal the central role that the artists of Piccadilly often played in it.

Naturally, there are many further avenues for research when it comes to this often overlooked period of the Academy's history. It could be useful to study in greater detail the works that academic artists showed at other venues and how these compared to their products at Burlington House. Such an examination could further help us define the visual identity that the institution sought to cultivate. The personal relations of RAs and ARAs can also be explored further as these can determine whether there were particular patterns that

made certain artists more likely to be elected than others. Another topic that has not been addressed in much detail here is patronage: an investigation of the people who bought and commissioned works from the academicians, their tastes and preferences, could shed new light on the social circumstances that shaped Burlington House's cultural agenda.

Academic art of the first half of the twentieth century was more complex and multifaceted than is usually assumed. It engaged with a great variety of discourses in its attempts to shape a visual culture that could be relevant to twentieth-century experience. The Academy contributed to debates about social change, the preservation of the countryside and the essence of the national character as it sought to prove that its practices reflected present realities better than the modernist experiments. Some of its artists also challenged the public's expectations even while using traditional idioms thereby demonstrating that naturalism and the established pictorial genres were less predictable and stable than many critics believed. These strategies and aspirations proved difficult to ignore and inspired much writing in the press, many visits to Burlington House and even some avant-garde artworks. I hope this thesis has shown that the Academy of that period can be similarly stimulating to scholars and deepen our understanding of British visual culture and its complex relationship with the twentieth century.

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