

British Art History and the History of British Art

It is a well-known fact that art history struggled for a long time to gain a foothold in British academia. In 1952, Nikolaus Pevsner pondered about the perception of art history as “an un-English activity”; two years later Erwin Panofsky quipped that the British treat artworks like their mistresses: as something to admire in private, without profaning their beauty by too much analysis (Pevsner 1952; Panofsky 1954).

AN UN-ENGLISH ACTIVITY?

Both statements just quoted are by German-born scholars, and this is perhaps telling. The common opinion assumes that the British were somehow temperamentally not inclined towards the rigorous study of art. The (belated) establishment of art history in Britain is thus seen as closely connected with the arrival of the “Hitler émigrés” (many of which were associated with the Warburg Institute), who came to Britain in the wake of the Nazi’s rise to power (e. g. Wuttke 1991; Haskell 1988). The Germans, it is said, taught the British a historically scrupulous way of studying artworks, and to analyse them with reference to broader cultural and intellectual contexts. Their arrival on Britannia’s shores coincided fortuitously with the foundation of the Courtauld Institute of Art in 1932 – the first institution providing an undergraduate degree in the subject (earlier attempts to establish degree-level teaching in the subject, such as a “Diploma in Fine Art” offered by Aberdeen University from 1924–33, remained short-lived). In the first years of its existence, the teaching offerings of the Courtauld

were indeed heavily interlaced with courses by émigré scholars. The critic Frank Rutter even wrote, in 1933, an indignant comment about the Courtauld for the *Times*, titled “No British need apply” (*Sunday Times*, 10 December 1933).

Much critical labour has been invested in reconstructing these debates about the institutional place of the discipline in war-time Britain (see also Fleckner/Mack [eds.] 2015; Anderson et al. [eds.] 2019). Considerably less attention has been paid, however, to the medium-term impact of these developments. Fast-forward thirty years, to the early 1960s, and the situation of art history in Britain might come as a surprise. In 1961, Nikolaus Pevsner and Benedict Nicolson conducted a survey about the state of the field – and it is fair to say that not much had changed in the past decades. There were, undoubtedly, more art historians working at British universities, but they still led a niche existence. A dedicated undergraduate degree remained only available at the Courtauld (Nicolson 1961, 163). The subject was well-represented in other institutions, such as Leeds, Manchester, and at Birkbeck College, as well as in Scotland (Edinburgh and Glasgow Universities both had sizable art history faculties) – but opportunities to qualify expressly as an art historian remained slim.

This only changed dramatically a few years later, between c. 1965 and 1975, when a large number of art history departments sprung up all across the country. The subject’s expansion went hand-in-hand with seismic changes in the British university system and the arrival of the so-called ‘plate glass universities’, seven new foundations in counties across England. By the mid-1960s, however, most émigré art historians had left Britain. Some, like the Byzantinist Otto Demus and the medievalist Otto Pächt, remigrated to the continent; others such as Ernst Kitzinger, Peter Brieger, or Rudolf Wittkower, decided to seek their fortune in

the United States – a country where the subject was more fully established and where institutions with deep pockets provided attractive pay packages. The lack of opportunities for art historians in Britain meant that moving on was the better choice for many (Hönes 2019). The staff lists of art history departments in the 1960s consequently give little purchase to the common hypothesis of a wholesale import of ‘Germanic’ art history to Britain. At most universities, the art history faculty consisted entirely of British-born and -educated scholars. Crucially, a significant number of them specialised in the history of *British* art.

This article takes this observation as the starting point to reflect on a crucial phase of British art history, between c. 1965 and 1975. As I hope to demonstrate in the following, the rise of British art history seems to have fewer debts to the German school than commonly assumed. In fact, important British art historians positioned themselves in explicit opposition to the ‘continental’ ways of doing art history. The establishment of art history in Britain in fact went hand-in-hand with a re-evaluation of British art. This was not purely born out of intellectual conviction, let alone chauvinistic nationalism. Instead, I propose that focusing on British art was a strategic decision that allowed the discipline to gain a foothold in an academic landscape that was not necessarily the most receptive environment. An avowed focus on British art allowed to cultivate the subject as a minor pathway within other degree programmes, and to ‘dock’ fledgling departments to existing and established subjects such as History and English. In the late 1960s, art history found a sure footing in Britain – but it had to do so by sneaking in through the backdoor.

MAKING AN ENTRY FOR ART HISTORY

The composition of many art history departments in 1960s Britain was distinctly unusual when compared to modern expectations. Instead of achieving a certain representative coverage for the subject (for example by hiring a Medievalist *and* a

Modernist, a specialist in Italian *and* Northern European art, etc.), many universities seem to have encouraged a certain monoculture. A few examples might illustrate the point. In 1967, the University of Leicester appointed Hamish Miles as Professor of the History of Art. Miles had published several smaller pieces on French Renaissance art, but his main area of expertise was the art of David Wilkie – the renowned master of his native Scotland. The University of Leicester made this appointment in the knowledge that further investment was about to come its way. Two years earlier, the Paul Mellon Foundation (the precursor of today’s Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art) had decided to fund a lectureship in modern British art at Leicester. In 1968, the university appointed Luke Herrmann to this position – a specialist on JMW Turner, and on English drawings of the eighteenth century. Programmatically, Leicester opted for two appointees with exactly the same specialism.

This was not unique; scholars like Hamish Miles had encountered similar setups throughout their career. Prior to joining Leicester, Miles had worked at Glasgow University, where students could enrol within the Scottish joint-honours system for a degree in the “History of Fine Art”. Andrew McLaren Young, the founder of the department, specialised on James Abbott McNeill Whistler, though his early death prevented the publication of a planned catalogue raisonné of the artist’s work (Farr 1975, 487). At Glasgow, McLaren Young was joined by Hamish Miles as lecturer, and David Irwin as assistant lecturer – the latter being an expert on British Neoclassicism. In effect, the Glasgow department consisted of three scholars, all working on British art of the 18th and 19th century. The pattern proliferated. In 1971, David Irwin was tasked with founding an art history department at the University of Aberdeen. His first appointment there was David Mannings, a scholar of British portraiture of the 18th century. Again, the department consisted of two men who had virtually the same specialism, and in particular a heavy focus on British art. The list of similar appointment strategies could be continued: Birmingham, with the Barber Institute is another example.

There were of course exceptions to this rule. The University of East Anglia (another plate glass university) for example decided, in 1965, to set up a fully-fledged art history department in one fell swoop, and advertised three art historical positions, covering medieval, early-modern, and modern art. It is telling for the state of the discipline that this bold endeavour caused concerns among other universities who were planning on hiring art historians around the same time: there was real fear that the pool of well-qualified, trained historians of art would be drained by East Anglia's initiative. But this, as said, was an exception to the rule. Most fledgling art history departments began by hiring a specialist in British art – whether in Bath (with Kenneth Garlick), York (with Peter Newton), or Nottingham (with Alastair Smart).

CARVING OUT A NICHE

Such 'monocultures' clearly were too common to be considered a mere coincidence. The focus on British art is particularly surprising given that this area was often looked down upon by many, even within the United Kingdom. The Courtauld in particular had a reputation of side-lining British heritage. When Michael Kitson, in the early 1950s, told Anthony Blunt that he wanted to write a PhD on Joshua Reynolds, the Courtauld's Director just sniffed at him and said "Certainly not. You'll work on Claude Lorrain" (PMC 59/3/1). Decades later, Kitson himself still echoed this view ("in the pictorial arts this country's achievement has not only been comparatively modest") – even after having become a leading scholar of 18th-century British art (Kitson/Wedgwood 1964, 1). The intense attention to British art within academia thus marks a change in fortunes.

This was at least in part motivated by administrative and strategic considerations. In his survey of the state of academic art history in Britain, Ben Nicolson stated that "the ancient tradition of specialisation in departments is breaking down". For many of his colleagues, this was a desirable and promising opportunity. In a nutshell, this statement summarises the strategy pursued by numerous art historians to secure their subject a place at the table.

The strategic aim was not primarily to establish art history as an independent subject, but to start securing and defining a niche for the discipline within existing academic frameworks. In many universities, the focus on British art seems a peculiar exercise of academic "boundary-work" (Gieryn 1983) that attempted to leave the borders of the discipline permeable.

In fact, many art historians explicitly argued against art history as a stand-alone degree. In 1967, Hamish Miles delivered his inaugural lecture as Professor of the History of Art at Leicester University. This was an opportunity to make a programmatic statement and to present a strong case for the new arrival. But the tone of Miles' lecture is surprisingly sceptical, repeatedly doubting the maturity of his own field of study: "As an undergraduate discipline, it seems to me that art history is open to suspicion". By and large, art history would be "a borrower" who relies on skills and methods taught by "a discipline of a cognate kind" such as History or Philology. On the other hand, such an orientation also allowed to form a strong opposition against the Formalism of Roger Fry, with its intense interest in psychology and normative aesthetics (Fry 1939). This historical and factual approach to art led perhaps indeed to a uniquely 'British' way of writing art history – as epitomised, for example, by Francis Haskell's and Brinsley Ford's studies on the history of classical receptions, patronage, and aristocratic communities of taste (Haskell/Penny 1981; Ingamells 1998).

The title of Miles' inaugural lecture, "Art as History" is thus to be understood quite literally: art history should remain a subsidiary subject taught alongside other "sub-histories" (Miles 1967, 13). An independent practice of art history, Miles argued, would only keep the subject in the confines of self-sufficient connoisseurship. This sentiment was echoed by many. As Basil Taylor, the director of the Paul Mellon Foundation, wrote in 1964: "We believe that the study of British art can be most fruitfully pursued in close contact with the study of history, particularly social, economic and local history and of literature". This means opting against "art history as a self-sufficient undergraduate

study”, integrating it instead in existing History and English literature degrees. Taylor argued against studying “British art too parochially” (PMC 26/1/7, Letter by Basil Taylor to Lord James of Rusholme, 7 October 1964).

Apart from Leicester, the Mellon Foundation also supported the establishment of a lectureship at York University. The choice for both universities was based on the potential of synergies between the new appointees’ work with existing strengths in other fields of study. The appointees pursued this mission successfully: At York, the art historian Peter Newton invested most of his energies in developing new interdisciplinary ventures, namely a post-graduate degree in “Medieval Studies” (PMC 26/1/7, Letter by Peter Newton to Basil Taylor, 12 May 66). This was a model that was tried-and-tested elsewhere. The University of Nottingham, for example, offered art history as an option for students of English and History; Reading taught it as a subsidiary in French honours, and Manchester made a course in the subject compulsory for honours students in Italian. None of these departments would have had the staff capacity to deliver a full undergraduate programme – making a pathway as a minor the only viable option for art history. Some departments of course grew rapidly during the 1970s: Aberdeen, for example, started out in 1971 with offering just a first-year course, covering the history of art “from the 18th century to the present day”. The offerings grew as the staffing base expanded.

This, again, corroborates the assumption that a focus on British art in part had logistical reasons. On the other hand, it is difficult to see a comprehensive intellectual rationale behind this practice. Similarities to the Warburg Institute’s ideal of “combined historical studies”, and an interdisciplinary *Kulturwissenschaft* are indeed purely incidental. Most protagonists cited so far seem to have cultivated a striking scepticism against the “dizzying aether known as the history of ideas” (Miles 1967, 13). Basil Taylor even argued that the continental (read: Warburgian) preoccupation with iconography would be the key reason for the neglect of British art in research thus far: “The historian of

art whose interests and training have been controlled by a study of continental conditions and the sequence of continental styles may well find uninteresting, even unimportant what is, in fact, most characteristic of English art” (Taylor 1955, 13). Though Taylor argued against studying British art “too parochially”, this very epithet could of course legitimately be applied to his own agenda.

The notion of ‘parochialism’ highlights another peculiarity of academic art history in Britain. It is notable that the preference for historians of British art was a strikingly provincial affair. The powerhouses of the metropolis, as already indicated, cared comparatively little for the national heritage, at least as far as the post-medieval periods were concerned. Oxford and Cambridge sided with the latter: the first appointees in art history at England’s oldest universities were Edgar Wind and Michael Jaffé – two scholars who were known primarily for their work on the Italian Renaissance and Flemish Baroque respectively. British art instead became a staple in cities such as Leicester and Aberystwyth, Hull and Birmingham. For the student bodies in such places, the history of British art might also have constituted a comparatively accessible field of study.

WHICH ART HISTORY?

Most protagonists and developments sketched in this essay have received little attention in historiographical literature. The history of art history in Britain is by no means an over-researched subject – but even the few accounts devoted to this topic give short shrift to the 1960s debates about the place of art history in British academia. In the common perception, scholars like Miles and Taylor (and Irwin, and Kitson, etc.) are eclipsed by international luminaries such as Ernst Gombrich and Anthony Blunt, the Directors of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes respectively – and understandably so. For an intellectual history of British art history, these heavy weights were infinitely more impactful than the modest contributions of most academic art historians

working in the provinces. Even scholars such as Ellis K. Waterhouse and Oliver Millar – the greatest experts on British art of their time – appear somewhat pale and traditional in comparison. And yet, these historians of British art are arguably more representative for what counted as ‘normal’ art history in 1960s Britain. Placing an historiographic spotlight onto their concerns yields, as this essay hopes to have shown, fresh insights regarding the institutional history of the discipline in Britain.

In the end, art history in Britain found its institutional feet in a fraught time of transition. In the 1970s, big ideological battles about the future of the humanities were raging elsewhere. The impact of Deconstruction, Marxism, and psychoanalysis changed the way we think about culture and art. At the same time, a group of British art scholars managed to carve out a niche for their discipline within a rapidly-expanding university system. Their strategy for success was rooted, in many respects, in a certain conservatism that allowed them to integrate the subject in an existing academic structure. British art historiography in the 1970s thus can be described as a strange case of the “simultaneity of the non-simultaneous” (Ernst Bloch). Scholars like Miles, Taylor or Waterhouse built institutional foundations – but their intellectual contribution was obliterated within years by new methodological torrents of an unprecedented force.

In 1974, T. J. Clark published a now-famous assault on British art history, describing a discipline “in crisis”, and “out of breath or in a state of gentle dissolution”. Clark championed a confident and assertive identity for art history; in doing so, he positioned himself clearly against those who were willing to describe themselves (as Hamish Miles did) as one of many sub-histories. In Clark’s words, such a strategy would only lead to a “deadly co-existence”. These were strong statements for a still-young discipline; in this period, art history in Britain gained a “curiously uncertain and yet vividly combative sense of itself”, as Griselda Pollock aptly phrased it (Pollock 2012, 361). Apart from Clark, scholars such as Linda Nochlin or Sarah Wilson also made numerous pioneering and

provocative interventions, challenging what they perceived as the country’s art historical orthodoxy from a social-historical and feminist point of view. The sense of an art historical ‘culture war’ was only exacerbated by the many reactionary counter-attacks, led by scholars such as David Watkin, which polarized the camps even further. Many of the ‘progressive’ voices happily argued there was indeed no such thing as art history in Britain, thus giving purchase to the narrative of a wholesale import from continental Europe. The 1970s looked to the 1940s for inspiration, and the postwar period became art history’s dark ages. Such a rhetoric effectively performed a lasting *damnatio memoriae* of those scholars who tried to forge a *Sonderweg* for ‘British’ art history, and founded many of the departments still flourishing today.

The research for this article was supported by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art. My thanks to Mark Hallett and Charlotte Brunskill for the support of my work.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anderson et al. (eds.) 2019: Joanne Anderson, Mick Finch and Johannes von Müller (eds.), *Image Journeys: The Warburg Institute and a British Art History*, Passau 2019.

Clark 1974: T. J. Clark, On the Conditions of Artistic Creation, in: *Times Literary Supplement* (24 May 1974).

Farr 1975: Dennis Farr, Professor Andrew McLaren Young, in: *The Burlington Magazine* 117/868 (1975), 487.

Fleckner/Mack (eds.) 2015: Uwe Fleckner and Peter Mack (eds.), *The Afterlife of the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg*, Berlin 2015.

Fry 1939: Roger Fry, Art-History as an Academic Study, in: *Last Lectures*, Cambridge 1939, 1–21.

Gieryn 1983: Thomas Gieryn, Boundary-work and the demarcation of science from non-science, in: *American Sociological Review* 48/6 (1983), 781–795.

Haskell/Penny 1981: Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny, *Taste and the Antique: The Lure of Classical Sculpture, 1500–1900*, New Haven/London 1981.

Haskell 1988: Francis Haskell, The Growth of British Art History and its Debts to Europe (Thank offering to Britain Lecture. Read 22 November 1988), in: *Proceedings of the British Academy* LXXIV (1988), 203–224.

Hönes 2019: Hans Christian Hönes, “A very specialised

subject”: Art History in Britain, in: *Insiders/Outsiders. Refugees from Nazi Europe and their Contribution to British Visual Culture*, ed. by Monica Bohm-Duchen, London 2019, 97–103.

Ingamells 1998: John Ingamells, Sir Brinsley Ford and the Grand Tour, in: *The Volume of the Walpole Society* 60/2 (1998), 134–135.

Kitson/Wedgwood 1964: Michael Kitson and Alexandra Wedgwood, *English Painting*, London 1964.

Miles 1967: Hamish Miles, *Art as history*. An inaugural lecture delivered in the University of Leicester 16 February 1967, Leicester 1967.

Nicolson 1961: Benedict Nicolson, The Teaching of Art History in British Universities, in: *The Burlington Magazine* 103/698 (May 1961), 163–165.

Panofsky 1954: Erwin Panofsky, Three Decades of Art History in the United States, in: *College Art Journal* XIV (1954), 7–27.

Pevsner 1952: Nikolaus Pevsner, An Un-English Activity. I. Reflections on Not Teaching Art History, in: *Listener* 47, no. 1235 (30 October 1952).

PMC 59/3/1: Oral History Interview with Brian Allen, conducted by Liz Bruchet, Paul Mellon Centre Institutional Archive.

PMC 26/1/7: York University, Grant & Fellowships successful applications file 1964, Paul Mellon Centre Institutional Archive.

Pollock 2012: Griselda Pollock, Art History and Visual Studies in Great Britain and Ireland, in: *Art History and Visual Studies in Europe*, ed. by Matthew Rampley et al., Leiden 2012, 355–378.

Taylor 1955: Basil Taylor, *Animal Painting in England*, Harmondsworth 1955.

Wuttke 1991: Dieter Wuttke, Die Emigration der Kulturwissenschaftlichen Bibliothek Warburg und die Anfänge des Universitätsfaches Kunstgeschichte in Großbritannien, in: *Aby Warburg. Akten des internationalen Symposions Hamburg 1990*, hg. v. Horst Bredekamp, Michael Diers, Charlotte Schoell-Glass, Weinheim 1991, 141–163.

DR. HANS CHRISTIAN HÖNES
University of Aberdeen
AB24 3DS Aberdeen, Scotland
Hans.hones@abdn.ac.uk

A Photographic Portrait of the Directors: The Visual Manifesto of a Discipline in Mexico

*in memoriam collegarum qui nos in
pandemia relinquerunt*

Here (fig. 1) is an image of Manuel Toussaint y Ritter (1890–1955) and Justino Fernández García (1904–1972). In perfect symmetry the shapes of bodies and objects orchestrate the composition: two people, a table, a framed photographic print, set before an austere white background. The wall’s weatherworn texture extends over the floor’s stone surface, at once signaling the fragile condition of its

construction and of a discipline in construction. The photograph was taken around 1940, possibly in the College of San Ildefonso (1588), university campus, home to the National Preparatory School, and to the *Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas* – the institution that is the subject of this essay.

A VISUAL MANIFESTO

The photographic double portrait visually articulates the processes behind the founding and institutional *modus operandi* of a discipline in Mexico: Art History and Aesthetic criticism at the crossroads of the multiple cultural transmissions that have shaped the Mexican nation. Its establishment owed much to the initiative of Manuel Toussaint, pictured to the left, and his resolution “to reveal the concrete artistic fact that will demonstrate the ac-