

## Book Review

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**Christopher Whitehead, *The Public Art Museum in Nineteenth Century Britain: The Development of the National Gallery*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005, £47.50 hardback, 290pp.**

The chief purpose of this book is indicated in its sub-title: to chart the institutional history of the National Gallery, London, between 1850 and 1876. Most previous histories of the Gallery have concentrated on the assembly of the collection, and, indeed, the history of museums and galleries has predominantly been written in terms of the pursuit and capture of works of art. As we all know, this is the sexy side of museum life. But we have come to see in recent years that the interpretation and presentation of collections, and the relations of museums with their visitors, are fundamentally important also. As one of a new generation of "museological" historians, Whitehead knows this. He focuses especially on architecture and display, and shows how the National Gallery moved "away from the traditions of the private collection – such as the adoption of ahistorical criteria for acquisition and display – and towards a newer public museology based upon a correlation of museum space with a historiographical scheme" (p.152).

Part Two of the book describes the recurrent attempts to supply the Gallery with accommodation more spacious and appropriate than that provided by the Wilkins building, completed in 1838. The story is largely of discussions, and Whitehead draws on the proceedings of a series of inquiries, notably a Parliamentary Select Committee of 1853 and a Royal Commission of 1857. While the proceedings of such inquiries are wonderful sources for historians of ideas, the inquiries themselves seldom produced much action. In the case of the National Gallery, the result of twenty-five years of altercation was the extension (8 rooms) designed by E.M. Barry and completed in 1876 – an outcome which, Whitehead admits, is "underwhelming" (p.205).

Still, he tells a good story, neatly weaving his material together and pacing his narrative well. His various Victorian spokespersons help to add light and shade with their characteristically colourful opinions. One controversialist congratulates himself that his intervention "confronts and unmasks *perversion and misrepresentation of evidence* ...exposes PATRONAGE AND JOBBERY" (p.143). Another denounces the employment by the Gallery of a German as "an insult to the artists of this country" (p.154). Proposals for new buildings are described as "distorted features ... like wens and bunions which disfigure the human face" (p.209 – a curious anticipation of a later criticism of a proposed extension as a "carbuncle"). Alongside the expostulation, however, is a good deal of wisdom.

It is this which Whitehead tries to highlight, from the perspective of today. Simply to tell the National Gallery's story without placing it in the context of museological doctrine would have been of limited interest. On the other hand, the context could overwhelm the story. The middle decades of the nineteenth century saw a flurry of museological theory and activity. The example of foreign picture galleries was constantly held before the National Gallery, while at home its fortunes seemed inextricably linked with those of the British Museum and the burgeoning South Kensington Museum. Indeed, the problem of relating museum objects to architectural space is much more keenly felt in museums that contain three-dimensional material than in picture galleries. A decorative arts curator known to this reviewer often used to say, in relation to display, "Flat art – easy. 3D art – difficult." So the National Gallery was slightly distanced from the heat of the debate, and it was often South Kensington that set the

pace in museological advance. Whitehead needs, therefore, to look at other institutions in order to provide an ideological background to his story of the National Gallery. He does this in Part One of his book, which is likely to become a standard text on "the public art museum in nineteenth century Britain".

One caveat. Whitehead has a very thorough grasp of the museological literature of the 1840s-'60s. But his story ends in 1876, and he does not deal with the literature of the last quarter of the century, of which there is plenty. His account, therefore, may more properly be said to deal with "the public art museum in *mid*-nineteenth century Britain".

He addresses, in five chapters, the various factors which influenced the way museums were built to accommodate exhibits. The over-arching question is (using some words of the critic Anna Jameson) whether displays should attempt to arouse love for art or impart knowledge about art. For Mrs Jameson, "knowledge comes after love" (p.17), but others felt that unlearned visitors needed some briefing before they could appreciate. It is a chicken-and-egg problem that remains unresolved. Whitehead shows how widely it was discussed 150 years ago. As now, the debate pitted "amusement" against "instruction", so Whitehead devotes his third chapter to "Museum Architecture and Moral Improvement". If applied to museum exhibits, the love/knowledge dichotomy led to some exhibits being revered as "works of art" while others were dismissed as "archaeological specimens". The implications of this distinction are explored in chapter 4, on "Typology in the London Museums and Their Collections". The construction of artistic typologies is just one aspect of the Victorian zeal for classification, which led, where paintings were concerned, to historiographical structures that militated against traditional connoisseurship (dealt with in chapter 1).

Whitehead's marshalling and presentation of evidence is exemplary, and his range of sources copious. He is invariably judicious and passes lightly ("it may not even be exceedingly imprudent to note...", p.80) over points which other academics might hammer into assertive, would-be-revisionist articles. One problem that faces him (and any historian looking for a pattern) is to allow for human frailty. He asserts that the way things turned out "related as much to politics and accident as to museological or art historical rationale" (p.82), but only occasionally can he reveal this. Apathy is sometimes to blame: in 1864 the Gallery suffered a reverse because (as a contemporary observer said) a Parliamentary vote was "taken at that very ticklish time of between seven and eight o'clock, when hon. Gentlemen thought more of dining than they did of legislation" (p.199). Bloody-mindedness intervenes, as with the mischievous tricks of Acton Ayrton of the Office of Works, described in chapter 5, "Museums and Their Builders". On the other hand, sometimes it is tempting to see purpose where perhaps chance prevailed. In chapter 2, "Interior Decoration and Historicism in the Art Museum", Whitehead rightly points to the efforts of the South Kensington authorities to devise an architectural style consonant with exhibits; but can this really be read back into the earliest displays at the Museum of Ornamental Art, where surely hasty improvisation was the order of the day?

In Whitehead's account there are bound to be occasional indistinct patches, where, no doubt, mid-Victorian curators just muddled on (as their successors surely do today), but Whitehead's important achievement is to show that they gave much more penetrating thought to museological principles than we might have supposed.

Anthony Burton