

FURTHER EVIDENCE FROM DONOR WATCH

1. The Director of the British Museum is in favour of legislation to restrict the effect of donors' conditions to a period of years. But I believe that the British Museum has never agreed to such an enactment. It seems reasonable to ask why.

2. The reason for why the period has been set at 25 years for some museums and 50 is this. J.S.Mill said that 50 years was a reasonable period. However the National Gallery in 1882 was set on getting rid of many of the works in the Turner Bequest. These had been received 26 years earlier. With that objective achieved (to the complete overthrow of Turner's conditions for his "Turner's Gallery" today), it was realised that a change to 50 years could be made without detriment to the wishes of the National Gallery. This has been done, but some other museums have lagged behind that change.

3. Mill was making his remarks when restrictions made by donors were under widespread liberal attack. These had some rationale with regard to those concerning education, but much less with regard to museums. If Phidias had left a collection of his works to be kept and displayed together without risk of loan, and his wishes had been honoured down to the present, we would consider that a great benefit.

4. There is no need to enact bills to allow for loosening of conditions. This can be done through the courts, as in the case of the Barnes Collection and by application to the principle of cy-pres. If it can't be done in the Burrell case, one may ask if the case for changing the restrictions is really a good one.

5. The question of overseas lending was aired in the debates on the 1930 and 1935 Bills. Lord Lee, founder of the Courtauld Institute, opposed. Lord D'Abernon for the National Gallery was so angry with Lord Lee that he had to be restrained from physically attacking him. (I have collected the evidence in the series of Appendices to my "Fallacy of Mediocrity"). Also taking a similar stance to Lord Lee were the 27th and 28th Earls of Crawford. An argument against was that power to lend opened the trustees to intolerable pressure to lend in order to get inward loans in exchange.

6. Dr Nicholas Penny has been accused of inconsistency in the matter of lending. He is an example of the pressure feared earlier (see 5). I doubt if he would have got the post of Director of the National Gallery if he had said that he would radically cut back on loan exhibitions. He is a protege of the late Professor Francis Haskell, however, and Professor Haskell also provoked similar angry protests when he attacked the frequency of loan exhibitions.

7. Other respected figures have argued that art is best left where it is - W.R.Sickert, Sir Ernst Gombrich etc. Toulouse-Lautrec said it was good for the public to make the effort to travel to see his museum - the result might be that they would appreciate it all the more.

8. Of course many love the abundance of loan exhibitions. But so they have the housing bubble, cheap loans etc. I suspect that the current fashion for loan exhibitions may similarly come to a juddering end - not only through a disaster, but also because the idea that everyone has a right to see everything is unsustainable in an increasingly wealthy world. May it not be the case that the new opportunity to view art online (often better than in museums) will satisfy all but a fairly small minority of art enthusiasts?

9. It is argued that the Glasgow poor will as a result see masterpieces from New York which they cannot otherwise afford to go and see. But can they afford the exhibitions in Glasgow? (I can't in London!). Critics are increasingly pointing out that the vogue for temporary exhibitions is a means to slipping in charging for works that the public can normally see free.

10. The empowerment of Sir William Burrell's Trustees to veto loans of certain categories of works or to certain destinations could be an advance, if the ultimate power is really given to them.

11. However they will be subject to pressures (5 above). The evidence of experts cannot be decisive. No doubt conservators work scientifically. But science is never certain, but merely an hypothesis which holds good until it is disproved.

12. Though I have Glaswegian forbears, I can hardly ever afford to go to Glasgow. When I go, I don't want to find that the exhibits I want to see are in Tokyo or New York.

13. If there are discrepancies in Sir William Burrell's provisions or doubts about their legal efficacy, it seems ironic that these are pointed out by the very law firm which advised him.

14. If the museum building requires such radical repair after such a comparatively short span of life, should not the architects and those who commissioned them be asked to explain why?

15. Remarks that Sir William Burrell, if alive today, would approve of this or that without any backing evidence should be rejected. Such claims are frequently made by those wishing to overturn a donor's conditions and generally mirror the views of those making the claim rather than those of the donor if seriously considered.

16. Overturning his conditions will add to the widespread scepticism that donors' wishes will be honoured. Sir William was aware of the prevalent cynicism, as related in an anecdote by Dr Honeyman in "Art and Audacity".

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