



JOHANNES WILDE

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1891-1970

JOHANNES WILDE died in Dulwich, on 13th September, 1970, in his eightieth year, a little less than three months after the death of his wife Julia.

He was born in Budapest, the youngest child of a large family, in June 1891. From 1909 until 1914, he studied art, archaeology, and philosophy at Budapest University and it was during this period that there appeared, in 1910, his translation into his native Hungarian of Hildebrand's *Das Problem der Form in der bildenden Kunst*, early evidence of his predilection for the visual arts.

From 1914 to 1920, he served as a member of the staff of the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest. But before 1920, his association with Vienna and Viennese art history had begun; by 1918 he had completed his thesis for Vienna University and this work, 'Die Anfänge der italienischen Radierung', earned him his doctorate *summa cum laude* in that year. Never published, the manuscript contains a wealth of information which proved of service in compiling the catalogue of an exhibition at the Albertina in Vienna as recently as 1963.

Wilde's gifts had been recognized at an early stage of his work for Vienna University by Max Dvořák who invited him to Vienna in 1920. It was Dvořák's intention that Wilde should become a lecturer at the University there, but competition for his services came from the Kunsthistorisches Museum where, at about the same time, he was invited to become a member of the staff.

Dvořák's unexpected death in 1921 at the age of forty-six was an acute personal loss to Wilde. But his reaction to the event was characteristic; he filled the gap left at the University by teaching and lecturing and, at the same time, set himself, in collaboration with Karl Swoboda, the formidable task of editing for publication the notes and manuscripts which Dvořák had left behind. The work was accomplished with that patience and dedication with which he was to approach different, but no

This obituary first appeared in the *Burlington Magazine*, Vol. cxiii, No. 816 [March 1971], pp. 155-7. The Academy gratefully acknowledges permission to republish it.

less exacting, commitments, much later in his life. Dvořák's *Gesammelte Schriften* was published in five volumes, the last appearing in 1929.

Wilde joined the staff of the Kunsthistorisches Museum as an assistant keeper in June 1923 and he remained there until his resignation in the winter of 1938, eight months after the *Anschluß*. It is scarcely too much to say that, as a result of his services to the museum in these fifteen years, the Italian section of the collection, and above all its Venetian share, was transformed. His contribution to problems of condition, date, style, and attribution, is evident in the entries concerned with Italian Quattrocento and Cinquecento paintings which he compiled for the 1928 Kunsthistorisches catalogue. Yet these were only a beginning. In the following year there appeared in the Vienna *Jahrbuch* his article on Antonello da Messina's San Cassiano altar-piece, where the arguments for his identification of the two Vienna fragments with attendant saints as parts of the lost altar-piece were set out and where he presented his now celebrated reconstruction of the entire *pala*. One year later, he published in the same journal a group of paintings he himself had rediscovered which included a work as familiar to us today as Palma Vecchio's *Bath of Diana*, recorded as having belonged to Archduke Leopold Wilhelm in the *Theatrum Pictorium* but long since lost sight of. Wilde had found the painting in a state of neglect in the Hofburg. Still more spectacular was his rehabilitation of Giorgione's *Laura* and his publication of the hitherto unknown dated inscription on the back in 1931.

The Antonello article had been the first in a rapid succession of contributions on his part to our knowledge of Venetian Renaissance painting. These articles took, however, very different forms and their variegated character indicates the diversity of his activities for the Vienna collection. When he joined the staff of the museum, he had found many of the Italian Renaissance paintings in bad condition. With Sebastian Isepp, whose gifts as a restorer Wilde was one of the first to recognize, he began a campaign of cleaning and restoration and it was in the course of this work that he came to appreciate the potentialities of the X-ray photography of paintings both as a means of assessing physical condition and as a guide to a deeper understanding of the individual artist's creative process. Wilde was far from being the first to X-ray works of art. But few, at that time, had attempted to employ the tool so systematically and perhaps fewer still had so much to offer when analyzing its

results. He was in contact with the Röntgenologisches Institut (a part of Vienna University) by 1928. In 1930 he was one of Austria's two delegates at the congress of restorers held in Rome, and, in the same year, improvisation with medical equipment came to an end in Vienna when he succeeded in having installed at the museum an X-ray laboratory for the examination of paintings which seems to have been the first of its kind in Europe. In the eight years between its installation and his resignation from the museum, Wilde had made over a thousand X-ray photographs of works in the collection, and two years after its inception he had published, in the Vienna *Jahrbuch*, his analysis of the X-rays of Giorgione's *Three Philosophers* and Titian's *Gipsy Madonna*.

Wilde's dedication to his work at the museum was a complete but never an exclusive one. He did not abandon all teaching when he joined its staff in 1923 and throughout the whole period of his life in Vienna he continued to supervise students. Still less were his interests confined to those areas of art illuminated by examples in the Vienna collection. The study of Michelangelo's art, the deepest intellectual passion of his life, began early, apparently unprompted by the example of any teacher or the influence of any colleague. And he pursued it vigorously with a number of his students from his earliest years in Vienna. His 'Zwei Modelle Michelangelos für das Juliusgrab', a searching study of a number of aspects of Michelangelo's most complex and problematic sculptural project, appeared in 1928, a year before his article on Antonello's altar-piece; and nothing can, perhaps, more clearly testify to the breadth of his interest, allied as it was with his penetrating analytical gifts, than the fact that his 'Eine Studie Michelangelos nach der Antike' (the modesty of the article's title concealing a far-ranging discussion of Michelangelo's debt to antiquity) appeared in the same year as his publication of the X-rays of Giorgione's *Three Philosophers*.

The *Anschluß* of March 1938 opened a period of crisis in Wilde's life. By October of the same year he had made the acutely painful decision to abandon the city and museum which meant so much to him and, helped by a number of devoted friends, he and his wife arrived in England in the spring of 1939. Despite the problems of an almost unknown country and a language which he had never learnt to speak, his initial months in this country were ones of relative peace and promise. On the outbreak of war with Germany, he was asked by the Director of the National Gallery, Kenneth Clark, to accompany the

paintings to Aberystwyth. The British Museum collection of Italian drawings was, at the same time, sent to the University Library there and this circumstance led to the beginning of his treasured friendship with A. E. Popham and to the invitation by the Museum Trustees, in June 1940, to compile the catalogue of the collection's Michelangelo drawings. But in the same month, bureaucratic panic and stupidity involved his internment and, subsequently, his deportation to Canada. This dark period of his life ended in 1941 when he was allowed to live in Buckinghamshire as the guest of a former pupil, who had done much to secure his release.

In these surroundings, Wilde could, once again, turn to Michelangelo, the artist who, above all others, henceforth was to claim his attention. In 1944 there appeared the first result of this resumption of his studies, his reconstruction of the Hall of the Great Council in Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, as it was prior to its mid-sixteenth-century transformation, and his discussion of the place which Michelangelo's *Battle of Cascina* was to occupy within it. Wilde's analysis went far beyond earlier studies of the problem yet it was based on a painstaking scrutiny of documentary evidence published many years earlier by Karl Frey. The article is as complete a demonstration as anything he ever wrote of one of the gifts he so supremely possessed: the capacity to look anew at evidence available to all and, without any over-interpretation of that evidence, to draw from it conclusions at once novel and persuasive.

More extensive contributions to Michelangelo scholarship—especially to the study of the drawings—were to follow. The catalogue of Italian fifteenth- and sixteenth-century drawings in the Royal Collection appeared in 1949, the combined work of Popham and Wilde. Wilde's own share of the book was the section concerned with the drawings of Michelangelo and his closest associates. And in it he returned to Michelangelo, with compelling arguments, sheets such as *The Archers shooting at a Herm* and *The Three Labours of Hercules*, which had been excluded from the canon by many students in the 1920s and 1930s who had never had the prolonged contact with the originals enjoyed by Wilde, and who had become the victims of a pervasive critical prejudice which Wilde's 1949 entries were decisive in destroying.

Wilde's catalogue of Michelangelo's drawings in the British Museum, first planned in 1940, appeared in 1953. The book is his greatest single achievement and can be regarded as a model

for all those engaged in a similar task. Its significance transcends the accidental limits imposed by the character of a single collection. In writing it, Wilde drew upon his knowledge of Michelangelo's entire graphic *œuvre*, a knowledge deepened by his renewed examination of the main European collections undertaken whilst work on the British Museum volume was still in progress. This knowledge served not only to help in the reassessment of familiar and controversial sheets (for example the drawings which, since the time of Morelli and Berenson, had been ascribed to Sebastiano del Piombo) where he broke with long-standing and misconceived orthodoxies, but deepened and extended our understanding of entire projects of Michelangelo's, whether sculptural, pictorial, or architectural. For anyone concerned with Michelangelo problems as diverse as, say, the dating of the Bruges *Madonna and Child* or the way in which the Laurenziana *Ricetto* was constructed, the entries dealing with the relevant British Museum drawings are of crucial importance. Even the laconic footnotes contain a wealth of new observation, new facts, and the correction of long-standing errors. And there may come to the specialist reader a sense of near frustration that the very nature of the book has, in many cases, prevented a lengthier discussion of the many aspects of the works alluded to by Wilde only in elliptical asides. In this sense, it is, of course, true that the 1953 catalogue, incomparably rich as it is, remains a part of a synoptic study of Michelangelo's life and work destined never to be completed. But we must be grateful that the catalogue was not his last word on Michelangelo to appear in print and that, on the contrary, it was followed by a number of remarkable essays and articles which have either resolved certain problems with which generations of Michelangelo scholars have grappled or which suggested new lines of approach to others. One thinks here of the article on Michelangelo's designs for the Medici tombs, of the text of the Charlton lecture on the *Victory* group, of the analysis of the lost *Leda*, and of the British Academy lecture on the decoration of the Sistine chapel.

Wilde's last article concerned with Michelangelo, a discussion of those small scale drawings made for fellow artists which Wilde himself called *cartonetti*, was, like some of his other publications, the text of a lecture which he had given at the Courtauld Institute. And the fact should serve to remind us that in attempting to describe his published work in this second creative period of his life, we gain a picture of only a part of his activities—even of

his achievement. There was no conflict between Wilde the scholar and Wilde the dedicated teacher, for he had had an instinctive sympathy for academic life even in the early days under Dvořák in Vienna. Already, before the end of the war, he had given his first lectures and classes in England, for London University on an informal basis. In 1947 he was made Reader in the History of Art at the Courtauld Institute, became the Institute's Deputy Director one year later and, in 1950, the title of Professor was conferred on him. And even after his retirement in 1958, he continued to give lectures and supervise postgraduate work.

Perhaps the most telling tribute to Wilde's teaching lies in that sense of profound indebtedness and affection which is so common a sentiment among his pupils. There was no dramatic didacticism about his way of teaching; there could not be in one who so manifestly shrank from academic pretentiousness and rhetoric. Himself distrustful of popularization, it remains true that some of his lecture series—one thinks of that devoted to Titian—were exemplary introductions to complex subjects. They were based on a lifetime's patient study of the works themselves, were full of observations concerning condition, purpose, and style which even now have not reached print, yet possessed a grasp of essentials and a lucidity of presentation which those who heard them can never forget. In classes, one may have felt an initial reserve on his part which, however, vanished before genuine enthusiasm and enquiry. Listening to essays read to him, his comments were sparing. Occasionally, they could be of an absolutely devastating irony. More often, they gently suggested a line of approach one had failed to consider or amplified what one had offered with the help of the contents of one of those grey folders of his photographs which would prove to be crammed with details of matchless beauty.

Wilde spoke most freely when surrounded by few people. And the most vivid memories of him will remain, for many, those of quiet afternoons spent with him in his study or garden at Dulwich. For it was there that one could most fully appreciate the inviolable integrity of his mind, the strength and generosity of his character, his unflagging interest in those works of art which had occupied him all his life, his distaste for the clamour of the intellectual market-place. Sometimes he would look back and would recount how, for example, the term 'Presentation Drawing'—so universally employed today that we take its usage for granted—came to him walking in a Buckinghamshire

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- 1946 'R. Pallucchini's "Sebastian Viniziano"', in: *The Burlington Magazine*, lxxxviii, pp. 256-9.
- 1949 *The Italian Drawings of the XV and XVI Centuries in the Collection of His Majesty the King at Windsor Castle* (section concerned with Michelangelo and his school, Sebastiano del Piombo, Daniele da Volterra, Baccio Bandinelli, and Raffaello da Montelupo).
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- 1951 'An illustration of the Ugolino Episode by Pierino da Vinci', in: *The Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, xiv, pp. 126-7.
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