



ELLIS WATERHOUSE

ELLIS KIRKHAM WATERHOUSE

1905-1985

SIR ELLIS WATERHOUSE, who died on 7 September 1985, was one of the first completely professional English art historians and one of the most distinguished to date. From the beginning of his career he applied the intellectual discipline he had acquired as a result of a classical education to the nascent study of European art, in opposition to the traditional English reliance on connoisseurship. This is not to imply that he was indifferent to the aesthetic merits of the objects of his study. On the contrary, he had a very discerning eye; and it was this which guided him initially in the choice of field to which he directed the precision-loving aspect of his intellect. He himself formulated this in his early publication on El Greco when accusing one of his predecessors of 'copious inaccuracy of detail and an over-generous attribution of the shop products to the master's own hand—defects which accurate research and a sense of quality should enable the student to remedy at no great intellectual expense'. Not only was he a pioneer art historian. He was active and distinguished in both of the two main branches of the discipline, the museum and the university. At different times he was connected with the National Gallery in London, the National Galleries of Scotland (as Director), the National Gallery of Art, Washington, the National Gallery of Canada, and the J. Paul Getty Museum, as well as holding fellowships and professorships at Oxford, Manchester, and Birmingham universities.

Ellis Kirkham Waterhouse was born at Epsom on 16 February 1905. His mother died when he was born. His father, an architect, later married a cousin who brought up Ellis as a mother. It was characteristic of her intelligence, and of her appreciation of his, that he was made aware of the facts of the situation at an early age. This did nothing to impair a devoted relationship which lasted until her death at over ninety.

From an early age Ellis Waterhouse combined conspicuous and precocious intellectual brilliance with an irresistible urge to ridicule authority. When he was at Oxford an exasperated tutor snapped at him, 'The trouble with you is you were not beaten

enough when you were at school', only to be demoralized by the reply, 'On the contrary, I held the record at two schools'. This episode, which would be irrelevant to the obituary of most distinguished men, is not so in the present case. To the end of his life Ellis Waterhouse continued to tilt at pomposity and humbug, combining the characteristics of the virtuoso with those of *enfant terrible*. A partial explanation, no doubt, was a wish to astonish; and this he never ceased to do, whether by virtue of his wit, his erudition, or the extreme quickness of his thought and repartee. A close friend said of him, also in exasperation: 'He will always win an argument even if the other man knows twice as much about the subject as he does.' Almost all his most characteristic traits are combined in a single example of his conversational style, in this case at a Royal Academy banquet in the 1930s. His neighbour, variously described as an academician or a bishop, opened the conversation by saying to the apparently demure young man at his side, 'I don't suppose you've ever heard of St Joseph of Copertino?', only to be told, 'On the contrary, I once bicycled to the birth place of that holy man'. He was the type of English intellectual, by no means uncommon, who, in general conversation, is apt to speak most flippantly of the subjects which are in fact closest to his heart.

Already at Marlborough he was seriously interested in the history of art and chose for all his school prizes the publications of Bernard Berenson. But it was not until he had come down from Oxford and migrated to Princeton as a Commonwealth Fund Fellow, that he was able to study it on a full-time basis under the guidance of Professor Frank J. Mather, Jr. His first major publication was a long article on El Greco's Italian period, a subject which enabled him to superimpose an intense study of the Spanish painter on the experience of Italian Renaissance painting which he had previously acquired, and which remained, on the whole, the closest to him of all his many interests. For various reasons this work, which he had started at Princeton and which was intended as the prelude to a full-length study of El Greco which he never finished, did not appear until 1930, and by this time he had been for a year at the National Gallery as Assistant Keeper. The four years that he spent there were nearly coterminous with the strangest episode in the history of the Gallery. Ever since the so-called Rosebery Minute of 1894, which transferred the director's power of purchase to the trustees, there had been friction between the board and the staff. After the retirement of Sir Charles Holmes as Director, in 1927, the Treas-

ury tried to heal it by the ingenious device of appointing one of the trustees as director. This may have been an intelligent idea in theory but it proved nothing less than bizarre in practice. The only evident qualification of the trustee in question, Sir Augustus Daniel, was that he had once been Mayor of Scarborough. We also know, from the recently published Crawford diaries (entries for 20 and 22 March 1928), that after Lord Crawford, as Chairman of trustees, had endorsed Daniel's candidature as Director of the National Gallery, in an interview with the Prime Minister (Stanley Baldwin) he asked him why he had appointed him a trustee in the first place—only to be told that Baldwin remembered Daniel as a 'fine footballer'. A consequence of a non-director as director was that some of the director's duties fell to the youngest member of the staff. At one stage the whole burden of securing acceptance of the Stern bequest, which carried with it an awkward provision for a life interest in the bequeathed pictures in favour of the testator's widow, fell to the young Waterhouse.

It was during this period that he developed his technical skills as an art historian. Already in his *El Greco* article he had included a catalogue of the early works—a considerable feat in view of their geographical dispersal. And soon after he arrived at the National Gallery he set himself to introduce a degree of method into what was then a scholarly wilderness. The library, for example, had been neglected ever since the death of Sir Charles Eastlake in 1865. This was eventually remedied, largely on his own initiative (he remained throughout his life a superb bibliographer). An even more serious failing was the lack of a photographic archive. The Gallery had some justification for neglecting this as Sir Robert Witt had announced his intention of bequeathing his library of this kind. But as soon as the Courtauld Institute was founded in 1931–2 Witt switched the bequest to it, leaving the Gallery in the lurch and Ellis Waterhouse in the position of trying to make up the loss. Above all he started the first systematic catalogue of the Italian pictures. This was not published until many years after he had left the Gallery by various of his successors, principally Martin Davies whom he had trained in his methods. These placed great emphasis on the provenance of individual pictures—a technique which, by offering the possibility of tracing the descent of a documented work without interruption, was capable of proving authenticity without the intervention of fallible human judgement. In the process he built up an unequalled knowledge of private collections and of sale catalogues.

Throughout his time at the National Gallery all his senior colleagues, with the exception of the non-figure of the director, were primarily interested in English painting. They were the Assistant Director, W. G. Constable, the Keeper, Collins Baker, and the Assistant, Isherwood Kay. Up to this time his own main interests, in the Italians and El Greco, had left him little time for the painters of his own country. Now that side of him which made him avoid the obvious ('I do not buy books on Michelangelo') became attracted by the problems of differentiating between the Mytenses, the Van Somers, the Janssens, the Wissings, and others who were still little more than names. This led ultimately to a fellowship at Magdalen College, Oxford, with a brief to research into the history of portraiture in England. But in the mean time there had been other developments.

After four years at the National Gallery, Ellis Waterhouse found the arbitrary rule of the trustees increasingly irksome. The obvious alternative would normally have been a post at the recently founded Courtauld Institute. As the first seat in England of the academic study of the history of art it might have seemed tailored to the young Waterhouse and he to it. Unfortunately, there was a snag. The two most influential members of the governing body, apart from Samuel Courtauld himself, were precisely the two National Gallery trustees whom Ellis regarded as the most pernicious. When the possibility of such a job was mentioned he replied—and he repeated this to all and sundry—that while he was prepared to lecture there he would not join the staff as long as the governors included 'a couple of charlatans of the first water'.

What were the rights and wrongs of this situation? After more than half a century some kind of assessment should be possible. The trustees in question were Viscount Lee of Fareham and Sir Robert Witt. Both were in effect self-made men with the ruthlessness that often goes with it. Both were bullies and both had made many enemies apart from the still very junior Waterhouse. But both had benefited the public, Witt by his energetic and effective direction of the National Art-Collections Fund, and later by the bequest of his photographic archive and large collection of Old Master drawings to the Courtauld Institute. Both of them had encouraged Samuel Courtauld to found the Institute, and Lee, in addition, had been largely responsible for bringing the Warburg Library, and its staff, from Hamburg and establishing it as part of the University of London—a really astonishing feat in view of the extent of official prejudice to be

encountered by such an eccentric idea. Previously he had presented his country house, Chequers, to the nation. Ellis Waterhouse took the line at the time that the main object of these actions had been self-aggrandizement, but the basic cause of his dislike of them was personal. They were the embodiment of pompous authority and therefore his legitimate targets. As usual he only harmed himself.

With the Courtauld Institute closed to him he accepted, in 1933, the post of Librarian at the British School at Rome, and this led to his most substantial publication to date. This was his *Baroque Painting in Rome*, published in 1937 (a second edition appeared in 1976). In accordance with what was already his practice little more than one-third of the book was devoted to the text and nearly two-thirds to the catalogue. The 'lists' as he called them were in obvious emulation of the 'lists' of Bernard Berenson, which were already regarded by art historians in much the same way that musicians regard the *Wohltemperiertes Klavier*, but which only went as far as the mid-sixteenth century. By extending them Ellis Waterhouse nevertheless altered the basic principle. Berenson had based his attributions largely on his own judgement or 'hunch'. But for the seventeenth century there was far more contemporary documentation available. Hence, in his own words, Ellis Waterhouse set himself 'to include in the lists only those works whose attribution is reasonably certain from documents or some other early evidence. Very occasionally I have given way to the temptation to make attributions of my own, but this is always clearly stated.' By the post-war period this book in its turn had become a kind of bible for students of Roman Baroque painting.

On returning to England in 1936 Ellis undertook, largely single-handed, the organization and also, of course, the cataloguing, of the major exhibition of seventeenth-century art in Europe which opened at the Royal Academy at the end of 1937. The scope of the exhibition, as a cross-section at a given moment, marked a departure from the traditional winter exhibitions in terms of national schools of art from more than one century. It involved finding major examples of seventeenth-century art by Italians, Frenchmen, Netherlanders, Spaniards, Germans, and the artists of the British Isles. By this time his knowledge of private collections in this country was such that he knew he could cover almost the whole field with loans from within it. They included, as one of the centrepieces, Rubens's huge equestrian portrait of George Villiers, later destroyed in a disastrous fire. The other

centrepiece, and the sensation of the exhibition, was the one loan he permitted himself from abroad—El Greco's Nativity, then belonging to the King of Roumania.

At the outbreak of war Ellis Waterhouse was on holiday in Greece. He did not return to England until 1944, and it was from Greece, after some months of indecision, that he was commissioned in the British army. As he was now in his mid thirties he need not have taken this step, and his own explanation obscured his real motive with characteristic levity—'I thought I could make more of a nuisance of myself after the war if I had been in the army.' Nuisance or no, he soon had a baptism of fire in the literal sense. In company with his friend, Monty Woodhouse, who had had, at Winchester and Oxford, an academic career as brilliant as Ellis's own, or even more so, and who was soon to have a heroic war in occupied Greece, he accompanied the fighting forces from Macedonia to the Argolid and to Crete and finally Egypt in the early summer of 1941. In that year his monograph on Reynolds, which he had finished two years previously, was published in England. It consisted of a short, incisive text and the first reliable catalogue.

There followed two years of military intelligence in Cairo and then a transfer to a civilian appointment on the staff of the British embassy to Greece, at first located in Cairo. Oddly enough the art of dynastic Egypt left him cold. He may or may not have been dragged to the Pyramids; he certainly never went to Upper Egypt. Even for the splendid Islamic monuments of medieval Cairo he had only a mild interest, and even that would have been regarded merely as an offshoot of his interest in Byzantine architecture.

His characteristically controversial part, while on the staff of the embassy, in directing British policy away from a communist government in Greece after the war was described in some detail in a letter to *The Times* after his death. But the possibility of renewed contact with European works of art, offered by the newly formed Monuments and Fine Arts branch of the Control Commission for Germany, was too great a temptation, even though it involved getting into uniform again. From the spring of 1945 Ellis was operating in this capacity in Holland and north-west Germany. His official reports at this time were received by his colleagues with something of the delight which is said to have been expressed by Winston Churchill on the receipt of outstandingly witty intelligence bulletins from Washington which he attributed to Irving [*sic*] Berlin. One of the war-time repositories

of the Rijksmuseum pictures, for example, was described as 'a tasteful edifice in the neo-Ravennate manner'. Another occupied the ground floor of a large building, whose upper floor 'must be explored with caution as it is currently in use as a hostel for psychopathic girls. It contains few works of art except for those from the pencil of H.M. The Queen of the Netherlands.' At this period Ellis sported a khaki beret which he wore in a somewhat un-military manner, draped forwards at an acute angle over one eye, in order, as he said, to 'look like Rembrandt'. The most sensational of his exploits in post-war Holland was the recognition that the various Vermeer 'discoveries' of the pre-war and war-time years, including the famous Supper at Emmaus, were modern forgeries. This led to the exposure of Hans van Meegeren.

At the end of 1945 Kenneth Clark retired from the Directorship of the National Gallery. Ellis Waterhouse, by now aged 40, was the most highly qualified among the *papabili* and ought to have succeeded him. But he had clashed with Clark in the Oxford days and the post went instead to the then head of the Leeds museum. In the event his post-war career started with a return to Oxford to resume his fellowship at Magdalen, quickly followed by a short spell at Manchester University before his appointment as Director of the National Galleries of Scotland in 1949. At this time he married Helen Thomas, herself a distinguished archaeologist and daughter of the Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford. There were two daughters of the happy and lasting marriage and eventually grandchildren. During his three-year tenure at Edinburgh he wrote his volume, *Painting in Britain, 1530 to 1790*, in the series called The Pelican History of Art, and, by its author, the 'Water-pelican'. It was his longest piece of continuous prose, but he was himself averse to making claims for it. In the preface he said: 'Hardly a week has passed since I began writing this book in which a new picture has not turned up or a signature and date been read which has modified previous conceptions. I am not apologizing for the tentative character of this book, but, as one of a series which includes much more richly cultivated ground, it is perhaps well that the ordinary reader should be made aware of the state of scholarship on the subject—and be encouraged to make further research and find the author wrong.' Despite this disavowal the book is still widely used after more than thirty years.

Written with an elegance that characterized all his published work, it was a summation of twenty-five years or so of looking at pictures in country houses and the sale-room and of making notes

at the end of every day. His memory was phenomenal but it was assisted by constant and methodical note-taking, and when he would say for instance, 'Ah yes, I last saw that in the second maid's bedroom at — in February, 1931', he was probably only partly aware of the mild sensation he produced. His judgements could be quirky. Only Ellis Waterhouse would have said of Tilly Kettle that his 'portraits can be readily recognised by his tendency to render the human skull in the shape of a football', and yet he was almost always, sometimes maddeningly, right. His eye registered these peculiar details and stored them up squirrel-like to be ready for use whenever the right time came. His extraordinary knowledge of major and minor painters was most happily epitomized in *The Dictionary of 18th Century British Painters* published as recently as 1981. There is no doubt that the minor figures intrigued him. The only pictures he bought for himself fall into this category, partly because he did not wish to spend money on works of art when, in his view, it would be better spent on books, partly because he held the somewhat perverse view that art historians should not collect, believing that they would value their own things too highly and that their judgement would thereby be impaired, and partly because he was curiously, and probably on principle, indifferent to his surroundings. He bought at auction *The Penance of Jane Shore* by Edward Penny (characteristically bidding under the name of 'Shilling') at a time when no one was looking seriously at this kind of picture, and presented it to the Birmingham City Art Gallery. Similarly he bought and gave to Aston Hall a portrait by Gilbert Jackson. He bought and kept for himself a good Soest which cost very little and a George Beare because it was signed and gave him a clue from which to construct the *œuvre* of this now highly regarded painter. At the same time he was able, by means of a highly individual combination of acuity and irreverence, to create an image which no one who had once read it would be likely to forget—as when he described Allan Ramsay's full-length gesticulating portrait of Norman, 22nd Chief of Macleod, as 'the Apollo Belvedere in tartan trews'.

His all too ready wit tended to mask the true sensitivity of his nature which he was at pains to hide.

Though in a position of greater authority at Edinburgh than he had enjoyed in London he experienced similar frustration at the hands of the Edinburgh trustees. And though his spell as Director had given him valuable administrative experience he did not regret leaving Edinburgh in 1952 on being appointed

Barber Professor of Fine Arts and Director of the Barber Institute in the University of Birmingham. Here too there were initial tussles with a curmudgeon of a chairman, but after the latter's retirement Ellis settled into the happiest phase of his professional life. The job suited him well, since it involved adding to the collection in addition to normal academic duties. He enjoyed university life and became Dean of the Faculty of Arts in 1964. His outside interests included energetic participation in the activities of the Walpole Society, the British Academy, the National Art-Collections Fund, and the Burlington Magazine. His later books included a monograph on Gainsborough (1958), Italian Baroque painting (1964), and the catalogue of the Waddesdon pictures (1967). The last was more of an achievement, even, than was evident in the result. For the well-known discretion of the Rothschild family had led to the loss of almost all the documentation concerning the circumstances in which the pictures had been acquired. No one, in all probability, but Ellis Waterhouse would have known where the various pictures were *before* they entered Rothschild possession, and this fund of knowledge enabled him to complete the provenance.

Concurrently with the Barber Professorship he had been Slade Professor at Oxford in 1953-5 and Clark Visiting Professor at Williams College, Massachusetts, 1962-3. On his retirement from Birmingham in 1970 Ellis Waterhouse was persuaded to become the first Director of Studies of the newly constituted Paul Mellon Centre for British Art in London. At the time that Mr Paul Mellon made public his intention of giving his collections of British art to Yale University, and commissioning a new building to house them, the Paul Mellon Foundation in London was closed down, an action which caused considerable acrimony in this country. Without getting involved in the politics of the decision, Ellis Waterhouse saw the potential of a new research centre devoted to British art being set up in London and in his characteristically firm and purposeful manner he lost no time in creating a highly professional research centre which could boast a rapidly expanding photographic archive and a beneficial programme of making grants to individuals and institutions to promote the study of British art. Although he retired in 1973 he set the pattern for the Centre's future activities. But as he grew older he became no more tolerant of bureaucracy and he did his best to keep the Centre as separate as possible from Yale University, repulsing any administrative interference swiftly and trenchantly. To his opposite number at Yale he would dispatch curt replies chiding

him for the unnecessary length of his letters and for wasting postage by not enclosing all his communications in one envelope. To his successor after his first official visit to Yale, he wrote congratulating him on surviving what he considered was the worst part of becoming Director. Yet when he spent a term at the Yale Center for British Art in 1976 shortly before it was due to open, he was unstinting in sound advice about how to organize the activities and how to display the collection. He firmly counseled the Director, tempted to experiment with every possible variation in hanging the pictures, 'to make up his mind and stick to it'. Later he held the posts of Kress Professor in Residence at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1974-5, and Advisor to the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 1975-7. In addition, he was at different times visiting lecturer at Bristol University and advisor at the J. Paul Getty Museum at Malibu.

His reaction to his knighthood in 1975 was characteristic: 'I was surprised, slightly amused but on the whole not displeased.' Before this he had become an Officer of the Order of Orange-Nassau and Cavaliere ufficiale of the Ordine al Merito della Repubblica italiana. He received honorary degrees from the universities of Leicester, Nottingham, Birmingham, and Oxford, as well as an honorary fellowship at New College.

In recalling more than forty years of friendship with a most remarkable man it is impossible not to mention various personal traits—the ringing, sardonic, slightly nasal, voice, the mischievous glint behind the spectacles, the exquisite handwriting, the underlying kindness, the accessibility to young scholars and open-handed willingness to share his results with them, and the astonishing industry which continued almost to the day of his death. Martin Davies once said of him: 'Ellis thinks he can do twice as much work as anyone else, and he very nearly can.' A consequence of his extreme mental agility was an unquenched desire to travel, to see as much as possible, whatever its cost in fatigue, and an ability to take a fresh interest in subjects—like Roman mosaics or classical sarcophagi—somewhat outside the main line of his interests. Within European art history he was that now rare species, a polymath. And at an age when most peoples' reactions become rigid his did not. A curious illustration of this occurred during the student unrest of the late 1960s when he found himself unable to make up his mind which side he favoured. Though disliking most manifestations of luxury he permitted himself certain extravagances, above all in building up his library. Long before his death this was already one of the two or

three best of its kind in the country; yet its very excellence exacted a penalty. He became increasingly disinclined to consult a book he did not own. It was also characteristic of him that he frequently chose to publish significant discoveries in very obscure foreign periodicals.

Though most or all of his books and articles and catalogues should retain much of their value for the foreseeable future, those who knew him best would agree that he himself was worth more than all of them. The combination of spontaneous wit and encyclopaedic knowledge could not be encompassed by the printed word. In his fascinating, almost explosive, company, while listening to him giving off paradoxes and intellectual fireworks in all directions, one was reminded of no one so much as Voltaire—to whom, in certain lights, he even bore a slight physical resemblance. Ultimately the most valuable legacy of his life and work will probably prove to lie in the extreme precision of his thought and methods; and at a time, the present, when many academic art historians, both in Europe and America, show increasing signs of indulging in subjective fantasies and blatant over-interpretation, such standards of scholarship seem more than ever necessary.

CECIL GOULD

I am indebted to Lady Waterhouse, Dr Kenneth Garlick, and Dr Christopher White for their contribution of material concerning certain aspects of Sir Ellis's life and work.