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John Gordon Beckwith
1918–1991

JOHN BECKWITH formed part of a group of scholar-curators who, after the Second World War, established the English National Museums as centres of academic excellence with a steady stream of erudite articles and more wide-ranging books aimed at the educated public.

He was born on 2 December 1918. Tragedy struck his family two years later, when his mother died giving birth to his brother Peter. His father, unable to cope with the burden of bringing up the two boys alone, deserted them and it was left to their paternal grandmother to raise the children. By all accounts she did this successfully: John sometimes recounted how his gift for languages was nurtured from an early age under the tutelage of a close friend of his grandmother's, Mimi Turnbull, and how French was often spoken at meal times in her house at Whitby. His affection for the town remained strong: I remember innocently asking him in 1980 whether he had visited the great Viking exhibition then being held at the British Museum and being taken aback by his typically robust and revealing riposte—'No, nor do I intend to. Those barbarians destroyed my beloved Whitby'. It was as if he had witnessed the destruction himself and the memory was still fresh.

He was sent to Ampleforth, and the education he received there was to shape his future. He was clearly extremely happy at the school and retained a fondness for it throughout his life which went far beyond most people's feelings for their old school; it served as a second home and no doubt provided him with a security which had been missing since the loss of his parents. He spoke often of his love for the place, and it was his hope that he might be offered a home in the grounds in later life. This never came to pass, but his special closeness to Ampleforth has now been marked permanently with the bequest of his library to the Abbey. In addition to his talent for

J. G. BECKWITH *Hon. Nicholas Sellicre*

French, at an early age he developed an interest in History and excelled at it, so that a place at Exeter College, Oxford, was duly offered.

He went up to Oxford in 1937 as a Loscombe Richards Exhibitioner, reading Modern History, but after two years as an undergraduate his studies were interrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War. He immediately joined up and remained in the Duke of Wellington's Regiment throughout the War. The War dealt two further serious blows to the young Beckwith: his brother was killed in 1941 and he himself was severely wounded after the D-Day landings in the battle for Le Parc de Boislande on 17 June 1944. His right hand was permanently injured and disfigured, forcing him to write with his left hand and to give up playing the piano, one of the great loves of his life. This must have been a heartbreaking turn of events. After a long period of convalescence, and now without any close family except for his cousins and aunt (his grandmother had died in 1938) he returned to Exeter College to continue his studies. At university he made a number of friends with whom he would remain on close terms for many years: foremost amongst these were Fr. Gervase Mathew, who encouraged in John an interest in things Byzantine, and who was to advise and help him over a long period; Denys Sutton, later to become the influential editor of *Apollo* magazine, for which Beckwith would write numerous short and pithy book reviews; and Ralph Pinder-Wilson, with whom he was to share a profound interest in Islamic art. He was also much influenced by the lectures of Otto Pächt, who was later to become a good friend. Graduating in 1947, he embarked on a D.Phil. on an aspect of medieval constitutional history, but this was abandoned when he applied for and was offered a job at the Victoria and Albert Museum the following year. By the time he came to make a career decision John was, by the standards of today, quite old (at 30) to be entering employment for the first time. He had already devoured a huge amount of both literature and historical material, but decided in the end that a university career was not the life for him. He briefly dabbled with the idea of diplomatic service, where he could have exercised his abilities for language, but instead was persuaded that a post in one of the national museums offered greater potential for his particular blend of talents. Consequently he went in 1948 for an unofficial talk with John Pope-Hennessy at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and shortly afterwards joined the Museum as one of the first batch of Assistant Keepers to be appointed after the War, together with John Hayward, Terence Hodgkinson, Jonathan Mayne and Peter Ward-Jackson. He was to remain at the Museum for his whole working life.

Posted initially in the Department of Textiles, under the Keepership of George Wingfield Digby, Beckwith took up responsibility for the Coptic, Byzantine and early medieval material. The study of these textiles had

moved on remarkably little since the endeavours of Thomas Kendrick in the 1920s and he was able to build up a detailed knowledge of them in a remarkably short period of time. He combined a sound historical knowledge with a close inspection of the textiles themselves, in the classic curatorial manner, and by the early 1950s he was recognised in the international scholarly community as a force to be reckoned with, speaking with authority at many conferences, taking up a Visiting Fellowship at Harvard University's Centre for Byzantine Studies at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington in 1950–1 and becoming a Member of the Centre Internationale des Études des Textils Anciens at Lyon in 1953. He travelled tirelessly on study trips, especially in the Middle East, becoming familiar with the monuments of Istanbul and greater Turkey (he had an extended stay at the British Institute of Archaeology in Ankara), and in the Lebanon. By this time he was fluent in French, German and Italian and had gained a good reading knowledge of Latin, Greek and some of the Slav languages. He started work on a comprehensive catalogue of the Byzantine silks in the Museum's collection but this, unfortunately, was to remain uncompleted. Wingfield Digby, from an older school, was uneasy with Beckwith's rigorous academic approach and was perhaps jealous of his younger international network of colleagues; relations between the two became strained, resulting in the latter's transfer, while on annual leave and against his wishes, to the Department of Architecture and Sculpture in 1955. Although his curatorial responsibilities now covered medieval sculpture his expertise was not surprisingly still called on by students of textiles and he continued to publish in that area.[1]

John now turned his energies overwhelmingly towards the study of medieval ivory carvings, largely because the Victoria and Albert Museum houses one of the most comprehensive collections in the world, but also because there seemed much to do on the subject. Then, as now, all scholars depended to a very great extent on the *corpora* of Adolph Goldschmidt on early medieval ivories published between 1914 and 1926, on the two volumes on Byzantine ivories published by the same author in conjunction with the young Kurt Weitzmann in 1930–4, and on W.F. Volbach's *Elfenbeinarbeiten der Spätantike und des frühen Mittelalters* (then in its second edition of 1952). Although these catalogues provided a solid foundation for study, Beckwith set out in his first ten years in the Department to publish new discoveries, refine problems of dating and localisation, and to make the early medieval and Byzantine collection of

[1] Most notably 'Coptic Textiles', *Ciba Review*, XII, no. 133, August 1959, pp.2–27, and 'Byzantine Tissues', *Actes du XIVe Congrès International des Études byzantines*, Bucharest, 1974, I, pp.33–44 (both reprinted in John Beckwith, *Studies in Byzantine and Medieval Western Art*, London, 1989, pp.1–70).

ivories at the V&A known to a wider constituency through more popular publications. In the first two areas he wrote a large number of important articles, in some cases on ivories which he himself had acquired for the Museum;[2] in the latter category he published five titles in the attractive and useful V&A Museum Monograph series, concentrating on *The Andrews Diptych* (1958), *Caskets from Cordoba* (1960), *The Veroli Casket* (1962), *The Basilewsky Situla* (1963) and *The Adoration of the Magi in Whalebone* (1966).

Outside the Victoria and Albert Museum Beckwith was the co-author, with Professor David Talbot Rice, of the catalogue accompanying the highly important exhibition of Byzantine art, held in Edinburgh and London in 1958. His involvement with the exhibition, which included not only writing much of the catalogue but also selecting the objects and arranging the installation in London, was to be his first experience of this type of large exhibition; it gave him the opportunity to show a talent for display which he was to reveal on a number of later occasions in the permanent galleries of the Victoria and Albert. The selection of the objects and the opportunity to study them at close quarters also provided the basis for much of the material covered in his first book, *The Art of Constantinople*, published by the Phaidon Press in 1961. In this book he employed a formula which he would return to again: a selection of objects of the highest quality, usually in good condition and often commissioned by the imperial court, were illustrated and discussed in the context of their historical background, with special emphasis being placed on the more notable and important personalities. He was blessed with a lucid and flowing prose style, which always makes his books a pleasure to read. At least one of the reviewers missed the point of the book, which was to make the subject more accessible to the educated public, to interpret rather than to break new ground. Within these parameters it was manifestly successful, and it sold well.

His next book, on Coptic sculpture, was published by the firm of Alec Tiranti in 1963 as one of their pioneering 'Chapters in Art' series, which

[2] 'An Ivory Relief of the Ascension', *Burlington Magazine*, XCVIII, 1956, pp. 118–20; 'An Ivory Relief of the Deposition', *idem*, pp.228–35; 'The Werden Casket reconsidered', *Art Bulletin*, XL, 1958, pp. 1–11; 'Sculptures d'ivoire à Byzance', *L'Oeil*, 51, March, 1959, pp.19–25; 'Some Anglo-Saxon carvings in ivory', *Connoisseur*, CXLVI, 1960, pp. 241 ff; 'An Ivory Relief of the Crucifixion', *Burlington Magazine*, CIII, 1961, pp. 434–7; 'Mother of God showing the Way: A Byzantine ivory statuette of the Theotokos Hodegetria', *Connoisseur*, CL, 1962, pp.2–7; 'A rediscovered Italo-Byzantine carving in Ivory', in *Miscellanea pro Arte. Festschrift für Hermann Schnitzler*, Dusseldorf, 1965, pp.168–70; 'A Game of Draughts', in *Studien zur Geschichte der europäischen Plastik: Festschrift Theodor Müller*, Munich, 1965, pp.31–36; 'Problèmes posées par certaines sculptures en ivoire du Haut Moyen Age', *Les Monuments Historiques de la France*, nos. 1–2, janvier-juin, 1966, pp.17 ff.; 'A rediscovered English reliquary cross', *Victoria and Albert Museum Bulletin*, II, 1966, pp.117–24.

also included George Zarnecki's three influential little books on English Romanesque sculpture. It was clearly a subject of specialist interest, but Beckwith presented the material clearly and cogently (with an excellent selection of about 150 good photographs) and avoided making it a dry discussion of concern only to a handful of scholars. Although unashamedly a history of style, it remains the only general survey of Coptic sculpture and the first point of reference for any student with an interest in the subject.

John was at the height of his powers in the 1960s, in demand as an exceedingly entertaining lecturer and as a Visiting Professor at Harvard (the Fogg Art Museum) in 1964 and at the University of Missouri at Columbia, Missouri, in 1968–9. His expert knowledge and good eye enabled him to make a number of fine acquisitions for the V&A (the most outstanding being the beautiful English eleventh-century walrus ivory pectoral cross, bought in 1966 and published by him in the same year), and his flair for display transformed many of the Museum's galleries. His favourite gallery at the Museum, and the one he himself considered to be his greatest success, was the Early Medieval Court near the main entrance, which he redisplayed in the mid 1960s and which became known in the Museum as 'Beckwith's basilica'. This remained a testament to his taste for twenty years, until it in turn was refurbished in 1986. He was to say later that the 1960s were his happiest days, working in a department with such internationally-recognised scholars as John Pope-Hennessy (Keeper of Architecture and Sculpture 1954–66, Director of the Museum 1967–74), Terence Hodgkinson (Keeper 1967–74) and the young Michael Baxandall. His standing in the academic community had been recognised within the Museum in 1958, when he had been promoted to Deputy Keeper, and in the 1960s, with a relatively light administrative workload, he was able to write an enormous amount and to lecture widely, both in this country and abroad. He was also involved in the organisation of a number of the great Council of Europe exhibitions of medieval art, most notably those on European Art around 1400 (Vienna, 1962) and on Charlemagne (Aachen, 1965), and he was on the European advisory committee for the planning of the important exhibition *The Year 1200*, held at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 1970. He was made a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in 1968.

In 1964 Thames and Hudson published Beckwith's third book, *Early Medieval Art*, in their extremely popular 'World of Art' series. Covering the Carolingian to Romanesque period, this book has been on the reading lists of undergraduates since publication and has been reprinted many times. Its enduring popularity has to do with its sureness of touch, its clarity and easy-to-read authority; it is to my mind his best book and a model of how a short survey of a particular artistic period should be written. Its

coverage is well-balanced, the buildings, paintings, manuscripts, sculptures and works of art are all placed in their historical context, the circumstances of their commissioning are lucidly explained, and the stylistic analyses are brilliantly succinct. Few museum curators of Beckwith's generation could have written such a wide-ranging volume on a potentially difficult subject which would appeal to such a large audience.

He was, then, by the mid sixties highly thought of and uncommonly productive. However, it seems that despite an outward appearance of great gregariousness in public he remained essentially a solitary person. He had a large number of acquaintances but few close friends. Sir Steven Runciman noted that 'he was immensely hospitable and took enormous trouble to entertain and look after scholars from abroad; and he delighted to see his old friends, who were often roped in to help him with some lady professor from Belgrade or some monk from Armenia'.[3] He is remembered by many as being wonderfully entertaining company, with a quick, witty and often wicked tongue, and a letter written to his Department from Harvard in 1964 bears this out:

> Last week I was asked to a medieval dinner by Radcliffe (the girls' college) which started with sickly sherry at 5.30 p.m., went on to grilled chicken wing (everybody had a wing, no legs to be seen) served by some of the students wearing the tall *hennin* decked out with scarves, with Renaissance music belting out from the stereo-hi-fi, and an old chasuble (Spanish, 17th century cut with 16th century embroideries) draped like a banner over the grand piano, and ended at 8.0 with coffee-bar coffee and that was that. I trudged along Garden Street, avoiding the piles of snow and the lakes of slush to get to my apartment at 8.30 ready for the party to begin. Yesterday evening I was invited to a sherry party at 5.0, which ended at 6.30, given by the President of Harvard to all new comers and their 'spouses' (as you know I don't have one) which entailed pinning a large label to oneself which gave one's name in red ink and one's profession (mine said 'F.A. Fogg' and I had to say to anyone interested that I liked it that way). Others had 'Govnt' and 'Ed' and there was a Jap with 'Psycho phys' which I found intriguing . . .
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> Then there are the students: they audit this and they credit that, they major in science and audit in culture, or major in Cubism and credit in Rembrandt. And they are terribly nice. The girls are clever, attractive, and anxious to show that they care; the boys are bright, outrageously dressed (even at Harvard), and determined. The Byzantine world goes down well with them; it is so strange and remote and really beyond their comprehension. They like anything new, fresh, and lucid. And they write it all down. It comes back, as I expected, packaged, refrigerated, and slightly out of focus. But then how can you expect someone from Pensacola or Wisconsin or even Boston to tune in straightaway to the Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus?

[3] *Burlington Magazine*, CXXXIII, 1991, p.315.

> What is nice about them is that they realise it too and they are wonderfully receptive. They know that they are not getting it quite right and I find that refreshing. The visits away, New York, Cleveland, Toledo, are like royal progresses. These are the times when I find myself on a pedestal and I look down to find someone is there *polishing*. The adulation rises like incense.[4]

But beneath this sociable and confident *persona* there was a certain loneliness and a need for reassurance. He was consequently susceptible to flattery, gradually becoming less aware of current research and resistant to new approaches. Perhaps a close companion—which John never had—could have prevented the almost imperceptible slide, both intellectual and physical, which started in the late 1960s. Always a heavy smoker and fond of drink, he was the more vulnerable for living alone.

In recognition of his ability to construct elegant and erudite surveys he was commissioned by Nikolaus Pevsner to write the *Early Christian and Byzantine Art* volume in the prestigious Pelican History of Art series, which duly appeared in 1970. It was written remarkably quickly and has perhaps not stood the test of time as well as *Early Medieval Art*. It is one of the shorter volumes in the Pelican History of Art series and although Beckwith emphasised in the foreword to the book that it was 'neither dictionary nor encyclopedia, neither catalogue nor hand-list', its modest scale means that it inevitably suffers in comparison with other volumes in the same series, most notably Richard Krautheimer's *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, which is now in its fourth, revised edition, and which combines a magisterial treatment of the survey with numerous new observations. Nevertheless, it too has entered the reading lists of all those studying the art of the period and it continues to sell steadily, twenty years on.

Beckwith's last book, *Ivory Carvings in Early Medieval England* (published by Harvey Miller in 1972), was the result of twenty-five years' study of Anglo-Saxon and English Romanesque ivories. It brought together material he had published elsewhere in articles and in exhibition catalogues and introduced a good number of little known pieces. Half introduction to the subject, half catalogue, it at once aroused controversy because of the large numbers of ivories included. Beckwith was aware that this might be the case, and said as much in the preface. Now that a reasonable time has passed since its publication, and with the benefit of the exhibitions of Anglo-Saxon and English Romanesque Art held at the British Museum and the Hayward Gallery in 1984, where many of the ivories discussed in the book were exhibited, it has to be said that up to a third of the 166

[4] This letter was published in full in *The Art Newspaper*, April 1991.

catalogue entries in the book are not now regarded as English by those working in the field.[5] Be that as it may, it still remains an extremely useful reference book and its publication played a large part in stimulating interest in the subject. Lord Clark was so impressed by the book and the beauty of the objects illustrated that he immediately suggested that an exhibition should be organised to present them to the general public. Beckwith was charged with re-casting the book into three-dimensional form with the help of the Arts Council and the exhibition took place two years later in the Victoria and Albert Museum. It was widely acclaimed as a triumph of design, as the entrance hall of the Museum was transformed into an intimate space reminiscent of the Palace Chapel at Aachen; every object was beautifully displayed, and although it was a comparatively small exhibition—there were only about sixty pieces—it left not only scholars but also non-specialists enchanted.

In the same year (1974) Beckwith was promoted to Keeper of the Department of Architecture and Sculpture and elected a Fellow of the British Academy. Because of his pre-eminence in his chosen fields he had also become a member of the consultative committees of *The Burlington Magazine* and *Pantheon*, the German art-historical periodical. Perhaps by this time he felt that he had no more mountains to climb; the five years of his Keepership were not marked by any special distinction and in contrast to his earlier years he wrote very little. Unlike his colleagues John Pope-Hennessy, who went on to direct the V&A and the British Museum, and Terence Hodgkinson, who became Director of the Wallace Collection, he felt no desire to manage change in a large institution and he harboured an aversion to all forms of bureaucracy. However, when he was invited by his old university to become the Slade Professor of the Fine Arts for the academic year 1978–9 he was jolted out of his self-imposed inertia to write at length again. The title of his Slade Lectures—*Early Medieval Art and the Imperial Ideal*—encapsulated Beckwith's over-riding interests and his approach to works of art produced in the courtly *milieu*, while the subject of the art of the imperial court both in the West and the East was at the heart of his studies and interests throughout his working life. Always concerned with high quality, he cared less for humbler products and could be scornfully dismissive of what he considered to be second-rate works of art.

On retirement in 1979, at the age of 60, he was offered a Visiting Senior Fellowship at Dumbarton Oaks, but by this time he was not

[5] For a balanced review of the book by S. Heslop see *Burlington Magazine*, CXVI, 1974, p.413; see also Peter Lasko's review of the exhibition which came out of the book, raising many questions of dating and localisation (*idem*, pp.426–30).

prepared to live abroad for a year and did not, in any case, have a particular research project which sufficiently interested him. His Slade Lectures would have needed a considerable amount of work before they could be turned into a book and by this time Beckwith's appetite for such work had sadly diminished. Unlike others who retire only to join committees or to write the books they had never had time to complete while in full-time employment, he instead withdrew to his small flat in Ladbroke Grove, which he had been renting since taking it over from Otto Pächt shortly after moving to London and which he was now able to buy. He bought a television set (never having owned one) and read and re-read his favourite biographies and novels, especially Trollope. He was surprised at how much his circle of acquaintances had shrunk now that he no longer worked at the Museum, and although he wrote the occasional review and acted as guest lecturer on one or two tours abroad in the early 1980s he gradually lost touch with most of his old colleagues. He did, however, take a keen interest in events at the Museum and was always anxious to be kept informed of any changes. He retained his strong Catholic faith and served on the fabric committee of Westminster Cathedral for many years, which gave him great pleasure, and he kept in contact with his old school at Ampleforth. But the intellectual momentum built up in the 1960s had slowed and stopped, and various ailments plagued him. By the late 1980s he was a shadow of his former self, and when the Pindar Press decided to publish a selection of his articles under the title *Studies in Byzantine and Medieval Western Art* he was unable to write the preface and additional notes which are the norm for such publications. This task was taken out of his hands and he was delighted when the volume was eventually published in 1989.

Shortly afterwards he experienced difficulty in swallowing and it was discovered that he had contracted cancer of the throat. After chemotherapy in the Charing Cross Hospital he was looked after in two nursing homes in London but was allowed to return to his flat when it appeared that he had made a satisfactory recovery. This was a huge blessing to him, and he had cause to be even more thankful when he discovered that he could rely on the assistance of a kind neighbour who had moved into the next flat while he was away. Elizabeth Tarrant turned out by an extraordinary twist of fate to be the mother of a boy still at Ampleforth, and her attention to John in his last months was an example of selfless charity rarely seen today. He died peacefully in his flat, surrounded by his books and his small collection of ceramics and pictures (many of them by his friend Marian Wenzel) on 20 February 1991.

PAUL WILLIAMSON
Victoria and Albert Museum

Note. The author wishes to acknowledge with gratitude the assistance and information he has received from Mrs Angela Greatorex (John's cousin), Terence Hodgkinson, Ralph Pinder-Wilson and Dom Alberic Stacpoole OSB of Ampleforth. Mention should be made of obituaries in *The Guardian*, 25 February 1991 (Professor Michael Kauffmann), *The Independent*, 23 February 1991 (Diana Scarisbrick), *The Times*, 27 February 1991 (the present author), *The Burlington Magazine*, CXXXIII, 1991, pp.314–15 (Sir Steven Runciman), and *Exeter College Association Register*, 1991, pp.6–10 (Dom Alberic Stacpoole).