



BASIL GRAY

*Cecilia Gray*

# Basil Gray

## 1904–1989

BASIL GRAY was one of those rare museum curators who have been able to combine fastidious scholarship with the organisation of a public collection. His legacy is twofold; the direction he gave to his department reflected in the acquisitions he made and his scholarly contribution to the understanding of the arts of Asia. He belonged to a generation that was bold enough to range over a wide field—in his case all Asia—and was not inhibited by the present preoccupation with specialisation. It is true that in the last half century there has been greater exploration in depth; but his overall knowledge of the arts of Asia allowed him to see relationships that can elude many of a later generation. He had, of course, the inestimable advantage of having under his care the superlative collections of the British Museum; and his talent was in understanding the direction which the collections should take. His scholarship was manifested in his numerous publications which reached beyond the specialist to a far wider public.

### I

Basil Gray, who was born in 1904, was wont to remind us that his own father was born during the reign of William IV. Some of his old fashioned formality and old fashioned courtesy could probably be attributed to the Victorian background of his parents and their advanced age when he was born. Singularly little is known about the family background of his father

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Charles Gray beyond the fact that he was the eighth of ten children born to Thomas Gray and his wife Alice Vicat of Huguenot origin. The family were brought up in Portsmouth where Thomas Gray was engaged in the provision of ship's furniture, that is, anchors, cables and so on, for the Navy. Charles trained as a doctor at St Thomas's Hospital, London, (of which he later became a governor) and joined the Army Medical Service in 1858. In the next year he went by steamship to Hong Kong to join the French and British forces who were gathering to demand from the Chinese the opening of their ports to western trade. It is clear from his own accounts that he served with distinction, having seen action as a surgeon officer in the advance on Peking in 1860, most of his patients being enemy wounded. His subsequent service was with the Royal Artillery and then the Rifle Brigade until his retirement—probably on grounds of health—in 1874 with the rank of Surgeon-Major.

Two years later he married Elizabeth Kershaw. She was the daughter of James Kershaw, a leading calico manufacturer in Manchester, a Liberal, who had been a champion of parliamentary reform and Corn Law repeal. He was Mayor of the city from 1843 to 1845 and MP for Stockport and later for the West Riding until his death in 1864. Elizabeth was considerably older than her husband and it seems that she had the financial means that enabled them to spend his retirement largely in foreign travel—visits to the United States and Canada, wintering in Egypt, Greece, Tangier, and Gibraltar, and touring in Italy and France, Holland and Spain. In London they lived in Portland Place and a large house on Wimbledon Common.

It was during these years that Charles Gray found an engrossing occupation probably due to the influence of a friend Frederick Elworthy, amateur anthropologist and lexicographer. This was the participation of Elworthy and his wife and sisters and Charles Gray and his wife as volunteers in the preparation of the *Oxford English Dictionary* edited from 1879 by Dr James Murray, who in his presidential address to the Philosophical Society on 16 May 1884 mentioned Charles Gray as one 'who had ranked high among our helpers, has worked carefully at the ordinary language of Addison and his colleagues, and has sent us many thousand quotations, from the *Spectator* and *Tatler* for ordinary words, the construction of verbs and prepositions, use of adverbs and conjunctions, which proved of the greatest value for giving us the literary usage of the eighteenth century'.

His wife Elizabeth died about 1895 and in 1899 Charles Gray married Florence Cowell daughter of the Revd Henry von Der Heyde Cowell—incumbent successively of a large Paddington parish and then of Wilmington in Kent—whose wife Amelia was the sister of Frederick

Elworthy, with whom he was already collaborating on the *Oxford English Dictionary*. After spending two winters in Egypt and travelling on the continent mainly in France and Italy, they settled down in one of the huge stuccoed terrace houses in Elvaston Place, South Kensington where their first son Charles was born in 1900 and on 21 July 1904, their second son Basil. They then moved to Boscombe, a suburb of Bournemouth and the sons were sent to a preparatory school in Twyford where in 1915 Basil was told of his father's death. He was eleven years old and it is difficult to know the impressions he had of his father whom he knew only in his seventies. According to his sister-in-law Dora Cowell, he suffered from deafness as a result of his war experiences; was quick and capable, alert and most observant, all attributes which his son inherited in good measure. That he was cultivated is clear from the books that passed to his sons; and judging from the charming letters he wrote to Basil he was also humorous. Their mother throughout her long life—she died in 1955—was assiduous in writing to her sons. She read widely and was not given to displays of affection. Of her two unmarried sisters, Dora Cowell with her literary interests—L. P. Hartley's *The Go-between* was dedicated to her—found a ready response in Basil. Basil remembers the fascination of the objects which his parents had brought back from their travels in Egypt and the Orient: a Turkish coffee set, tables inlaid with mother-of-pearl and a mashrabiya from Cairo. His father's collection of Alinari photographs of Italian art and the set of Arundel lithographic prints of Italian painting impressed him even at his early age.

From Twyford he was sent to Bradfield College in Berkshire where he joined his brother Charles who had been sent to Winchester but because he disliked it was transferred to Bradfield, prompted in part by the appointment of a Winchester master to be Headmaster of Bradfield. This was the Revd Robert Beloe, a remarkable man who did much to restore the somewhat fallen reputation of Bradfield. Basil passed his years at Bradfield with credit and approval by his masters. Beloe who had exacting intellectual and moral standards, encouraged and stimulated his inclination to history and literature and eventually made him head boy. He took part in the school's activities even if he did not excel at games. On the other hand he founded a dramatic society and was a co-editor of the *Bradfield College Chronicle*. Under Beloe's persuasion, he stayed on at Bradfield until he was nineteen when he proceeded to New College, Oxford as an Honorary Exhibitioner in History in 1923. He had already shown his capacity for friendship at school where he made two particular friends. One was Dennis Kincaid, who was to join the Indian Civil Service

and published two novels set in India and a remarkable study of British social life in India. He died tragically in India in 1940. The other, Edward Muir, remained a life long friend eventually becoming Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Works. He was also a friend of the Ramsden family whose son was at Bradfield; and he enjoyed visiting them in their house at Luddenden in Yorkshire where there was music and gaiety.

Perhaps against his better judgement he read Greats, without taking Honour Moderations, and secured only a third. However his tutor Alec Smith, subsequently Warden of New College, had a high opinion of his ability and allowed him to go on to read Modern History. Largely because he took this in two instead of the usual three years, he achieved only a second when he took his Finals in 1927. His tutor A. L. Woodward had expected him to get a first.

At Oxford he was drawn towards the literary circle about John Betjeman. His particular friend was Eric Schroeder, whom he had first met at the Ramsdens and was now an undergraduate at Corpus Christi College and with whom he remained in correspondence all his life. He wrote much poetry at Oxford and later took part in the archaeological excavations at Kish in Syria with Henry Field of the Marshall Field Museum in Chicago. Schroeder was able to describe to Basil his travels in Syria. Subsequently he was to distinguish himself in the field of Islamic art and history. Another influence was Ellis Waterhouse the art historian who did much to lay the foundations of Basil's interest in art history; together, they would visit country houses. At this stage it was literature rather than art that mainly engaged him. He bought much belles-lettres and poetry and also liked travel books. He said later that E. G. Browne's *A Year among the Persians* was a landmark in his gradually developing interest in the Orient.

Someone who was to be a close friend to all the family after his marriage was Gervase Mathew who became a Dominican and a scholar of extraordinary range: Greek patristics, Byzantine art, Medieval England, and East African archaeology. He introduced Basil to Austin Farrer the theologian and Bampton Lecturer who for many years was Chaplain at Trinity College and eventually Warden of Keble College; and it was in the Long Vacation in 1925 that Basil and he spent a month travelling in Greece. They visited the great classical sites of Olympia, Thebes and Bassae, Sparta and Corinth; but it was the small Byzantine churches that caught Basil's imagination.

On coming down from Oxford in 1927, Basil had to decide on his future. H. A. L. Fisher, the Warden of New College, was consulted;

and banking and publishing were considered. He sat for the Civil Service examination in which he was 48th out of 121 candidates. Then Stanley Casson who wrote about ancient and contemporary sculpture and who had tutored him in Greek history at New College, invited him to join his second year's season of excavations on the Hippodrome site in Constantinople. This was sponsored by the British Academy and financed by Lord Duveen. One enticement was the possible finding of statues near the Hippodrome.

On the outward journey he spent three months in Vienna to prepare himself for the excavations as well as to learn German. He attended the lectures of the eminent art historian Strzygowski but did not respond to the imaginative sweeps of that particular kind of art history. More rewarding was the friendship he formed with the Byzantinist Otto Demus under whose supervision he was placed. As a foretaste of his future interest he met the Orientalist Heinrich Glück who with Strzygowski had published the Mughal miniatures in the *Faketenzimmer* in the Schönbrunn and more recently had completed his sumptuous publication of the great Mughal miniatures from the *Hamzanama*.

In April he set out for Istanbul where he remained until July. The excavations were disappointing since only the bases of the statues in the Hippodrome that they hoped to find were revealed. He himself was given the task of cataloguing the brickstamps and copper coins. The excavation team was led by David Talbot Rice who had rented a house at Bebek on the Bosphorus. He and his wife Tamara were to remain lifelong friends. The experience of Istanbul was to remain a vivid memory all his life; and he always claimed it as the city of his choice. The Byzantine monuments were few and he readily responded to Ottoman architecture and particularly to the brilliant tile revetments. In the Topkapi Saray the Chinese celadon vessels were being prepared for exhibition and here was the foundation for yet another future interest.

Back in England he applied with H. A. L. Fisher's support, for the post of Assistant Keeper in the Department of British and Medieval Antiquities in the British Museum. However, the post was not one that would have allowed him to specialise in Byzantine art 'since Dalton', he was told 'had already done the Byzantine field' and he was offered the prospect of working on the pre-historic flint collections, a post that had no attraction for him and was eventually taken up by Christopher Hawkes. He was then offered a post in the Library and he joined the British Museum on the 10 December 1928. At about this date he set up his first London home in Hampstead where he shared a flat with Ellis

Waterhouse in a Georgian house owned by H. S. Ede, then at the Tate Gallery, whom Gray frequently visited.

Although it was not of his choice, he had no regrets for the year he spent in the Library since it taught him the procedure of cataloguing and the placing of books. Moreover it left him too with a view of the nature of the Library which enabled him to speak with some authority when the relation between Library and Museum came to be debated in the 1960s. It was during this year that he formed a friendship with Laurence Binyon, Keeper of the Sub-Department of Oriental Prints and Drawings to whom he was able to show the purchases he had made in the bazaars of Istanbul. It so happened that Binyon's assistant Arthur Waley suddenly resigned and Binyon was sufficiently impressed by Basil to invite him to join the department which he did on 1 January 1930. He was at once given the cataloguing of the Japanese woodcut prints. The influence of Laurence Binyon was very great. Basil referred to him as his mentor. He opened up to him a whole new world, that of Chinese and Japanese painting and Japanese prints, which was quite unfamiliar to him. He appreciated Binyon's warm humanity and universal sympathy so that Basil could describe him as a Renaissance humanist.

Binyon was already engaged in preparing the great exhibition of Persian Art held at the Royal Academy from January to March 1931. Gray was at once put on the selection committee and was fully engaged in assembling and cataloguing the manuscripts and miniatures brought together for the exhibition. The experience of handling manuscript miniatures was fundamental in developing the historical approach to Persian painting and taught him to appreciate style and quality. He was confident enough to publish in 1930 his *Persian Painting*. This was a brief introduction to the subject of which he already showed an astonishing understanding. More important was his contribution to *Persian Miniature Painting* by Laurence Binyon, J. V. S. Wilkinson and Basil Gray (1933). This was a study of the subject based on the superb examples in the Exhibition, and presented a picture of the development of Persian painting which is still valid in its broadest outline for today. Gray contributed those parts dealing with the early and formative periods.

An admirable example of Gray's approach to a subject is a brief article which he published in the *Burlington Magazine* in 1932 at the beginning of his career with which he much later expressed some satisfaction. 'Two Portraits of Mehmet II' is a contribution to the iconography of the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet Fatih, conqueror of Constantinople. He was able to show that a portrait in an album in the Topkapı Sarayı Library

was the work of Costanzo da Ferrara by comparing it with the fine bronze portrait medal of the Sultan signed by the artist. It is known that Costanzo was a painter but nothing of his has survived save this sketch. Another portrait in the same album is clearly a portrait of the Sultan but by an oriental hand. This he shows convincingly to be a copy probably by a Turkish pupil of a portrait by Gentile Bellini painted in Constantinople for the famous museum of the humanist Paolo Giovio. He believed that Gentile Bellini's portrait of Mehmet Fatih in the National Gallery was painted by Bellini in Constantinople but has been too much restored to be of any value. His views, cogently argued, have met with general approval.

Once he had settled at the Museum, his particular friends among his colleagues were Roger Hinks, art historian, William King, expert on European porcelain and Francis Wormald, medievalist and palaeographer, all young men of brilliance and wit, who used to meet regularly for lunch. Another influence in his work was Billy Winkworth, connoisseur of Far Eastern art, whose infectious enthusiasm had an effect on Basil, to whom he addressed numerous letters concerning the decorative arts.

In 1933 he was married to Binyon's youngest daughter Nicolette, seven years younger than him. Under her father's guidance she was already knowledgeable and discriminating in many fields of art. After a history degree at Oxford she had won a stint as a scholar at the British School at Rome studying Dark Age inscriptions, which was somewhat curtailed by the marriage when some remaining fieldwork had to be carried out in his company. Theirs was a marriage of true partnership. She was his support throughout their life together and he had recourse to her wisdom in his work. In 1937 he was commissioned somewhat surprisingly to write *The English Print* in a series of handbooks published by A. & C. Black; it has to be remembered that as a member of a sub-department of the Department of Prints and Drawings he had taken his turn at answering general enquiries in the Print Room. He was greatly helped in the writing of the book by his wife who contributed certain chapters although her name did not appear on the title page. It remained sufficiently in demand as a standard book to be subsequently reprinted.

In the same year Gray found himself in the newly formed Department of Oriental Antiquities under its first keeper, R. L. Hobson, who until then had been keeper of the Department of Ceramics. He was the great authority on Chinese ceramics and he transferred to the new Department the Asian ceramic collections. Binyon too, who was a keen advocate of this policy decision also retired at the end of the year so that Gray was now in



charge of the oriental section of what had been the Sub-Department of Prints and Drawings. The department thus covered the whole of Asia with the exception of the pre-Islamic collections of western Asia, which came under the Department of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities; and it comprised both antiquities and the graphic arts. Gray's initial task in the new department was the re-organisation of the Indian Sculpture which until then had come within the domain of the Department of Ethnography and had been arranged to illustrate the religions of India. This was pioneering work since there was little literature on the subject from the art historian's viewpoint. In a practical way he benefited from the advice of Sir William Rothenstein and Jacob Epstein. Meanwhile he concentrated on painting and published studies on Chinese and Japanese as well as on Persian and Mughal painting. He was able to take advantage of the magnificent assembly of Chinese paintings in the International Exhibition of Chinese Art at the Royal Academy in the winter of 1935–6. He was thus able to write the descriptions and notes on selected paintings in a beautifully produced book *Chinese Art* which he co-authored with Leigh Ashton. This publication of 1935 was the beginning of a long association between Gray and the publishing house of Faber and Faber.

When Hobson retired in 1938, Gray was designated his successor but since still junior both in years and in service—he was only thirty-four—he was designated officer-in-charge. In December of that year he showed members of the India Society his new arrangement of the Indian sculpture. In the accompanying address he formulated his own ideas on gallery arrangement to which he had evidently given considerable thought, and essentially he adhered to these throughout his museum career:

If now it were asked what was the aim of the Antiquities Department in the Museum it would probably best be stated as historical. . . . We therefore aim at a display of the development of cultures by means of as good examples as can be obtained of the work of each period and also to show as far as possible the action of one cultural influence upon another. Already we attempt to show related civilisations in adjoining rooms and I look forward to the day, perhaps not very distant when the oriental collections may be displayed in a thoroughly vital way in a series of chronological rooms where influences can be easily followed up.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> MS 'Visit of members of the India Society to the British Museum, Saturday 10 December 1938', in unpublished family papers.

But the times were depressing; there was talk of suppressing the department on account of the expenses involved in coordinating the collections. Hanging over everything was the impending war situation. On the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, he was designated as one of the skeleton staff not called up for military service. The process of evacuation began. Portable objects were despatched to a house in the Midlands where they remained until a secure haven was found for them in Bath-stone quarries in Somerset, which were equipped with air-conditioning. He took his stint of duty at the various places of deposit of British Museum material. In January 1941 Gray evacuated his family to Oxford where he joined them at weekends while he himself commuted to Bloomsbury. In spite of the general disruption of life he managed to keep up a steady stream of publications in the journals.

## II

Appointed Deputy Keeper of his department in 1940, he was promoted Keeper in 1946; and it was from then until his retirement in 1969 that he impressed his personality on his department. He and his family, now consisting of two sons and three daughters, were living in a solid Victorian house in Essex Villas, Kensington to which they had moved in 1938 from a flat in Regent's Park and to which they returned from Oxford. Then in 1955 Gray bought a handsome house dating from about 1725 to 1730 on Maze Hill, in Greenwich. Finally in 1960 the family took up residence in the Keeper's house in the south east wing of the Museum to which as senior keeper he was entitled. For Nicolette it was like going home as she had spent her childhood and youth in the same house which had been occupied by the Binyons.

At the end of the war funds were made available for reconstruction and he was able to direct this into increasing his staff, by this time consisting only of Soame Jenyns since Brankston had died during the war, and to the reorganising of the galleries. Recruits to his staff were required to have knowledge of the language or languages of their chosen field but were expected to acquire their connoisseurship in handling the collections. Between 1947 and 1949 Douglas Barrett, William Watson, and the present writer joined the staff; and when Watson was appointed to the Perceval Foundation Professorship in London University, he was replaced by Laurence Smith who took over the care of the Japanese collections. In the course of the next few years Gray succeeded in securing

the King Edward the Seventh Gallery for the sole use of the Department of Oriental Antiquities while an upper gallery reserved for temporary exhibitions of the graphic arts of Asia was created.

Gray was punctilious in consulting his colleagues when making decisions about acquisitions. And it was here that his influence was strongest since apart from the smooth running of his department and the care of the collections and their presentation to the public, his concern was for the enlargement of the collections while achieving a greater balance. While there were areas of surpassing excellence, at the same time there were neglected areas and it was these that Gray sought to identify and to remedy. In these years the Museum benefited from important gifts and bequests. He knew the potential donors well and was assiduous in retaining their good will. Many belonged to the Oriental Ceramic Society of which Gray was twice President, and had lent to the International Exhibition of Chinese Art, for it was largely in the Chinese field that donations were made.

Funding was a recurrent problem, the annual grant from the Museum's fund being woefully inadequate for purchases on the scale he deemed necessary. It is true that there were other ways of raising money; resort in the first instance to the Museum's reserve fund and then to the National Art Collections Fund. In 1952 however he had a great stroke of good fortune in a totally unexpected gift from the private banker P. T. Brook Sewell, though Gray remembered his presenting to the Museum a Mughal jewelled jade dish before the War. He presented about £500,000 to extend the Department's collection of Mughal jade carvings. This at once put the Department in the forefront of purchasers in the field of Oriental art; indeed the only rival was the Cleveland Museum of Art which at that time had also received outstanding endowments. Since Mughal jades of Museum quality were rare to come by, Gray was able to persuade Brook Sewell to extend his gift to cover other lacunae in the collections and to this he readily agreed with the exception of Japanese art for which he had no feeling. When he died in 1958, the Museum as residuary legatee under his will received a further £100,000. In the following year the generous gift was celebrated in an exhibition.

Like his predecessor R. L. Hobson, Gray had within his purview not only the decorative arts but also the painting and graphic arts of Asia. His grasp of the whole field was truly astonishing. Thus he made important purchases in Chinese and Japanese paintings in order to achieve a better balance between painting and the decorative arts, which had already reaped the benefit from the acquisition in 1938 of the Eumorfopoulos

collection. The latter too were reinforced by the acquisition of early Chinese bronzes and lacquer. Gray's own interest is evident in the purchase of the blue and white porcelains of the Yuan and Ming periods. Later he was to write about Chinese porcelain and its trade to western Asia and its influence on the decorative arts of the Islamic world.<sup>2</sup> But perhaps the most important additions to the collection were in the field of Indian sculpture, notably those from South India, a field that had been comparatively neglected in the first half of the century. In this he owed much to the knowledge and enthusiasm of his Deputy Keeper Douglas Barrett who had acquired a profound knowledge of Indian sculpture in his almost annual travels in the Indian Sub-Continent. Both he and Barrett appreciated this great school of Sculpture; and three Pallava pieces (eighth to ninth century) and others of early Chola style (850–1014) in stone and bronze were acquired. In the Islamic collections notable examples of glass and in particular the cut glass of Persia and Egypt were acquired. The most important of these was one of the fourteen so-called Hedwig glasses whose enigmatic history was to occupy his mind at a later date.

Within the department he organised temporary exhibitions both of painting and of the decorative arts. There was little or no funding for these exhibitions which for the most part were recorded in a cyclostyled catalogue for which there was no charge. The most memorable of these was entitled 'The Lion in Asia' which showed how prominent was the lion in the arts of the continent, and was a memorial to the species that has now become virtually extinct in Asia.

During his keepership he steadily built up his reputation as a savant of the arts of Asia and, more than that, he was increasingly in demand for his judgement, always clearly expressed. He had the respect and confidence of the Museum's Trustees. His advice, too, was sought outside the Museum and abroad. Thus he was a valued member of the Reviewing Committee which was concerned with the control of the export of works of art and of the Standing Commission on Museums so that he had an overall view of the public collections in the country. He twice also served on the Art Panel of the Arts Council on which he was valued for his wide range of interests in the visual arts. In this he was much indebted to his

<sup>2</sup> 'The export of Chinese porcelain to the Islamic world: some reflections on its significance for Islamic art before 1400', *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society*, 41 (1975–7); reprinted in *Chinese Ceramics and Islamic Art, Studies in Chinese and Islamic Art*, II (1987), pp. 91–103.

wife who had an established reputation in the field of letter forms, but had a passionate interest in English painting. She it was who organised the first international exhibition of abstract art in Britain in 1936. When he was Keeper it was their habit to spend together his weekly afternoon off in visiting the exhibition galleries.

As Keeper he gradually had more frequent opportunities of travel which for him was as much a diversion as duty. Many of these were the result of invitations. In 1947 he made his first visit to the Indian Sub-Continent in order to select objects for the International Exhibition of the arts of India and Pakistan; the choice of paintings was his and the commemorative catalogue of the exhibition shows how great was his understanding of the painting of the northern Indian schools. The journey entailed much travel and on his return he was laid up with a leg disorder. At Burlington House where he had to mount the exhibits he was somewhat impeded by having to resort to a wheel chair. In 1951 he made the first of a number of visits to Iran at the invitation of Roman Ghirshman to see his excavations at Susa. Subsequent visits were made in connection with the British Institute of Persian Studies of which he was a member of the Governing Council and subsequently President. He was able to see the great cities of Isfahan, Shiraz, Tabriz, and Mashhad in each of which he lectured, and it was he who proposed and urged the archaeological investigation of Siraf on the Persian Gulf in the expectation, amply confirmed, that this would reveal new aspects of the trade between China and the Islamic world.

In 1957 he was invited to take part in a delegation of ten, including Graham Greene, to China. They arrived in Beijing in time for the May Day celebrations; and they were invited to tea with Chou-en-Lai and even caught a glimpse of Chairman Mao. Since he had sought permission to study early Buddhist paintings he was allowed to spend four days at Tunhuang which resulted in a book *Buddhist Cave-Paintings at Tun-Huang* published in 1959.

He was also able to visit Japan three times, each time accompanied by his wife. The first was planned by the artist and art historian Yakio Yashiro, an old friend of Laurence Binyon, who was able to show him wonderful hand scroll paintings.

He particularly enjoyed his first visit to Syria, to attend the international conference on Glass in Damascus in 1965. He was taken to see the great site of Palmyra and the cities of the Hauran, then to Aleppo and to Qal'at Sama'an and so on to Jerusalem via Beirut and Amman.

His main preoccupation, however, was his department. In his relations

with his staff he always acted with propriety and he commanded general respect. He was by nature reserved and only rarely did he show his underlying warmth and sympathy. Gallery display he left to his colleagues though he gave the final seal of approval. He certainly had the confidence of the Museum's Trustees who with rare exceptions sanctioned the purchase of acquisitions he submitted for their approval.

In 1957 he was awarded the CBE; by then he was the senior among the Museum keepers. He was therefore a candidate for the directorship on the retirement in 1958 of Sir Thomas Kendrick who favoured him as successor. In the event the Trustees under the leadership of the chairman Dr Fisher, Archbishop of Canterbury, chose Frank Francis, a senior Keeper in the Library who had been the alternative candidate when Kendrick was appointed in 1950. They were undoubtedly influenced by the proposed rebuilding of the Library on the site between Great Russell Street and Bloomsbury Way. The scheme was however abandoned when it was decided to separate the Library and to build its premises at St Pancras. Gray was one of those who favoured the retention of the Library and believed that without today's accretions it could have occupied the so-called Bloomsbury site. Whether as director he would have been able to influence the final decision is of course open to question. Proof however of his administrative ability came in 1969 when he was appointed acting Director and Principal Librarian in the period between the retirement of Francis and the succession of Sir John Wolfenden. In the Director's Office he won the praises of all who worked under him. With his incisive manner he secured the confidence of the keepers. The consensus was that Gray was among the best directors the Museum never had. Recognition of his services to the Museum came with the award of the CB on his retirement in 1969.

### III

Gray had always dreamed of spending his retirement in the country, preferably within easy access of Oxford. He finally settled on a delightful house in the village of Long Wittenham on the Thames near Wallingford. The house was built by the well-known architect Guy Dawber in 1911 as his own home. Much care had gone into the detailing especially in the interior and the whole had an air of the Arts and Crafts Movement. With deep eaves and mullioned windows, it was set in a well-laid out garden, with a north west aspect looking out over an arm of the river and

partially screened by a row of stately elms at the end of the garden, which alas fell victim to Dutch elm disease soon after the arrival of the Grays.

In the remaining twenty years he was as active as in his Museum years; but now that he was released from the strains of office, he was more relaxed and expansive. He was happy with his Oxford connections and renewed friendships. From 1969 to 1979 he was a Visitor to the Ashmolean Museum where his help and advice were appreciated particularly by the Department of Eastern Art. He also frequently took the train to London for the different committees and the like. Elected to the British Academy in 1966, he continued to participate in the affairs of the Academy, presiding over the British Institute of Persian Studies (1987–9) and the British Society for Afghan Studies (1979). Nor was he deterred from foreign travel. In 1971 he was guest at the commemoration of the 2500th anniversary of the founding of the Persian empire by Cyrus the Great.

In the following year he presided over the Sixth International Congress of Iranian Art which was held at Oxford. Gray was one of the few there who had also attended the Third Congress in Leningrad in 1935.

In 1974 at the invitation of the Committee of the Musée Sursok, Beirut, he arranged the selection and cataloguing of an exhibition of Islamic Art of which the exhibits were largely borrowed from private collections in Beirut. A major preoccupation from 1975 was the preparation of the notable exhibition *The Arts of Islam* which was shown at the Hayward Gallery, London, and for which he was the principal organiser. This was the central feature of the World of Islam Festival—an ambitious attempt to illustrate the many aspects of Islamic culture; the arts, the sciences, urban and nomadic life, poetry and music, and the Qur'an and its teaching. There were numerous other exhibitions both in London and the provinces and Gray's advice was constantly sought. *The Arts of Islam* was organised by the Arts Council of Great Britain and Gray chaired the exhibition committee. It consisted of over six hundred and fifty loans from more than a hundred and twenty public collections in this country and abroad. It was on the same scale as the international exhibitions organised by the Royal Academy. He had made frequent visits abroad to select exhibits and in the previous year Gray with his wife and the present writer travelled to Spain in order to arrange loans for the exhibition, travelling as far afield as Cordova and Pamplona. Now that he was free of Museum responsibilities, he was able to travel where he had always wanted to go. In 1982 he was in Toulouse which he made a centre for visiting the Romanesque churches in that region. Later he joined a tour of eastern Turkey as a lecturer; and a first visit to Sicily made a deep impression on him.

International recognition of his contribution to Persian art studies came with his election as president of the *Societas Iranologica Europea* in 1983–7; and this involved a visit to Turin. At home he had been awarded the Sir Percy Sykes Medal by the Royal Asiatic Society in 1978. He had never been a Fellow of the Society and had been greatly disturbed when the Society's council decided to sell the unique copy of a part of Rashid al-Din's *Jami'al-Tawarikh* in order to meet their financial liabilities and he tried without success to persuade the Government to prevent the export of the manuscript by its purchase. He did however succeed in writing *The World History of Rashid Al-Din. A Study of the Royal Asiatic Society Manuscript* which was published with ample illustrations by Faber in 1978.

Basil was a committed member of the Church of England and was church warden of St George's, Bloomsbury, during his residence in the Museum, and again at Long Wittenham. He was by nature a pessimist or rather he liked to be seen as such. He travelled with a copy of Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living and Dying*. One sorrow was the sudden death of his eldest daughter Camilla who died in 1971. She had written the authoritative history of the Russian artistic avant-garde and was married to the son of the composer Sergei Prokofiev.

Basil was of medium height and light of build always of upright carriage. His figure was trim and compact, his eyes grey green and colouring pale. His aspect was observant and generally stern but in company he was benign and in an expansive mood convivial. He was certainly not without humour but his was of the deadpan sort. He wore only well-tailored suits and it would be difficult to recall any occasion when he had worn the sports jacket and grey flannel trousers that were the distinctive dress of his generation. His only indulgence, especially as he grew older, was a taste for rather daring neckties.

He was a long standing member of the Savile Club, preferring it to the more academic and establishment character of the Athenaeum, and he would lunch there. In 1984 he was invited to address the club with some of his memories when he spoke eloquently of what the club had meant to him:

. . . at the British Museum I was aware of serving a very great institution. . . . It was not a provincial world and I soon learnt to appreciate friendship with colleagues in most foreign countries. But I needed also to be in daily touch with the contemporary world and that I managed through my membership of the Savile. . . . I have found the club a place of stimulus and recreation: for me the walls of these rooms echo with memories of flying wit and wisdom, when all



tiresome worries fall into a wider perspective and I owe an untold debt to the company of Savilians over these many years.<sup>3</sup>

He had in good measure those qualities required of a museum curator; the 'eye' and a sensitive perception of style and appreciation of quality. Gray combined these with a prodigious visual memory which enabled him to discern connections and influences. Writing occupied much of his time; and he had the gift of a clear and well-written prose style without the enticements of a populariser. His official reports such as those to the Trustees were succinct—he believed that brevity made the greater impact. He regularly published paintings or objects recently acquired whether by purchase or by gift and their relevance to the collections. The two Royal Academy exhibitions of the arts of Persia, and of India and Pakistan set the pattern for much of his writing.

From the experience of these two exhibitions he was to produce his book *Persian Painting* (Skira, 1961), and his contribution on Mughal painting and the painting schools of the Deccan in *Painting in India* (ed. Douglas Barrett, Skira, 1963). He would be the first to disclaim finality in his art history since the source material is constantly growing but he provides an overall picture and framework to which new information can be introduced. Moreover his view of Mughal painting was enhanced by his knowledge and understanding of Persian painting.

It was this very wide range of experience that stimulated his choice of subjects. He was particularly interested in the artistic relations between China and the Islamic world when two empires were united under Mongol dynasties, the Yuan in China and the Ilkhans in Transoxiana and Persia, and were the channels through which Chinese paintings exerted a powerful influence on the painting schools of the Ilkhans. In the succeeding Timurid period, through the medium of frequent diplomatic missions and commercial activity the entire decorative vocabulary of Persia and indeed the central lands of the Islamic world was enriched by the examples of Chinese painting, porcelain, and textiles. At the same time Islamic metalwork forms were adopted in Chinese blue and white porcelain. These themes were presented in a number of articles and were supported by examples from carefully selected objects or illustrated in contemporary manuscript miniatures. In a certain sense this was the history of taste and he was keen to discover the workings of such changes, which in part he believed were due to patronage.

<sup>3</sup> MS 'Address at Savile Club dinner for Basil Gray', in unpublished family papers.

This leads to what may well prove to be his most enduring contribution. In retirement he had decided to concentrate on problems in Islamic art history which had exercised him over the years. The principal was the development of Persian painting of which the crucial changes took place in the fourteenth century. In 1969 he had attended a UNESCO symposium in Samarqand on the arts of the Timurid period and was appointed editor of a comprehensive study of the Timurid arts of the book. This was published in 1979 and covered the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries and was the combined work of ten authors. Apart from correlating the work of his collaborators, he himself contributed the sections on the history of miniature painting of the fourteenth century in which he presented his considered views on how the Persian miniature developed under the patronage of the Ilkhanids and the Mongol succession dynasties, in particular the Jalairids, into the Timurid period. He was able to show the connection between these developments and the influence of the princely patron in the great centres, Tabriz, Baghdad, Shiraz, and Herat. All this was based on his first hand knowledge of Persian miniatures, whether in manuscripts or detached.

An unpublished article 'Workshop practise in Herat' was preliminary to a study of the library of Iskandar Sultan grandson of Timur who governed Shiraz from 1394 at the age of seven to 1414 and was both calligrapher and painter and superintended his staff in the production of manuscripts, exercising taste and judgement in his choice of subject, style, and technique. This study awaits publication.

His last visit abroad was to Basel in September 1988 to see the exhibition 'Glass of the Middle Ages' which was held in the Rheinisches Museum and he attended an informal conference at which he read the third of his papers on the Hedwig glasses. This was his final contribution to the problem of the Hedwig glasses. Previously this homogeneous group of glass beakers, of which all the examples have been found only in the West, has been attributed variously to Egyptian, Syrian, or Byzantine glass centres, but generally dated to the late twelfth to early thirteenth century. In his paper he boldly speculated that the group was made in South Italy, at the instance of Frederick II, by Muslim craftsmen, supporting his argument by showing iconographic relationships with sculpture in Apulia.

From there he went on to the Abbey of St Maurice d'Agaune beyond the Lake of Geneva to see the enamelled ewer of early Islamic date, and then to visit Colmar where he was able to see again after many years the Issenheim altarpiece of Grünewald. He was now eighty-four but still very

alert and mentally vigorous, standing up to the strain of travel remarkably well. He had complained of difficulty in walking and he decided to risk a second hip replacement. In June, 1989 he was admitted to the Wingfield Orthopaedic Hospital where he was operated on apparently successfully but his constitution evidently was unable to withstand the shock. He was removed to the John Radcliffe Hospital where on the 10 June he died peacefully. He is buried in the churchyard of Long Wittenham.

It is still too early to assess Gray's influence since he had little or no part in formal teaching; he made himself felt rather in his written word, the learned paper or discussion. He was never, however, the skilled lecturer who could rivet the attention of an audience.

Like Binyon, he was not literate in the cultures which he studied and he was certainly conscious of this deficiency. He was well aware that knowledge of their language adds another dimension to the understanding of a people's culture. He read widely in translation when available and was never shy in seeking the help of the epigrapher in the elucidation of inscriptions. By way of compensation he had developed connoisseurship to a high degree, involving recognition of style, ability to discern quality, and to discriminate between the genuine and the false. With the historian's mind he looked for links between objects of art in time and space. That is why his studies of the relations between Chinese and Islamic Art and his analysis of Ilkhanid and Timurid painting have met with general acceptance. Scholars and amateurs of the arts of the Orient owe him a debt for his wise and far-seeing additions to the oriental collections in the British Museum when funds and objects were still available in the period of his keepership.

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*Note.* I am indebted to the members of Basil Gray's family for information regarding Gray himself and the history of the family, and in particular to Edmund Gray.

### Bibliographical Note

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