
‘Aspects of Art’: The lecture series

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The ‘Aspects of Art’ Lectures were endowed a century ago by Henriette Hertz, who also founded the Bibliotheca Hertziana, in Rome in 1912, a library that remains a crucial resource for historians of Italian Art. Aspects of Art, one of three lecture series endowed by Hertz, were to be ‘on some problem or aspect of the relation of Art in any of its manifestations to human culture; Art including Poetry and Music as well as Sculpture and Painting.’ Initial debate on how this generous rubric was to be interpreted is evident in the changing headings for the lecture series in the first few years. The first was announced as ‘First annual lecture on aspects of art, including poetry’, the next two as the second and third ‘annual lecture on art in relation to civilization’. The lectures were not subsequently further defined other than being on ‘Aspects of Art’. On one occasion (1946) a proposed lecture was judged not to meet the terms of the Trust: a Council minute for 20 February 1946 recorded that ‘Mr Geoffrey Webb, who was employed with the British Commission in Germany, had found himself unable to prepare his lecture on Baroque Art. He had offered a lecture on the position of works of art in Germany, but it was considered that this did not come sufficiently within the terms of the Trust, and it was agreed to suspend the Lecture for the present year and to invite Mr Webb to deliver it in 1947’ – which he did. Would the lecture on art in Germany at this moment have been judged too close to reportage, or was the subject too raw?

Lectures have been fundamental to the British Academy’s activities from the start, and the Aspects of Art Lectures introduced an important strand dedicated to subjects otherwise absent from the programme. A few of the lectures did include poetry, following Hertz’s wishes, notably the first three lectures in the series – the lectures by Maurice Barrès and Emile Verhaeren, and Laurence Binyon’s ‘English poetry in relation to painting and the other arts’. However, the fact that other Academy lecture series were dedicated to poetry probably contributed to the increased tendency for Aspects of Art Lectures to focus on the visual arts, architecture and music. While the majority have been on the visual arts and architecture, it was understood from the start that music should be included, although only three out of the 49 lectures delivered up to 1984 were on music topics. On first scanning the lecture titles I thought the 1919 lecture entitled ‘Rhythm’ was about music, but it turned out to be something very different. There were two successive musicology lectures in 1985 and 1986, on Josquin and on Plainchant, but since 2000 music and the visual arts have alternated. With the

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exception of 1985/6, lectures since the Second World War have no longer been annual.

The first five lectures were primarily concerned with contemporary art and poetry, setting current practices in relation to history and tradition. In the 1920s classical topics dominated, including a lecture on ‘Vergil’s creative art’, while broadly speaking the Renaissance and Baroque took over in the post Second World War period. This was probably regarded as safer ground than the battles over Modernism that galvanised some of the earliest lectures. After that early flurry, very few lectures have dealt with 20th-century let alone contemporary subjects. Most address the broader cultural or historical context and the importance of the topic in relation to the state of research in the subject. The majority of the topics are Western European, though the Middle East and China also figure.

War

The first lecture took place in the middle of the First World War. The President of the Academy, Viscount Bryce, in his Address for 1915, noted that the Academy intended to continue its regular activities despite the War, with one exception: ‘The year that has passed since the last general meeting of the Academy has been an Annus Mirabilis, full of unexpected and terrible events. The Council has thought it better not to let these events disturb the even tenor of our way... The Academy has carried on its meetings and public lectures, making no change save one. The Council has this year proposed no foreign men of learning to be elected as Corresponding Fellows.’ The first lecturers chosen for the Aspects of Art series were two of the most prominent literary figures from Britain’s closest war-time allies, France and Belgium: Maurice Barrès (1862-1923) and Emile Verhaeren (1855-1916). Barrès gave the first lecture in French, in 1916, on ‘Le blason de la France, ou ses traits éternels dans cette guerre et dans les vieilles épopées’ (The coat of arms of France, or its eternal traits in this war and in the old epics). Writer, politician and

The Henriette Hertz Fund



Henriette Hertz
(1846-1913)

The Academy's earliest benefactors

Henriette Hertz, who died 100 years ago in 1913, was one of the British Academy's first benefactors.

Established by Royal Charter in 1902, the Academy struggled for funds in its early years – it would not be until 1924 that it would receive its first annual grant from the Treasury. However, prior to the First World War, the Academy's indefatigable Secretary, Israel Gollancz, managed to persuade a very close circle of *emigré* Jewish friends to support the Academy's activities through endowments. The primary purpose was to establish funds for the furtherance of research in particular subject areas; a spin-off benefit was the establishment of a number of series of public lectures, which served to raise the Academy's profile.

The Academy's first endowment came in 1907 from Constance Schweich, who established the Leopold Schweich Fund in memory of her father, to support research into 'Ancient Civilisation with reference to Biblical Study' – including the series of 'Schweich Lectures' on this theme.¹ In 1910, Constance Schweich's aunt, Mrs Frida Mond, gave the Academy money for research 'in the various branches of English Literature'; this time, two lecture series were supported – the 'Warton Lectures' on English poetry and the 'Shakespeare Lectures'.²

In 1914, the Academy received a further endowment in the form of a bequest from Frida Mond's close friend, Miss Henriette Hertz.

Henriette Hertz

Henriette Hertz was born in Cologne on 6 January 1846. She was good friends at school with Frida Löwenthal. When, in 1867, Frida and her husband, Ludwig Mond, moved to England, it wasn't long before Henriette joined them to keep her friend company. And when Ludwig became a wealthy industrial chemist, Frida, Ludwig and Henriette were able to enjoy a lavish life of travelling and entertaining. In 1889, the three of them acquired space in the Palazzo Zuccari in Rome, and established an open house there which quickly became a centre of cosmopolitan intellectual life in the city.

As a young girl Henriette had developed an interest in the history of art. In Rome she decided that she wanted to improve the conditions of scholars studying Italian art history: 'I think the time is ripe to break down those barriers constituted by nationality and gender'. She built up a collection of books on Italian art, supplemented by volumes from Frida Mond's private library; and, together with her extensive collection of photographs, this formed the basis of a library which Henriette established at the Palazzo Zuccari – and which still exists today. The Bibliotheca Hertziana opened to scholars in 1912 on the occasion of the 10th International Congress of Art Historians which was being held that year in Rome.³

The Henriette Hertz Fund

As well as being in the same close set as those who had already supported the Academy generously, by now Henriette Hertz had her own intimate connection with the Academy: in 1910, Israel Gollancz had married her niece, the painter Alide Goldschmidt.

In her will of November 1911, 'Miss Henriette Hertz, of "The Poplars", Regent's Park, London, and of the Palazzo Zuccari, Rome', bequeathed £6,000 to the British Academy. After her death on 9 April 1913, a Declaration of Trust was drawn up (November 1914) for 'the Henriette Hertz Fund'. Following the terms of the will, the purposes of the Fund included the support of: a 'Lecture or Investigation or Paper on a philosophical problem' (the first 'Philosophical Lecture' was delivered in December 1914); a 'Lecture or Investigation or Paper on some problem or aspect of the relation of Art in any of its manifestations to human culture' (the first 'Aspects of Art Lecture' was delivered in 1916); and a 'Public Lecture on some Master-Mind considered individually with reference to his life and work specially in order to appraise the essential elements of his Genius' (the first 'Master-Mind Lecture' was delivered in 1916).

All three lecture series remain to this day important elements of the Academy's programme of events.



Part of the Bibliotheca Hertziana in the Palazzo Zuccari, Rome

¹ See Graham Davies, 'Leopold Schweich and his Family', *British Academy Review*, 12 (January 2009), 53-57.

² The Academy would receive further money from Mrs Frida Mond (d. 1923), including in her will.

³ www.biblhertz.it/en/institute/history-of-the-institute

member of the Académie française, Barrès was the most famous French intellectual and patriot of his time. He had been a radical and nonconformist in his youth, moving in symbolist circles, but took the anti-Dreyfus side in a case that divided France, and became the leader of an ethnic nationalism. The lecture was a defiant celebration of France, emphasising the importance and contemporary relevance of ancient epic poetry and imagery in the resistance to Germany. Barrès recounts heroic and tragic episodes from the trenches, linking their spirit to the Chansons de Geste, to the literature of the crusades and to Corneille. Viscount Bryce, in his Address on 14 July 1916, said: 'We listened two days ago to [a lecture] by M. Maurice Barrès on the Spirit of France as displayed in old French epic poetry and again revealed in the present war.' All the lectures of that year, including the 'Aspects of Art', were, he said, of the highest merit.

Emile Verhaeren, poet and playwright, died in November 1916, before his lecture took place. 'An aesthetic interpretation of Belgium's past' was read in French on 17 March 1917 by the Belgian Minister. Verhaeren sums up a civilisation at a moment of national anguish, because of the German occupation and destruction of Louvain and its library. Unfortunately the two poems Verhaeren had planned to read during his lecture were not included in the published version. The choice of two major European figures during the crisis of the war exemplifies the Academy's outward-looking, international stance and sense of solidarity with a Europe under threat; at the same time each lecture is strongly nationalistic in tone. There is no hint of the new voices that were transforming poetry and the visual arts, rejecting traditional modes of creation in the search for a new language of modernity. Not all of these were reacting against the war. Some, like Apollinaire or the Italian Futurist Marinetti, made it part of their new aesthetic, but cultural and political nationalism together with literary and artistic traditions were generally rejected by the avant-garde.

Modernism versus the traditional

The clash between Modernism and more conventional art and literature dominates the next few lectures: 1918, Laurence Binyon 'English poetry in relation to painting and the other arts': 1919, D.S. MacColl, 'Rhythm', 1920 Sir Reginald Blomfield, 'The tangled skein: art in England 1800-1920'; 1921 William Rothenstein, 'The Compass and Disabilities of contemporary art'. The level of disaffection or downright opposition to Modernism varies, from the relatively moderate opinions of Binyon to the fierce resistance of Blomfield. Unfortunately we have no record of the 1921 lecture by William Rothenstein on 'The Compass and Disabilities of contemporary art', which must have been a response to Blomfield's 1920 lecture, nor that of D.S. MacColl in 1919, 'Rhythm', which may well have partially defended modern art. Their absences is a pity because they could have thrown light on the long and damaging controversies in England about modern art and the notorious failure of the national collections during the first decades of the 20th century to acquire work by contemporary foreign artists such as Picasso and Matisse.

Rothenstein was a painter and writer on art, and from 1920-1935 Principal of the Royal College of Art. Although relatively conservative as an artist himself, he encouraged his students, such as Henry Moore and Edward Burra, to experiment.

The third lecture in the series, and the first on English Art (as it was invariably called at the time), was given by Rothenstein's friend Laurence Binyon, who, unusually, lectured twice; the only other person to do so was Anthony Blunt. Binyon was not only a poet but also an art historian and curator, and specialist in the art of the Far East. His second lecture in 1936 was on 'Chinese art and Buddhism'. His 1918 lecture, 'English poetry in relation to painting and the other arts', is one of the few in the series to engage seriously with the relationship between the arts and poetry, and this brings him into a dialogue with modernist notions of the specificity of the medium; his position is ambiguous, because while on the one hand sensitive to this, his main concern was for the exercise of the imagination which for him meant a connection with poetry. Quoting Walter Pater, for whom all arts aspire to the condition of music, he argues that this implies a criticism of poetry, so that 'artists and art critics today have a curious horror of the intrusion into art of anything suspected of being literature.' Popular painting, he says, has 'become more and more enslaved to the unconstructive nowhere-leading doctrine of naturalism; it lets the rhythmic element die out more and more'; having lost its relationship with poetry painting deserts its own proper basis and inspiration. He disliked the Pre-Raphaelites, and ended his lecture with Keats, the 'most pictorial' of poets. When painters, he argued, applied his method to what they saw rather than what they imagined, instead of that distinctness of imagination which Keats required, 'we descend to a doctrine of minute fidelity to nature, which leads insensibly to the negation of art.' He blames 'a certain waste and division and incoherence' on the 'unrelatedness' of the arts. 'The arts have each their boundaries, each their separate felicities belonging to their medium. But it is well also to remember that they have their common spring of inspiration in the imaginative life, and it is that fundamental unity that best preserves them from chaos, triviality and caprice.'

Although MacColl's 1919 lecture 'Rhythm' wasn't published, he engaged in a polemic with Roger Fry in the *Burlington Magazine* the same year which gives an indication of his position. MacColl was an art historian, a regular critic in the *Burlington* and keeper at the Tate Gallery from 1906-1911. He has a reputation for championing modern art, but within limits. Two long letters to the *Burlington* strongly object to Roger Fry's recent articles on 'Line as a means of expression in modern art' (December 1918 and February 1919), which had argued that the revolution in art had released artists from the bond of representational accuracy, enabling them to find fuller expression, and rhythmic harmony, in free lines. MacColl objected 'To substitute for the research of natural rhythms a violent or arbitrary "distortion" as the general principle of drawing is to caricature without the caricaturists' motive and threatens sterility in design.' Although Binyon, MacColl and Rothenstein in various

ways supported a moderate modernism, this did not extend to cubism, to Picasso, Matisse and Kandinsky, or to abstraction. Sir Reginald Blomfield, an architect and designer of Italianate gardens, was uncompromisingly against modern art. His 1920 lecture, 'The tangled skein: art in England 1800-1920', is a diatribe against the 'revolution in art'. Admitting that 'all is not well with the arts', he ridicules those who 'ask us to scrap everything, traditions, associations, all the splendid inheritance of the past, and to paint, model and design with results unlike anything that has ever been on land or sea.' On the other hand there are those who 'believe that the arts ... cannot be violently pulled to pieces and turned upside down without injury to civilization, who think it is neither necessary nor desirable to seek inspiration in the methods of the South Sea Islanders...' This is a dig against artists like Picasso and Derain who admired non-Western art. A survey of art and architecture since 1820, with Turner as the greatest hero, is followed by an interesting argument that the rot began with French Salon criticism in the 18th century, since when art has been dominated by critics and theorists. He objects to the invention of the term Academic Art as an Aunt Sally for the 'raging hosts of the revolutionaries', and then comes up to date with comments on the kind of contemporary art that has been lauded to the skies by the critics, such as the exhibition in London by a notorious French painter (Matisse). Blomfield found 'a collection of canvases that appeared to have no meaning at all and no object, except the negation of every quality of form, colour, and composition...' Even worse was a painter who 'by the mercy of Providence has not yet penetrated to England' but makes 'purely non-representative pictures' (this is probably Kandinsky). 'Art is to be an affair of hieroglyphics, of arrangements of forms and colours which are out of relation to observed realities, and indeed which need have no meaning at all, because there are always at hand the skilled art critic to supply the necessary hermeneutics, and the more unintelligible the artist, the better material for his ready eloquence and ingenuity.'

History of art

These contentious issues around the contemporary situation of art were avoided almost completely in the succeeding lectures, which stick to the history of art and architecture, while covering a broad range of topics, including sculpture, painting, Greek pottery, prints, stained glass, medals, armour, illuminated manuscripts, miniatures, and architectural carving. There was no 20th-century topic until John Golding's 1980 lecture 'Fauvism and the School of Chatou: Post-Impressionism in Crisis' (Figure 1).

The condition of Art History in the UK was transformed as a side effect of the rise of Hitler. Germany had been the seedbed for the historical and critical study of art and of aesthetics, and many of the outstanding scholars from Germany and Eastern Europe took refuge in the UK during the 1930s. Among those who contributed to the Aspects of Art series after the war, having settled here, were Johannes Wilde, Edgar Wind and George Zarnecki. (Ernst Gombrich,



Figure 1. (Above) Works by André Derain, one the painters discussed in John Golding's 1980 'Aspects of Art' Lecture: Self Portrait (1904); Big Ben (1905-6). John Golding (1929-2012) was a Fellow of both the British Academy and the Royal Academy; his Arco Iris (1991-2) hangs on the walls of the British Academy (below).





Figure 2. *The Prophet Daniel, Sistine Ceiling.*

Director of the Warburg Institute, did not. It's notable that the majority of the lecturers were from the Courtauld Institute of Art, rather than the Warburg.) Wind was Professor of Art History at Oxford, where he delivered a series of lectures on Michelangelo so popular that they had to be moved to the Playhouse. His *Aspects of Art Lecture, 'Michelangelo's Prophets and Sibyls'* (1960), is one of the highlights of the post-war series. It followed on from Johannes Wilde's lecture on 'The Decoration of the Sistine Chapel' (1958), and the two are wonderfully complementary.¹ Wilde published relatively little in his lifetime, though his lectures at the Courtauld where he became Professor were legendary, so this published lecture is a rarity.

¹ Both Johannes Wilde's 'The Decoration of the Sistine Chapel' and Edgar Wind's 'Michelangelo's Prophets and Sibyls' are reprinted in *Art and Politics in Renaissance Italy: British Academy Lectures*, edited by

He discusses the commission, structure and sequences of the paintings in the Sistine Chapel, while Wind explores the iconography of the Prophets and Sibyls (Figures 2 and 3) and the role of the great preacher Savanorola.

Music

The increase of lectures on music reflects, at least in part, the expansion of the subject at universities. In 1986 David Hiley spoke on 'Thurstan of Caen and Plainchant at Glastonbury: Musicological reflexions on the Norman Conquest', which took as its starting point the murder of two monks at Glastonbury in 1081 or 1083 by Abbot

George Holmes, which is still available in paperback from Oxford University Press.

Thurstan's retainers, because they insisted on singing the wrong kind of plainchant. While not solving the difficulty of knowing what plainchant actually sounded like, the detective work in analysing the differences in ecclesiastical traditions and decoding the evidence in the surviving music books satisfactorily delivered the conclusion that Anglo-Saxon plainchant continued to be sung after the conquest, not only in England but in Normandy. Hiley is pleased to echo George Zarnecki, who concluded in his 900th anniversary lecture in 1966, '1066 and Architectural Sculpture', that Anglo-Saxon sculpture did not die an heroic death at Hastings. Hiley ends with a modest and convincing plea for musicology: There is satisfaction in being able to discover how things of innate beauty were created and transmitted, in identifying musical traditions; 'with capabilities such as these, musicology may deservedly occupy its place among the humanities, contributing to, as well as nourished by, other historical disciplines.'

Recently the controversial question of performance in relation to music and musicology was addressed by Nicholas Cook, in his 2013 lecture, 'Between Art and Science: Music as Performance'². The music topics, though considerably fewer in number than those on art history, look to this outsider as perhaps more adventurous and more open to popular aspects of art. In 2003 Stephen Banfield spoke on 'Scholarship and the musical: reclaiming Jerome Kern', a fascinating account of this hugely prolific composer of popular songs including 'Ol' Man River'.

It has not been possible to do justice to the full range and significance of the Aspects of Art Lectures, nor to follow up the many interesting questions that have arisen. There is no doubt that they give a rich account of changes in taste, of the development of two disciplines over the last century and the ways these have been shaped by scholars.



Figure 3. *The Erythraean Sibyl*, Sistine Ceiling.

² A video recording of Nicholas Cook's 2013 Aspects of Art Lecture may be found via www.britac.ac.uk/events/2013/