PICTURES FOR THE NATION:

Conceptualizing a Collection of 'Old Masters' for London

1775-1800

by

Kristin Erin Campbell

A thesis submitted to the Department of Art
In conformity with the requirements for
The degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Queen’s University
Kingston, Ontario, Canada
January 2009

Copyright © Kristin Campbell, 2009
Abstract

This thesis addresses the growing impulse towards establishing a public, national collection of Old Master pictures for Britain, located in London, in the last quarter of the eighteenth-century. It does so by identifying the importance of individual conceptualizations of what such a collection might mean for a nation, and how it might come to be realized for an imprecisely defined public. My thesis examines the shifting dynamics between private and public collections during the period of 1775 to 1800, repositioning notions of what constituted space for viewing and accessing art in a national context, and investigates just who participated in the ensuing dialogues about various uses of art for the nation. To this end, three case studies have been employed. The first examines the collection of pictures assembled by Sir Robert Walpole and their public legacy. The second explores the proposal for a national collection of art put forth by art dealer Noel Desenfans. The third examines the frustrated plans of Sir Joshua Reynolds for his collection of Old Master pictures.

Through the respective lenses provided by the case studies, it is demonstrated that the envisioning of a national gallery for Britain pitched competing perspectives against each other, as different kinds of people jockeyed for cultural authority. The process of articulating and shaping these ambitions with an eye towards national benefit was only beginning to be explored, and negotiations of private ambitions and interests surrounding picture collections for the public was further complicated by factors of social class and profession. This thesis demonstrate that the boundaries of participation in matters concerning art for the nation were not fixed regarding Old Master pictures and the value placed on them in late eighteenth-century London.
Acknowledgements

I had ambitious plans, coming out of my experience doing special field examinations in the Department of Art at Queen’s University. I was determined that my dissertation could cover at least a hundred years of art viewing in London, between 1750 and 1850. It was my intention to look at practice of touring and visiting histories of private and public collections in both town and country houses, and the differences between temporary and permanent art exhibitions. I wanted to expand on the idea of what it meant to have space in which to view art objects; not only physical ones like drawing rooms and galleries, but also descriptive and prescriptive spaces, particularly those textual and descriptive journeys in guidebooks, pamphlets and newspapers that might enable a mysterious and largely anonymous public who didn’t often see art, to imagine it.

From the vantage point that only a completed project affords, I can look back and say with relative certainty that almost everyone in the Department who read my initial proposals must have recognized that the scope of the intended project was a bit ridiculous. These same people had equal confidence that as I progressed through the material, I would be able to redirect focus on aspects that would not only contribute something relevant to the field, but would allow me to finish the project before it was time to collect a pension! I gratefully acknowledge the Department of Art for its support and encouragement as I worked through the processes of researching, producing and refining this dissertation.

I must thank Dr. Janice Helland for her able supervision of my special field examinations. We worked through a changing process together, and navigated it so
successfully that I emerged with an enthusiastic and inspirational co-supervisor, Janet M. Brooke. Janet’s generosity with her time and her knowledge in the field of Collecting History added immeasurably to the experience: I’m grateful for the many opportunities to dialogue with her throughout the development of this dissertation, and for her constant support and encouragement throughout the process. The project could not have been whittled down to manageable size without her. Dr. Lynda Jessup’s support as co-supervisor is also much appreciated: her insightful reading of my material invigorated my research at a crucial juncture, and the benefits of this are apparent.

My extensive research in London could not have been undertaken without the support of a Bader Fellowship. The generosity of Dr. Alfred Bader in establishing this fellowship enabled many opportunities, and I am most grateful. I am also grateful for the support of Canadian Society for Eighteenth Century Studies. As a recipient of the D.W. Smith Fellowship, I was able to conclude my research with a final short trip to London.

The necessary navigation of libraries in pursuit of research is always made better when a graduate student has the good fortune to work with people who are as generous and helpful as they are capable. My good fortune began at Queen’s University: many thanks to Rozan Roberts and Nina Boyd of the Art History Library, and to Mary Fraser (ret.) of the Visual Resources unit of the Department of Art.

While in London, I was assisted by the staff at a variety of libraries, archives and museums, and would like to thank in particular Mrs. Calista M. Lucy and Dr. Jan Piggott (ret.) of the Dulwich College Archives, and Lynn Young at the British Library, for their help. Val Hoyt at Christie’s New York was also very generous, receiving requests and answering queries. Staff at the Rare Books and Manuscripts room at the British Library,
the National Art Library (Victoria & Albert Museum), the Sackler Library at Oxford
University, the Cambridge University Library, and at the Library at the Art Gallery of
Ontario are also to be thanked for their assistance.

Mentors and friends have all provided much needed support, encouragement, and
sometimes the welcome distractions: I could not have embarked on this project without
some of them, and could not have completed it without others. They all have my
profound thanks and my gratitude. J. Douglas Stewart, for sharing his great love of the
arts in Britain, and his passion for learning and the power of anecdote. Carol Gibson
Wood, for encouraging me in my first critical readings of Horace Walpole and George
Vertue a decade ago at the University of Victoria. Catherine Harding, Sally Hickson and
Sharon Gregory, for providing me with opportunities to share parts of this thesis at
conference sessions in recent years, and to discover the joy of discussing my work with
others. Victoria Pollard, my oldest friend and strongest supporter, for intoning a steady
refrain of encouragement from the beginning: Coraggio! Allison and Joan Sherman, for
their boundless kindness and generosity, and, frequently, the roof over my head! Peter
Coffman and Diane Laundy, for always forging their own path and setting the greatest
example by it. Roger and Meow Brook, for always making me feel so at home in theirs.
Michelle Brook, Sonia Dubon, Jane Russell Corbett and Stan Corbett, Kristy Holmes,
Angela Roberts, Andrea Bubenik, Krystina Stermole, Noah Kelly, Graham Brown—you
have all helped make this possibility a reality.

Finally, my family: Gerry and Judy Campbell, and Lt. Col. and Mrs. W. B.
Asbury, for being there from Day One, and helping every step of the way.
Dedicated to the memory of J. Douglas Stewart (1934-2008). My best times at Queen’s were spent in your classroom and around your dinner table—a generous teacher and kind host, always. It was my great fortune to have been one of your students, and the experience continues to inspire me.
Table of Contents

Abstract i
Acknowledgments ii
Dedication v
Table of Contents vi
List of Illustrations viii

Chapter One: Introduction and Literature Review 1

Chapter Two: Presence, Absence, and Narratives of Loss: Robert Walpole (1676-1745) and the Collection at Houghton Hall 48

Chapter Three: Noel Desenfans (1744/5-1807), Francis Bourgeois (c.1756-1811), and the Problem of Negotiated Ownership 109

Chapter Four: Continuing Strategies of Negotiation 156

Chapter Five: The Old Servants’ Old Masters: The Collection of Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792) 192

Chapter Six: Conclusion 210

Bibliography: 216

Appendix A: Letter from Horace Walpole to George Montagu 232
Appendix B: Parliamentary Speech of John Wilkes, 8 April 1777 235
Appendix C: Prospectus for John Boydell’s Houghton Gallery 241
Appendix D: Noel Desenfans’s Plan for a National Gallery 242
Appendix E: Newspaper Clipping on the Orléans Collection 277
Appendix F: Letter from an Anonymous Painter to Noel Desenfans 279
Appendix G: Letter from Noel Desenfans to Benjamin West 301
Appendix H: Satirical News Item related to ‘Ralph’s Exhibition’ 320
## List of Illustrations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fig.</th>
<th>Illustration Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Dedication Page to Catherine the Great, from John Boydell’s <em>Houghton Gallery</em> 1788.</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>S.F. Ravenet after Carlo Dolci, <em>Saint John</em>, for John Boydell, 1780.</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>S.F. Ravenet after Carlo Dolci, <em>Saint John</em>, for John Boydell, 1780. Detail of Inscription.</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter One:
Introduction and Literature Review

In 1761, Horace Walpole (1717-1797), 4th Earl of Orford, penned a letter to his friend, George Montagu, detailing a recent exchange with painter and engraver William Hogarth in the artist’s Leicester Fields’ studio, on the matter of literary projects in which each was engaged at the time. Walpole was in the throes of assembling and compiling his Anecdotes of Painting in England; Hogarth was planning an Apology for Painters. Though Walpole’s account suggests that Hogarth was the more agitated of the two, each man seems to have been concerned that the other’s work would infringe on the essential nature and content of his own, and challenged the competence of the other to embark on such a project in the first place. For the sake of clarity in the letter, Walpole recorded the dialogue using the initials “H” to indicate Hogarth and “W” for himself:

H. I am told you are going to entertain the town with something in our way. W. Not very soon, Mr. Hogarth. H. I wish you would let me have it, to correct; I should be sorry to have you expose yourself to censure. We painters must know more of those things than other people. W. Do you think nobody understands painting but painters? H. Oh! So far from it, there’s Reynolds, who certainly has genius; why but ‘t’other day he offered L100 for a picture I would not hang in my cellar; and indeed, to say truth, I have generally found that persons who have studied painting were the best judges of it… I wish you would let me correct it—besides, I am writing something of the same kind myself, I should be sorry we should clash. W. I believe it is not much known what my work is; very few

---

persons have seen it. **H.** Why, it is a critical history of painting, is it not? **W.** No, it is an antiquarian history of it in England…Besides, if it does, I cannot help it: when I publish anything I give it to the world to think of as they please. **H.** Oh! If it is an antiquarian work, we shall not clash. Mine is a critical work…

The tightly constructed dialogue as presented by Walpole abounds with pointed references to several issues of great concern, not only to the two men in question, but to a much broader population of British artists, patrons, connoisseurs, collectors and entrepreneurs, and these issues would continue to develop rapidly throughout the latter decades of the eighteenth century. Here, we see the practitioner of the arts jockeying for authority with the gentleman collector and dilettante. Here, we see the taste and judgment of each man questioned by the other. Here, we see distinctions made between antiquarian histories and critical ones, each burdened with respective unflattering connotations.

The second half of the eighteenth century witnessed the intersection of a variety of developing artistic and entrepreneurial practices and the establishment of institutions

---

2 Horace Walpole to George Montagu, 5 May 1761, in *Horace Walpole’s Correspondence*, ed. W.S. Lewis, (New Haven, Yale UP, 1937-1983), 9: 365. Hereafter identified as *HWC*. The complete letter is transcribed as Appendix A.

3 Iain Pears, *The Discovery of Painting: The Growth of Interest in the Arts in England, 1680-1768* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988), 93-106. Lampooning the fussiness and almost obtuse attention to detail associated with connoisseurs was a common subject (antiquarians did not fare any better) and a constant theme in a variety of media and performance art from the 1730’s on throughout the eighteenth century. James Miller’s play, *The Man of Taste*, 1735, constituted just one example; anonymous line engravings such as *A Connoisseur Admiring a Dark Night Piece* (which depicts a man with a spyglass intently examining a picture which is so dark it is represented as a flat plane of black), of 1771, in the Lewis Walpole Library at Yale University, provided a visual element to the ridicule. In contrast, artists who embarked on creating theories and histories of art were as likely as not to meet with criticisms due to the association of their work with ‘mechanical’ trades, and the related assumption that they could not contribute much that was meaningful to the enlightenment or improvement in understanding of the fine arts.
in London that reconfigured the contexts in which art could be viewed and acquired, in ways greatly expanded from the previous century. Transitions were occurring on many fronts, and the various components of this growth and change were rarely negotiated without incident: while they promoted commercial opportunity and increased cultural accessibility to varying degrees, they also generated confusion, suspicion, and anxiety.

In many ways, Horace Walpole’s dialogue with Hogarth establishes perfectly the point of this polemical intersection. By recording the exchange for his friend Montagu, Walpole’s remarks may be taken as an assertion of his authority over an artist he considered presumptuous, occasionally irrational and possibly even demented [See Appendix A]. But it also identifies a point central to the artistic debates of the age—and of this thesis—underscored most precisely in Walpole’s exclamation: “Do you think nobody understands painting but painters?” Just who was qualified to pass judgment on pictures, and who should write their histories? Who was entitled to view paintings, and in what locations and contexts? Posing such questions was easy: the answers, however, were less simply arrived at.

This thesis aims to address these pivotal questions by identifying and examining a growing impulse in the last quarter of the eighteenth century towards the establishment of a publicly owned, national collection of pictures for Britain, located in London. It does so using three case studies, creating cultural and social contexts in which the existence of private collections of Old Master pictures might be observed against the

---

4 Horace Walpole 1969, 3:11. Walpole’s encounter with Hogarth occurred in the wake of a particularly trying time in the Hogarth’s career, when his history painting depicting *Sigismunda* (1759, Tate Gallery) was being roundly panned by his critics. Walpole’s dislike for the painting was such that he branded it a “vulgar expression”, the subject of which far outstripping the artist’s ability to render it. See also Derek Jarrett, *The Ingenious Mr. Hogarth* (London: M. Joseph, 1976), 185-186.
development of that impulse, through individual responses and reactions to it. The first case study examines the collection of pictures assembled by Horace Walpole’s father, Sir Robert Walpole, and its public legacy in a collective conscious facilitated by printed books, reproductive prints, and ephemera; the second case study explores the proposal for a national collection of art put forth by London art dealer Noel Desenfans; and the third examines the frustrated plans of the first president of the Royal Academy, Sir Joshua Reynolds, for public access to his collection of Old Master pictures. The studies are not presented in strict chronological order, but rather are positioned to allow the last and most speculative study to stand in response to the previous two.

By incorporating aspects of histories of art and eighteenth-century cultural studies, each case study exposes and examines different aspects of the shifting dynamics of ‘private’ and ‘public’ as related to picture collections during this period. Each addresses the parameters of ownership and entitlement by exploring the notion of what might constitute space for viewing, and investigates individual and collective negotiations best understood within the context of those shifting dynamics.

It is perhaps easier to describe what the project is not than to pinpoint what it is. It is not, for instance, a history of the National Gallery of London or its origins. Rather, it aims to recover and address aspects of distinct individual histories that have been lost and subsumed in larger ones, and in so doing, to identify different kinds of responses towards a growing awareness of the value of publicly accessible collections of pictures.

---

for the nation.6 It does not address the concrete realities of locations and buildings
which might create and sustain a national gallery, but with conceptions of such a gallery;
of the kinds of objects that might be featured, the public to whom it might be geared, and
who might best determine either of these aspects.

To paint a brief picture with broad strokes, eighteenth-century London
experienced an increase in the range of available goods in a variety of qualities,
including objects of decorative and fine art which would once have been the exclusive
preserve of the noble and the wealthy. As Iain Pears and John Brewer have noted in
their respective studies of art and its markets in the eighteenth century, the range of
reasons for acquiring these goods was also changing: not only did the developing
market provide opportunities to engage in pursuits that mimicked those of the more
affluent members of society, but it also enabled the dismantling and re-crafting of those
pursuits in ways more suitable to a broader range of consumers.7 The arts no longer
relied so exclusively upon a system of specific, individual patronage but were being
redefined in many ways to accommodate a public one, even if that ‘public’ could not
always be clearly defined.8

6 This is entirely in keeping with development of ever-growing sense of patriotism and
the crafting of national worth against peoples and nations coming to be seen as ‘other’
over the course of the eighteenth century, which has been observed by scholars of
eighteenth-century British history. See in particular Linda Colley, Britons: Forging the
Nation, 1707-1837 (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992), and “Whose Nation? Class and
National Consciousness,” Past and Present 113, no. 1 (1986): 97-117. See also Roy
7 See Pears, 1988. See also John Brewer, “Cultural Production, Consumption, and the
Place of the Artist in Eighteenth-Century England,” in Towards a Modern Art World, ed.
Brian Allen (New Haven: Yale UP, 1995), 7-25, and The Pleasures of the Imagination:
8 A notoriously difficult and loaded term, ‘public’ is employed in this thesis in the most
general sense unless otherwise qualified: a largely anonymous and inchoate group that
Though financial and social limitations clearly persisted, it must be observed that they could also be increasingly porous. Several independent factors conspired to expand the opportunities of an ever-increasing range of people to view art and to acquire it. The import tax on pictures had been relaxed in the 1690’s, changing the dynamics not only of private important but of the developing market, and as the eighteenth century progressed, the political uncertainty in other parts of Europe prompted many foreign collectors to have their collections shown and sold at auction in London. 9 By the early years of the next century, the Napoleonic Wars and related upheavals dramatically increased the number of available works, providing English picture collectors and their agents with a greatly enlarged range of works from which to choose. In turn, this affected the number and range of items that dealers and auctioneers could make available to a broader purchasing public, including pictures deemed to be of lesser condition or quality, or prints or copies after original works.


9 The history of the Orléans Collection is a prime example. The collection of the Duc d’Orléans was broken up and dispersed during the upheaval of the French Revolution. The Dutch and Flemish pictures were shown in London in 1793. Subsequently, the large portion of Italian works were purchased by a syndicate of English collectors, who then put the remainder of the pictures up for prolonged exhibition and sale in London’s Pall Mall in 1798. See George Redford, Art Sales: A History of Sales of Pictures and Other Works of Art (London: Bradbury, Agnew and Co., 1888), 2:69-78. See also Francis Haskell, The Ephemeral Museum: Old Master Paintings and the Rise of the Art Exhibition (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000), 22-29; and Jordana Pomeroy, “The Orléans Collection: Its Impact on the British Art World,” Apollo 145, no. 420 (February 1997): 26-31.
Notions of ‘public’ and ‘private’ in relation to access to art collections in this period were subject to shifting ideas of what constituted a suitable, ‘admissible’ public. While picture and sculpture collections housed in private homes were beginning to open to visitors, the ‘public’ to whom they were open consisted largely of the owner’s peers and associates, those personally recommended or vouched for by such, and in some cases, those deemed to be engaged in ‘worthy’ pursuits such as artistic study.\(^{10}\) Even the British Museum, founded 1753, which was established in large part to serve national and public purposes, defined ‘the public’ most exclusively, with access further complicated by a cumbersome and inefficient procedure by which to obtain entrance tickets.\(^{11}\) Having said this, improvements in physical and social mobility enabled something of a tourist culture to develop as people gained the means and access to view visual culture and art collections not only in country houses, but also at a variety of venues and establishments in the city, including coffee houses, commercial galleries and sale rooms, town houses, and outdoor pleasure gardens.\(^{12}\) Though difficult to pinpoint and largely

---


\(^{12}\) Evidenced in part by the increasing numbers of guides to country houses that were available to prospective visitors. See Carole Fabricant, “The Literature of Domestic Tourism and the Public Consumption of Private Property,” in *The New Eighteenth Century*, ed. Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown (New York: Metheun, 1987) and Ian Ousby, *The Englishman’s England: Taste, Travel and the Rise of Tourism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990). Holger Hoock has also asserted that the proliferation of collections in town houses during the period were of very limited access to all but the friends and associates of the owner. Giles Waterfield’s research bore out that “…unknown members of the middle classes were given access to most houses…only occasionally and with general reluctance”. See Holger Hoock, “Old Masters for an
anonymous, an expanding middle class could more easily navigate the purchase of paintings and prints than it could in the past, creating and participating in what amounted to a collective, anonymous patronage of art and visual culture. This patronage was facilitated through print shops, showrooms and booksellers’ stalls, and assumed greater cultural significance as the century progressed, not only as access expanded but as critics and members of artistic societies sought to contain, redirect or otherwise control that access.\textsuperscript{13} Also, there were growing opportunities to simply collect \textit{sights} themselves, to read or hear about and venture forth to see what was owned by others, as well as to imagine the opportunities of ownership with the increasing range of available goods at auction.\textsuperscript{14}

Native-born artists, who in the first half of the century had battled both real limitations and perceived weaknesses fostered in large part by the absence of an English academy, were able in the second half of the century to expand both their training and employment opportunities exponentially.\textsuperscript{15} Not only did they produce original works,
but also opportunities existed for them to work as copyists of Old Master pictures in
paint and print, and to make careers for themselves as book illustrators, printer-
publishers, and art dealers.\textsuperscript{16}

The establishment of the Royal Academy of the Arts in 1768 enabled a seeming
rush of opportunities in its wake, not only under its own developing auspices but, just as
significantly, by enabling a range of other galleries, exhibitions, and institutions and
their respective display and exhibition practices to develop in response.\textsuperscript{17} The policies
and practices of the Royal Academy could at once be seen to provide necessary training
and support for artists in order to make them competitive with their foreign

\textsuperscript{16} Evidenced by the careers of Arthur Pond, Richard Cosway and John Boydell, to cite
three such examples. See Louise Lippincott, \textit{Selling Art in Georgian London: The Rise of
Arthur Pond} (New Haven: Yale UP, 1982). See also Thomas Balston, "John Boydell,
Publisher: 'The Commercial Maecenas'," \textit{Signature} 8 (New Series 1949): 3-22, and Sven
Bruntjen, \textit{John Boydell (1719-1804): A Study of Art Patronage and Publishing in

\textsuperscript{17} Louise Lippincott ably illustrates the range of developments and some of the effects in
the introduction to her study of artist and dealer Arthur Pond (see note 13). Artists who
did not agree with various practices of the Royal Academy periodically set up their own
alternative exhibitions to it, including Royal Academicians Thomas Gainsborough,
Nathaniel Hone, and Joseph Wright of Derby. For Hone see Fintan Cullen, \textit{Visual
Politics: The Representation of Ireland 1750-1930} (Cork: Cork UP, 1997), 23-24. For
Wright of Derby, see: John Bonehill, "Laying Siege to the Royal Academy: Wright of
Derby's View of Gibraltar at Robins's Rooms, Covent Garden, April 1785," \textit{Art History}
30, no. 4 (September 2007): 521-544. Also, other societies supportive of the arts set up in
contrast to the exclusive showing of contemporary works hosted annually by the Royal
Academy—such as the British Institution, founded in 1805, which relied on members to
lend Old Master Pictures for show. For additional discussion of commercial and artistic
enterprises that offered other alternatives, see Rosie Dias, “‘A World of Pictures’: The
Topography of Display, 1780-99,” in \textit{Georgian Geographies: Essays on Space, Place
and Landscape in the Eighteenth Century}, ed. Miles Ogborn and Charles W. Withers
contemporaries, but could also seem restrictive, arbitrary, and at times, counterproductive.¹⁸

 Much of the scholarship of the last twenty-five years on the visual arts in eighteenth-century Britain has been framed to reflect a kind of re-discovery of painting, and the many related activities and practices that sprang up around this discovery in that period: not only did art production flourish and expand, but so did the practices of collection and display.¹⁹

 The increasing commodification of culture and tourism which further fed the developing, if chaotic, interest in the arts in this period has been examined in social histories and cultural studies, as well as art historical ones. Produced from such a wide variety of viewpoints and disciplines, some studies are based less on objects and their cultural or material value, and more on experiential aspects of access, social opportunities and cultural practices. Histories of leisure pursuits and the viewing of country houses, the production of decorative objects, the development of markets and

¹⁸ The implementation of some of the Royal Academy’s schemes and ideas raised concern, amongst some of the members as well as the public, including its poorly justified entrance fee, and its practices for the membership status of engravers. Both policies generated a great deal of contemporary criticism, and shaped a range of alternatives with the responses they prompted. See C.S. Matheson, “‘A Shilling Well Laid Out’: The Royal Academy’s Early Public,” and Sarah Hyde, “Printmakers and the Royal Academy Exhibitions, 1708-1836,” in Art on the Line: The Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House, 1780-1836, ed. David Solkin (New Haven: Yale UP, 2001), 217-228.

¹⁹ Iain Pears has asserted possibilities of viewing and acquiring painting to unify Englishmen across class lines, at least in that it became a more desirable pursuit among a wider range of people. See Pears, 6. John Barrell and David Solkin identify contemporary attempts to incorporate painting into theories of the common and public good; the latter makes a persuasive case for the merging of painting with progressive, commercial interests in earnest in this period. See John Barrell, The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt: "The Body of the Public" (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986). See also David Solkin 1992.
publics, and new interpretations of geographies and spaces of all kinds for viewing and consumption all provide valuable points of discussion and help shape the reception and understanding of many different aspects of the growth of the arts in eighteenth-century London.  

That said, much of the literature on the visual arts in this period has been directed towards those aspects that seem new and groundbreaking in light of what had gone before them. These aspects have been cast in a progressive narrative of development that includes innovative business enterprises, new modes of artistic practice, and changing practices of collection and display, and in so doing, aspects which have been judged less progressive are edited out and neglected. This can reshape entirely the perception of those projects and institutions, sometimes very negatively.  

An example of this may be observed in the scholarship dealing with of printmaker and publisher John Boydell. The bulk of literature produced on Boydell 

---


21 The general trend towards emphasizing the arbitrarily determined ‘progressive’ is also exemplified by sources such as Janet Minihan, *The Nationalization of Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 1977). Minihan sketches out the role of the state in shaping cultural outlets, and takes as her starting point the parliamentary debates surrounding the establishment of the National Gallery of London in the 1820’s.
focuses on the many projects that were developed around his Shakespeare Gallery, due
to its divergence from past and foreign traditions of production and display.\textsuperscript{22} Two such
examples are Richard Altick’s \textit{Shows of London} and Morris Eaves’ \textit{The Counter-Arts
Conspiracy}: the former explores the novelty and spirit of public spectacle represented by
the physical space of the Gallery in London’s Pall Mall, and its display of specially
commissioned images after theatrical scenes, and the latter underscores the novelty in
merging two narratives of commerce and aesthetics, which had long opposed each
other.\textsuperscript{23}

The focus on the aspects of Boydell’s enterprises deemed to be most progressive
has not only hampered understanding of his other creative and professional outlets, it has
created a peculiar problem in the scholarship. Ultimately those aspects identified as
most novel, which provided the chief attraction for Shakespearean scholars and art
historians alike, resulted in financial collapse and ruin: the chief attraction for Boydell
also made it possible to categorize and dismiss him as a failure.\textsuperscript{24} Only recently have
scholars begun to revise the way ‘success’ might be gauged in Boydell’s career; re-

\textsuperscript{22} The particular focus on John Boydell’s Shakespeare Gallery and the many projects
which surrounded it is one prime example, and is discussed in countless sources at the
expense of his many other projects, from studies devoted entirely to his career such as
Winifred Freidman, \textit{Boydell’s Shakespeare Gallery} (New York: Garland Publishing,
1976), to more thematic discussions such as Arthur M. Hind’s \textit{History of Engraving and
Etching from the 15th century to the Year 1914} (New York: Dover Publications, 1963),
Susan Lambert’s \textit{The Image Multiplied : Five Centuries of Printed Reproductions of
Paintings and Drawings} (London: Trefoil Publications, 1987), and Morris Eaves, \textit{The
Counter Arts Conspiracy: Art and Industry in the Age of Blake} (Ithaca: Cornell UP,
\textsuperscript{23} See Altick, 106-108. See also Eaves, 38.
\textsuperscript{24} In extreme cases, because of the project’s close association with the patronage of many
of London’s contemporary painters, the designation of Boydell and his Shakespeare
Gallery as a uniform failure is extended to enable a more generalized conclusion about
the failure to establish a School of British Painting. See Altick, 107.
examining the Shakespeare Gallery project by exploring how new readings and contexts illuminate the many contributions it made to the arts in late eighteenth-century London.25 Boydell is still tied almost exclusively to his progressive Shakespeare project. The seeming newness of the project in its spaces of exhibition and the Englishness of its subjects continue to command attention.

Similar problems occur when the idea of progressiveness is writ large in the history of eighteenth century London and the arts. The focus of scholarship on eighteenth-century art topics has been directed overwhelmingly towards contemporary production, theory and practice. With the exception of a few forays into the history of taste that attempt to incorporate the role of Old Master and European pictures within larger projects with varying degrees of success, the scholarly trend has been to move away from these types of pictures entirely, or relocate them incidentally within the history of collections and institutions which were developed in the nineteenth century and into the twentieth.26

---


A Different Kind of Capital

Studies that focus on what authors have designated as more progressive aspects of art production and display in eighteenth-century London conspire to give a particular impression of the period. But what of Old Master pictures in London during the late eighteenth century? Old Master pictures continued to be collected and displayed with renewed vigor in eighteenth-century London due to the influx of stock from abroad. The acquisition of these sorts of pictures could carry different connotations entirely: for the wealthy and noble (and those with similar aspirations), they represented not only the means by which education, taste and status might be demonstrated and displayed, but also a specific kind of social and cultural capital that operated as a standard by which individuals could be measured against each other and by which the perceived value of a country might be counted against others.


27 Compiled largely from the extensive work of Frits Lugt, Denys Sutton’s research indicated that the number of sales steadily increased between 1775 and 1810, ranging from 729 between 1775-1780, and 1393 between 1810-1815. See Frits Lugt, Répertoire des catalogues de ventes publiques, intéressant l’art ou la curiosité, tableaux, dessins, estampes, miniatures, sculptures, bronzes, émaux, vitraux, tapisseries, céramiques, objets d’art, meubles, antiquités, monnaies, médailles, camées, intailles, armes, instruments, curiosités naturelles, etc. 4 vols. (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1938-1987); and Denys Sutton, “A Wealth of Pictures,” Apollo 119, no. 267 (May 1984): 346-361. Since Sutton’s publication, the discoveries of many more sales have been added to the online database of Lugt’s Répertoire. See also Haskell 2000; and Algernon Graves. Art Sales from Early in the Eighteenth Century to Early in the Twentieth Century (Mostly Old Master and Early English pictures), 3 vols. (London, 1918-1921, repr., New York, B. Franklin, 1970).

28 The practice of collecting Old Master paintings can be linked specifically to the observable movement towards the
establishment of a publicly-owned collection of pictures in Britain, both by those who had vested interest in the cultivation of taste and civility and even the health and worth of the nation associated with such pictures, and those who wished to exploit this interest for social or commercial gain.

The influx of goods and the expanded range of available objects increased opportunity for viewing and acquisition, but generated confusion as well: criteria by which some Old Masters were judged—hardly a universal standard agreed upon by all—were thrown into turmoil, as countless paintings appeared on the market and in collections that seemed to defy what was known of the individual masters’ works. A reference in the diary of the Royal Academician Joseph Farington (1747-1821) provides some idea of the significance that confusion around the attribution of Old Master pictures could assume in the lives of collectors and picture dealers:

[Sir Richard] Payne Knight bought the picture by Bronzini at Trumbull’s sale, & calls it a Carrach. –He gave 170 guineas for it; He came to Desenfans with Sir G[eorge]. B[eaumont], & N[athaniel]. Dance, and expressed doubts of Desenfans Carrach—at which Sir Francis [Bourgeois] expressed indignation, & afterwards mentioned it to [Benjamin] West, who agreed that the pictures were not both by Carrach.

29 Jonathan Richardson the Elder (1665-1745), a painter and theorist, wrote his Two Discourses in 1719. Richardson’s work remained a familiar feature in private libraries well into the eighteenth century. Richardson strove to ennoble the status of the arts and elevate the status of artists, and equip his readers with the means to evaluate and observe the qualities of pictures. No standard then existed, even with aids designed to provide practical applications and theoretical dimensions to older traditional treatises on art appreciation, such as William Aglionby’s Painting Illustrated in Three Dialogues of 1685, Charles Alphonse du Fresnoy’s De Arte Graphica (translated into English in 1695), and Roger de Piles’ Cours de Peinture par Principes of 1708. Richardson intended to clarify the process of determining ‘good’ pictures from ‘bad’ ones. See Jonathan Richardson, Two Discourses: Essay on the Whole Art of Criticism as it Relates to Painting and an Argument in Behalf of the Science of the Connoisseur, (London, 1719).

30 Entry of February 27, 1797. The Royal Academician Joseph Farington’s extensive diary, which spans almost thirty years of his career between 1793 and 1821, is full of anecdotal musings related to colleagues, patrons, friends and rivals he encountered. Sir
For the purposes of this discussion, it is largely irrelevant today whether either Sir Richard Payne Knight (1750-1824) or Noel Desenfans (1744-1807) was actually in possession of an authentic seventeenth-century work by Italian artist Annibale Carracci, or, for that matter, if either of them were, though it would hardly have seemed so to either man. What is significant is that each was convinced of the authenticity of the work he owned, demonstrating the importance that was placed on the authority of one’s opinions and the wish for others to put stock in those opinions.

The general discussion and debate around the countless exchanges like that of Knight and Desenfans indicates the degree of confusion informing just what constituted an able connoisseur, as it became apparent that many who were born to a station in life that might once have been understood to assure them this distinction (rather, who ostensibly had the education and the means and opportunity to cultivate it) sometimes proved themselves ignorant by the perception of having purchased poorly. It was such a significant topic of discussion that, by the 1790’s, humourous ‘Hints for Collectors’ were appearing in the London papers:

IF you possess a portrait in a Vandyke habit, no matter how ill it is drawn or coloured, swear that Vandyke was the Painter, and that the dress proves it. To this you may add, that you know the family who possessed it a few years since, and that it is the portrait of one of their whiskered progenitors. If any should suggest that the gentleman you allude to was not born until the Painter died—say it was his grandfather.

Richard Payne Knight, the primary subject of this anecdote, was a gentleman collector and esteemed antiquarian, though his own judgment on matters of taste came under public scrutiny more than once in his lifetime. George Beaumont, also a collector, was instrumental in the establishment of the British Institution; Nathaniel Dance was a member of the Royal Academy. Noel Desenfans was a French-born collector and dealer, and his associate Sir Francis Bourgeois was a painter and member of the Royal Academy. Joseph Farington, The Diary of Joseph Farington, ed. Kenneth Garlick, Angus Macintyre, and Helen Cave (New Haven: Yale UP, 1978-1984), 3: 781.
If you have a large gaudy picture with lascivious looking satyrs, fat women, sea horses, and river gods, baptize it Rubens; and should it be said it is ill-coloured, and obscurely conceived, tell the critic it is an allegory, and until he is deeper read in Heathen Mythology, you do not wonder at his not understanding it.

If you lay hold of a little panel, plastered over with a dirty compound, the colour of chalk and charcoal, without it being possible to discover a form, or guess what the artist intended, call it Rembrandt.31

The anonymous article proffers several additional amusing recommendations about obscuring the origins of questionable pictures. Relying on an audience familiar with artist and theorist Jonathan Richardson’s discourses on the science of connoisseurship, it lampoons the pompous pronouncements of those gentlemen collectors who were determined to own only the best works by the best masters.32 Not only does it provide an indication of the types of pictures that were already being associated with certain Old Master painters, but it also speaks to the prevalence of pictures of dubious origin and provenance, and the ease with which the problems of their provenance could be discussed and mocked. Deceit was not exclusively the purview of the unscrupulous dealer, but might commonly be found among friends and acquaintances that were just as likely to try and conceal a picture’s attribution or its history from their peers. The practice of attribution was complex, even in instances where deliberate deception was not intended. Even if one did not know what one was talking about, it was important to appear as though one did. If the newspapers and

31 London, Victoria & Albert Museum, National Art Library, Press Cuttings from English Newspapers on Matters of Artistic Interest 1686-1835, entry of 10-12 July 1792, 3: 633. Many of the cuttings in this multivolume collection do not bear printed dates, but the years of publication have been inscribed by hand where known.
32 Richardson 1719. See also Carol Gibson-Wood, Jonathan Richardson: Art Theorist of the English Enlightenment (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000).
diaries of the age are to be believed, the world of pictures for the gentleman connoisseur in eighteenth-century London was fraught with difficulties. Patronage of and support for contemporary painters could certainly connote an understanding of what was tasteful and fashionable (and just as easily isolate what was not), but a gentleman was hardly a gentleman if he could not tell one murky Old Master of uncertain provenance from another. Old Master pictures, in theory and practice, represented a particular kind of social and cultural capital.

Though general histories of Britain in the mid-eighteenth century often evoke a country suffused with overflowing confidence about the superior identity it had crafted for itself through a variety of cultural, social, economic, military and religious means, it was a matter of particular concern and anxiety on several levels that no national collection of Old Master pictures existed. In an age that at times has appeared to define itself and to be defined by its seemingly tireless, ceaseless attempts at “improvement” through production and consumption, a publicly-owned collection of Old Masters would have constituted an appropriate base from which to educate members of the populace (albeit an ill-defined one), to practically instruct and inspire a developing native school of artists that had been slow to find its footing, and to demonstrate to

33 Such as Jim Smyth’s recent history of nation-building in the period. His sweeping assessment of the “security” of the English in their Englishness makes no allowances for the insecurities which were clearly registered by a range of people in a range of contexts: it simplifies issues which upon closer inspection and in specific instances, are more complex. Indeed, he provides contemporary proof that, as a people, they were singularly wanting in curiosity about other nations and even the remotest parts of what would eventually be their own. While the confidence and certitude Smyth observes surely existed, I do not believe it did so to the exclusion of anxiety or concern about the cultural institutions formed in other parts of the world and which were absent in England. See Jim Smyth, The Making of the United Kingdom 1660-1800 (New York: Longman, 2001), 154.
foreign visitors the highest degree of both innate taste and cultivated civility held by the
English.  

34 Peter Borsay, “The Culture of Improvement,” in The Eighteenth Century: 1688-1815, ed. Paul Langford (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 183-210. Borsay asserts that, in theory and at times in practice, goods and material culture where not in this period simply enjoyed for their own sake. The belief that personal or collective betterment, in terms of what the object enabled the owner to participate in, should underscore ownership was common. This represents the viewpoint of many artists and collectors, which struggled to reach fruition, but which did so haltingly with the establishment of the British Institution in 1806. The mandate of the Institution was, in part, to help nurture and shape the taste of the English people. The British Institution did not begin to show Old Master pictures to the public for several years after its founding, and this was met with some controversy, but the motivating factors were already in place. See Pullan. See also Haskell 2000, 46-63, and Dulwich, Palaces of Art, 130. While the cultural value was certainly placed on the skill and talents of contemporary painters, concerns about cultivating and maximizing their talent was frequently associated with the absence of a national collection. The engraver Valentine Green’s essay on the state of the arts in England speaks to the absence of a national gallery as a real loss. See Valentine Green, A Review of the Polite Arts in France, at the time of their Establishement under Louis the XIVth, compared with their Present State in England: In Which Their National Importance, and Several other Pursuits, are Briefly stated and considered In a Letter to Sir Joshua Reynolds, President of the Royal Academy, and F.R.S. (London, 1782). James Barry, whose controversial behavior and critical viewpoints often put him directly at odds with the Royal Academy (of which he was a member), also made particular note of the lack of such a collection. He appealed to the Society for the Dilettante to rectify the lack in the form of an epistolary pamphlet published in 1798. See James Barry, Letter to the Dilettanti Society, respecting the Obtention of certain Matters essentially necessary for the Improvement of Public Taste, and for accomplishing the original Views of the Royal Academy of Great Britain (London, 1798). Also, the dealer Noel Desenfans recognized this absence, and attempted to facilitate a solution in the context of the British Museum. See Noel Desenfans, A Plan, preceded by a short Review of the Fine Arts, to preserve among us, and transmit to Posterity, the Portraits of the most distinguished Characters of England, Scotland, and Ireland, since his Majesty’s Accession to the Throne. Also, to give Encouragement to British Artists, and to enrich and adorn London with some Galleries or Pictures, Statues, Antiques, Medals, and other valuable curiosities, without any Expense to Government (London, 1799). The degree to which he attempted to exploit the possible personal investment of individual collectors will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three. Horace Walpole noted the absence of a national collections of pictures in Britain compared to other countries frequently, but it is particularly pointed in the preface of his haphazard publication of Abraham van der Doort’s inventory of the then long-dispersed Royal Collection of Charles I. Walpole registered his hope that the (then) newly-opened British Museum might prevent private collections from straggling “through auctions into obscurity” by becoming a repository for worthy donations of Old
Project Outline and Survey of Literature

Although substantial and informative contributions have been made to scholarship dealing with collection and display in the last twenty-five years, the issues underlying the developing impulse to establish a national, publicly-accessible collection of paintings for Britain remain, for the most part, unidentified and unexamined in recent scholarship of this kind. This is perhaps unsurprising: evidence of such impulses is far-flung, and buried for the most part in letters, diaries, and printed ephemera.

In those instances where such ambitions are referenced, they are frequently earmarked simply as false starts, and are relegated to footnotes, collapsed or overlooked entirely, assembled and deployed to form the barest parts of pre-history before focus is redirected towards successful institutions that were realized. In tying discussion of the issue in histories that might not be related to a significant degree, a false impression of exclusive association is created. Such is the case with Brandon Taylor’s *Art for the Nation: Exhibitions and the London Public*. In the space of a single paragraph, which examines what Taylor identifies as the ‘Preconditions’ for the establishment of the National Gallery of London, he briefly lists all of the case studies addressed in this thesis before moving on to examine early nineteenth-century prehistory of the National Gallery. An ambitious study that brings a great deal of valuable material together, it

---

attempts, nonetheless, to force temporary exhibitions and permanent publicly available collections into the same history. This impression of a comprehensive history shuts down further exploration, rather than encouraging it, in spite of Taylor’s assertion in his introduction that a comprehensive single narrative history is not to be found, and that he will instead focus on those projects that worked towards and participated in a culture of civic improvement.\textsuperscript{38}

Similarly, Holger Hoock’s recent studies anchor the development of public galleries within the context of the Royal Academy. In diverting attention to the interests of the Academy, he limits discussion of the impulse towards establishing publicly accessible galleries to a specific context that, while undoubtedly significant, was certainly not the only one to foster discussions about such things.\textsuperscript{39}

Reductions and collapses of this type are found in each of the three case studies to be addressed in this thesis, as will be shown in the project outline and case-specific reviews of literature that follow. The subjects of the selected case studies have been forced retrospectively into histories of spaces, specific institutions or events that they could not have anticipated, or in some instances have been written out almost entirely. To recover them is not only to underscore individual underrepresented histories, but also to identify and better situate the kinds of players in a larger history of the impulse towards the establishment of publicly accessible picture collections in the late eighteenth-century. Though there is risk of creating the appearance of inevitability, the

\textsuperscript{38} Taylor, xi-xii.

goal in approaching this subject through separate case studies is to engage in a more nuanced approach to the material, to which the format of a doctoral thesis is ideally suited. In approaching the material through case studies, we may enable each instance to be treated within its own context and without the imposition of a conclusion based on a retroactive reading of subsequent events, and without the imposition of the burdens and standards of what was to come when a National Gallery for Britain was founded, finally, in 1824.

_Presence, Absence, and Narratives of Loss: Robert Walpole (1676-1745) and the Collection at Houghton Hall_

Chapter Two of this thesis addresses the legacy of the art collection of Sir Robert Walpole. The impulse towards establishing a public collection of pictures can be observed here in several different ways, but is taken for granted in the related literature. This was manifested in distinct ways that had lasting repercussions, and have long been overlooked.

The existing scholarship devoted to Robert Walpole and his collection at first seems vast. Closer inspection reveals that the bulk of it is directed towards the grandness of the collection, the grandness of its last English home, and the grandness of its subsequent and current one. While at times the literature can be remarkably detailed and informative, it is also surprisingly narrow in scope.
As England’s first putative Prime Minister, Robert Walpole has been the subject of numerous biographies, political and economic histories. \(^{40}\) So significant was his impact in his lifetime that books and articles devoted to studying aspects of this period refer to it as the ‘age of Walpole’ and are constructed around his influence and participation in the politics of the day. By extension, the luxury objects Walpole acquired to materially demonstrate his power have also received attention.

Houghton Hall, the country home Robert Walpole built for himself in the family seat of Norfolk in his years of greatest influence between 1722 and 1735, came, by turns, to house members of his family, his friends, and his collection of pictures. \(^{41}\) It was a sprawling assertion of the influence and affluence his position afforded him. The collection itself, considerable in its scope and for the relative speed with which it was assembled, enjoyed great fame in its day and, with Houghton Hall, became something of a tourist attraction. \(^{42}\)


\(^{41}\) Iain Pears and Andrew Moore have both taken care to assert the metropolitan origins of the collection. The collection itself had so long been associated with the country estate that the important details about its original distribution in Walpole’s houses in London were underemphasized. See Pears, 143. See also Andrew Moore, ed., *Houghton Hall: The Prime Minister, The Empress and The Heritage* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 1996), 48-49; and Larissa Dukelskaya and Andrew Moore, ed., *A Capital Collection: Houghton Hall and The Hermitage* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2002), 3.

\(^{42}\) The house and the its role in the rich pageantry of Robert Walpole’s ambitious career are discussed in Marc Girouard’s influential social history of practices of country life. In many instances, the ambitious sprawl of Walpole’s estate serve as the exceptional example of practices of the day, where grand estates constituted the means by which to measure the influence and worth of an individual or family. See Girouard, 4, 7-6, 149, 161. See also Tinniswood, 72; and Moore.
Contemporary references to both Robert Walpole’s collection and Houghton Hall are spread throughout a wide range of sources, from published surveys and guides to sites deemed curious or exceptional to personal travel journals and letters of visitors who noted some aspect of their experiences there. Rivals and political opponents made their share of negatives remarks on the house also, in both private and public correspondence. Walpole’s life and activities were of great interest to both his supporters and detractors, and remained so into the decades following his death. This is particularly true of his picture collection, which on the surface might seem usual but for one significant reason: the bulk of Robert Walpole’s pictures (by then in the ownership of his grandson, George) were sold to the Empress of Russia, Catherine II in 1779, and left England shortly thereafter to be installed at her Hermitage in St. Petersburg, now in the State Hermitage Museum. The reputation of the collection’s magnificence long outlasted its actual physical presence in England.

The sale of the Walpole collection in 1779 attracted much negative attention from a portion of the public that had come to view it as a significant part of the cultural heritage of the country, and this is, in part, attributable to an attempt on the part of MP John Wilkes to convince parliament to retain the collection as the nucleus of a national collection of Old Master pictures for Britain. Though Wilkes’ proposal was not taken up, the action succeeded in registering and nurturing the impulse towards the establishment of a national picture gallery or museum for the public benefit. The failure

---

of the proposal enabled what I would argue is a misdirection of focus in subsequent scholarship dealing with the collection and its sale; that is, this failure served to remove the significance of the proposal from its context in the history of the Walpole collection and inserted it instead into pre-histories of the National Gallery of London. Part of the purpose of Chapter Two, as a result, is to relocate its particular importance within a history of the reception of the Walpole Collection, and the legacy of its sale.

The sale of the Walpole collection itself is most often referenced in histories and examinations of Walpole’s youngest son, Horace, as it is through both his correspondence and other writings that we find the bulk of discussion of the collection itself, and the greatest response to its sale and eventual removal from Britain. The younger Walpole’s passionate, opinionated writings on many aspects of the collection—its assembly, its display, and its eventual sale in the years after his father’s death—in conjunction with his general proclivity for recording his every opinion on the arts, ensure his association with the collection over and above that of his father. His deluxe, detailed catalogue of the collection, the *Aedes Walpolianae*, constitutes the first publication of its kind in England, and this has also contributed to the continued impression of significance of the collection itself.

---

44 Recent examples of this may be found in Hoock 2004, 2, and MacGregor 2007, 98–99.
The loss of the collection to a foreign monarch was lamented in a variety of ways well into the nineteenth century, by authors both domestic and foreign. It is, for instance, a primary point of reference in the memoirs of the art dealer William Buchanan, when he provides what he feels is the important background to the history of Old Master pictures in England.\textsuperscript{47}

The German artist Johann David Passavant (1787-1861) published an account of his trip to England in the early 1830’s, with notes on his impression of the state of the arts in the country. In the preface to his book, while referencing the publications he had consulted in preparation for his tour, he explains that some of the earliest sources on collecting in Britain, such as Thomas Martyn’s \textit{The English Connoisseur}, were no longer of much practical use, particularly since the “splendid Houghton collection” had long since “quitted English shores”.\textsuperscript{48} Gustav Waagen, director of the Berlin Museum, provided a brief mention of Houghton Hall and the collection once housed there, in the popular volumes of \textit{Art Treasures in Great Britain}. Simply citing Robert Walpole’s name among the great collectors of the eighteenth century would have been sufficient to

\begin{flushright}
\footnotesize

\textsuperscript{48} This reference appears in the context of Passavant demonstrating the need for a new guide, such as his own, Passavant explains that older guides, while they were able to provide a wonderful account of the state and locations of pictures and collections in their own times, no longer proved relevant because so many objects had changed hands. The collection at Houghton was singled out for particular reference, suggesting the significance afforded not only to the collection, but also recognition of the impact of its loss. See J.D. Passavant, \textit{Tour of a German Artist in England} (1836; repr., London: EP Publishing Limited 1978), vi.
\end{flushright}
rekindle memory of the collection for a county which was only lately in possession of a National Gallery. ⁴⁹

In recent years two major studies have been produced on the Walpole Collection, providing valuable companion pieces to fulsome and impressive exhibitions of paintings and objects. Andrew Moore’s edited collection of essays from 1996, *Houghton Hall: The Prime Minister, the Empress, and the Heritage*, situates both the house and collection as the jewel of not only Sir Robert’s crown but that of his family and descendents as well. These essays underscore the important role of Houghton Hall as a family seat, which served (and continues to serve) as a living memorial to Robert Walpole’s greatness and as a feature site for the English Heritage Foundation.⁵⁰ A series of essays addresses the design and construction of the house, the grounds, the sale, and even prints made after the pictures, and enables the reader to envisage the house and grounds as they were developed and built over the course of several years, to follow the process of development for both, and to participate in the assembly, arrangement and eventual dispersal of the collection of pictures.

In 2002, the collection itself was the focus of an exhibition and catalogue, entitled *A Capital Collection: Houghton Hall and the Hermitage*, by Larissa Dukelskaya and Andrew Moore, which took the opportunity to associate the collection for the first time with a modern, edited version of the catalogue produced by Horace Walpole.⁵¹ Focusing more exclusively than any previous study on the development of the collection

---

⁵⁰ See Moore. The book was published in conjunction with an exhibition held in 1996-1997 at the Norwich Castle Museum and Kenwood House.
⁵¹ See Dukelskaya and Moore.
from its metropolitan origins in the London homes of Robert Walpole, and its
installation first at Houghton Hall and subsequently at the Hermitage of Catherine the
Great, *A Capital Collection* constitutes an ambitious micro-history of the impact of one
grand collection, from its inception at the hands of Walpole and his buying agents to its
transition to an even grander situation in the much larger collection of the Empress of
Russia. Dukelskaya and Moore’s work firmly establishes the idea that the collection
permeated public consciousness, and was understood to be exceptional in its own time.
At the same time they situate its scope, reputation, and the process of its assembly, first
within the context of its installation at Houghton Hall, and later in the events
surrounding its departure from England for Russia. While the pervasive contemporary
significance of the collection is asserted, the authors stop short of exploring the lingering
resonances of the collection in England.

Dukelskaya and Moore do not examine to any extent the domestic legacy of this
sale. A deliberate choice on the part of the authors, they explain that this approach frees
the collection from any associations with the long shadow cast by its removal by foreign
hands from England, because “it is under these circumstances that the modern reader is
best equipped to judge the achievements of father and son” on their own terms, and
allows for the demonstration of just how significant the collection was in the very
specific context of the second half of the eighteenth century.\(^{52}\) The deliberate choice
overlooks the fact that the reverse might have consistently been the case—that the legacy
of the collection has outlasted its contemporary significance. But while ample proof of

\(^{52}\) Dukelskaya and Moore, 20.
that legacy exists, acknowledgment and examination of how it came to be fashioned are nowhere in evidence.

Thus, in this study, Chapter Two takes as its starting point an examination of two roughly contemporary projects that have long been overlooked in their context, by which Robert Walpole’s collection and the cultural trauma of its sale remained a fully functioning presence long after its removal to Russia. These projects are the written sources by Robert Walpole’s son, Horace, the *Aedes Walpolianae* and the *Anecdotes of Painting in England*; and the series of prints produced after the collection by printer and publisher, John Boydell, the *Houghton Gallery*.53 Though the role of these projects in determining the legacy of the Walpole Collection is never explicitly referenced or explored in accounts of the sale to Catherine the Great, Chapter Two recovers and demonstrates that these projects fed a growing sense of the need for access to works of art for the English public.54

The sale itself and its aftermath constitute a particularly under-examined aspect of the history. Chapter Two shows that the loss of the Walpole Collection underscored and emphasized the absence of a national collection of Old Master pictures in Britain.

---


54 See Dukelskaya and Moore, 350-417. Dukelskaya and Moore in part provide the means to begin the valuable restitution of the project to their history of the sale of the Walpole Collection to Catherine the Great, by including a modern edition of Horace Walpole’s *Aedes Walpolianae* within their catalogue. The reproduction of the *Aedes Walpolianae* exists to recreate for readers the relationship of the text to the collection as it existed in Horace Walpole’s time. The relationship of the *Aedes Walpolianae* to the *legacy* of the Collection after its removal to St. Petersburg is never addressed.
and contributed to a groundswell of a more collective, publicly expressed impulse to establish one. It also demonstrates that the loss of the Walpole Collection mobilized a new, distinct status for the collection, the absence of which made it something to be celebrated, commemorated and mourned. The absent collection became a site on which an impulse to establish a public collection could be nurtured, alongside the exploitation of that impulse in the absence of its realization.

Noel Desenfans (1745-1807), Francis Bourgeois (c. 1756-1811), and the Problem of Negotiated Ownership

Where Chapter Two addresses a private collection that took on the stature of a national patrimony in the public conscience, Chapters Three and Four deal with what can be described as a nearly-national collection that was forced into becoming a private one. They do so through an examination of the related careers of the French art dealer Noel Desenfans and, to a lesser extent, his friend and associate, Royal Academician and painter Francis Bourgeois. Existing treatments of their careers and activities focus almost exclusively on their involvement with what would become England’s first purpose-built picture gallery at what was then known as Alleyn’s College of God’s Gift, at Dulwich (now the Dulwich Picture Gallery). Their involvement in this project resulted as much from an accident of chance as from deliberate decision-making on the part of either man. It has nonetheless come to define them both, and in so doing, obscures our view of their other activities, interests and participation in the growing impulse towards the establishment of a public collection of pictures in London.
In 1799, the French-born, London-based picture dealer Desenfans published a lengthy proposal to establish an ambitious national collection of art at the existing British Museum. By that time, he found himself saddled with the luxury fruits of a failed transaction with the King of Poland, having assembled for him a collection of Old Master pictures at the London sales that could not be delivered after Poland was partitioned in 1795 and the King was forced to abdicate. A delayed reaction in part to the inability to conclude his business with the Polish King, Desenfans’s proposal might have solved a significant problem for him had it been successful. As it happened, his continued negotiation of personal ownership of the collection was an exercise that engaged Desenfans for the remainder of his life. This negotiation enabled Desenfans to participate to varying degrees in significant discussions around the establishment of a national collection of pictures. Chapter Three examines Desenfans’s plan to establish a national gallery of pictures for the nation. Chapter Four demonstrates Desenfans’s response to the change in course of the collection he assembled in the wake of the failure of his plan, his use of sales catalogues to register opinions on the state of the picture market, and the dialogue this engaged him in with those who felt threatened by his public expression of his ideas.

The failure of Desenfans’s proposal has resulted in similar treatment in scholarship as that I have identified in the case of John Wilkes’ earlier proposal for the Walpole collection: by virtue of its failure, Desenfans’s plan is often forced into the prehistory of a National Gallery it did not anticipate.\(^{55}\) A second element hampers

\(^{55}\) My research suggests the first instance of Desenfans’s Plan being cited briefly as a failed precursor to the National Gallery of London occurs in an article by W.G.
discussion of Desenfans’s proposal, however: it is also tied almost exclusively to the prehistory of the Dulwich Picture Gallery.\textsuperscript{56}

Contemporary references to Desenfans, relating primarily to his activities as a picture dealer and collector, appear in a range of printed ephemera of the day. These include newspaper advertisements and announcements Desenfans placed to promote his own sales or to notify other collectors about pictures he had invested in, and to publicize his work in assembling a collection of pictures for the King of Poland, Stanislaw Poniatowski. Desenfans produced his own catalogues to accompany sales of his pictures, and these sometimes digressed into lengthy and revealing discursive exercises in personal commentary on the state of the market for pictures in London.\textsuperscript{57}

Additionally, several privately published pamphlets engaged Desenfans in printed debate by challenging his ideas and opinions and his right to assert them, and questioning his motives and activities. These will be discussed in greater detail in Chapters Three and Four.

After his death in 1807, Desenfans’s life and career were commemorated by an anonymous author, “J.T.”, who published a memoir of his life three years later.\textsuperscript{58} The

\textsuperscript{56} To date, the most effective treatment of Desenfans’ proposal and attempt to deal more comprehensively with his life and career is found in: Washington, National Gallery of Art, \textit{Collection for a King: Old Masters from the Dulwich Picture Gallery} (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1985), 15-16.

\textsuperscript{57} Noel Desenfans, \textit{A Descriptive Catalogue (with Remarks and Anecdotes never before published in English) of some Pictures of the Different Schools, purchased for His Majesty the Late King of Poland}, 2 vols. (London: 1801).

\textsuperscript{58} See [John Taylor?], \textit{Memoirs of the Late Noel Desenfans, Esq. containing also, A Plan for Preserving the Portraits of Distinguished Characters; Poems, and Letters} (London, 1810). Giles Waterfield put forth the suggestion of John Taylor, a contemporary journalist, as the author of the memoir in the introductory essay to Washington, 1985, 9.
memoir describes Desenfans’s life and activities in the most flattering and exaggerated terms, commending everything from his exceptional taste and his high moral standards, to his patriotic benevolence. Special emphasis is placed by the sympathetic author on the diligence with which Desenfans pursued his task of assembling a collection for the King of Poland, and the selflessness he exhibited when he drew up a plan which would have transferred the collection into the public domain.

Desenfans’s name also appears in the memoirs, biographies and letters of contemporaries he encountered in social and professional capacities, unpublished until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Through the glimpses provided in these sources, it becomes clear that Desenfans was active as a dealer who bought, sold and advised others in these capacities throughout his life; that he attempted to cultivate advantageous social connections with a wide range of artists, collectors, and noblemen; and that he frequently inserted himself in the political maneuverings of Royal Academy elections through his close association with Francis Bourgeois.59

Contemporary references to Bourgeois are scant, and are largely restricted to newspaper references that discuss specific paintings he was working on or had submitted to annual spring exhibitions of the Royal Academy. He is discussed both in relation to and in terms of his involvement in the Royal Academy as well as his close association with Desenfans in the diaries of his direct contemporary and fellow Royal Academician, Joseph Farington. In the years following Desenfans’s death, Farington’s treatment of

Bourgeois shifts focus, and provides fragmentary insight into his developing plans for the collection, which had by that time through additional sales and purchases changed greatly from that which he and Desenfans had assembled for the King of Poland. These plans included an attempt to establish a gallery for the pictures in his home, and when this proved impossible, a bequest to the British Museum was briefly considered. Finally, just before his own death, Bourgeois settled on agreeable terms for a bequest to establish a picture gallery at Dulwich; it was left up to Desenfans’s widow Margaret to oversee the execution of these plans.

The focus of references to Desenfans and Bourgeois changed in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, when accounts of their activities shifted to address the men in a different capacity. They were no longer treated simply as players in a world of pictures for London, but became associated almost exclusively with England’s first purpose-built picture gallery.

J. D. Passavant makes reference to Bourgeois and the collection at Dulwich in his *Tour of a German Artist through England*, not only to commend his generosity, but also to provide some discussion of what he felt were the finer works in the collection. No mention is made of Desenfans. Gustav Waagen, also, in his *Art Treasures in Great Britain*, provides a brief account of the collection at Dulwich, with reference to both

---


Desenfans and Bourgeois. He was not impressed by the quality of the pictures in the collection, and indeed found it curiously overrated by most of the English people of his acquaintance, but he was nonetheless struck by the apparent generous impulse of Bourgeois and the problem of finding a home for his collection.

The prolific writer of art guides in nineteenth-century London, Anna Brownell Jameson, provides a detailed account of the collection at Dulwich in her *Handbook to Public Galleries In and Near London*, published in 1842. She prefaces her thorough account of the collection, which described each picture and its location in the gallery, with as much as she could assemble of the history behind it, and this includes descriptions not only of Bourgeois’ life and career as a painter, but also of Desenfans’s known activities as a dealer, emphasizing those occasions that put him at odds with his contemporaries. Her revival of certain anecdotes allowed the histories of Desenfans and Bourgeois to expand in scope for a brief time, though this revival coloured subsequent perceptions of them.

In the late 1880’s and 1890’s, two histories of art sales and auctions in London were published, and each featured an account of events leading up to the bequest of the collection to the College at Dulwich. William Roberts and George Redford were attracted not only to the histories and provenance of great paintings, but particularly to those curious and sensational details that more often than not led to their movements through the salerooms. An entertaining story was the primary requirement, and

---

62 Waagen praises the industry of both Desenfans and Bourgeois in assembling the collection, and he too credits Bourgeois with a noble but ultimately failed attempt to offer the collection to the nation. Waagen 1854, 2:341-2.

Desenfans’s activities as passed down by Anna Jameson enabled him to be characterized as an incautious, socially inept buffoon who reached above himself in an effort to profit in the saleroom, and failed in his (considerable) efforts.⁶⁴

In the early twentieth century, W.T. Whitely afforded Desenfans and his career in the saleroom considerable attention in *Art in England: 1800-1820*.⁶⁵ As the century progressed, however, both Desenfans and Bourgeois were again restricted to institutional histories of the Dulwich Picture Gallery, primarily in the museum’s own publications and catalogues, and those related to the Gallery.⁶⁶ To varying degrees in the last twenty-five years, accounts of their lives have expanded or shrunk, depending on the individual source, but are all ultimately subject to the goal that their collection eventually realized: its installation at Dulwich around the rather unusual feature of their mausoleum with that of Margaret Desenfans in the gallery.⁶⁷

Peter Murray’s 1980 catalogue of the Dulwich Gallery pays significantly more attention to smaller sales throughout Desenfans early career as a dealer, and in so doing

---

⁶⁶ Only three examples came to my attention in the course of this study. The first is Denys Sutton’s attempt situate Desenfans more broadly in his late eighteenth century context. See Sutton, 346-356. Giles Waterfield focused scholarly attention on Francis Bourgeois and his career as a painter by moving him out of Desenfans’ shadow, though Waterfield had to admit the biographies of the two men are difficult to separate: what fragmentary documentation does exist, overlaps. See Waterfield 1989. Reference to the two men as collectors can also be found in Richard Butterwick, *Poland’s Last King and English Culture: Stanislaw August Poniatowski 1732-1798* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).
⁶⁷ The most extensive account of the lives and careers of either Desenfans or Bourgeois appears the exhibition catalogue Washington 1985, 9-20. Ultimately, the information is presented simply as backdrop for a discussion of the bequest that established the Gallery at Dulwich.
distinguishes itself from previous scholarly efforts.\footnote{Peter Murray, \textit{Dulwich Picture Gallery—A Catalogue} (London: Sotheby Parke Bernet, 1980). The first descriptive catalogue of the exhibited pictures did not appear until 1876. Two separate volumes produced in 1824 and 1858 provided little more than a list of pictures’ titles as arranged according to the five ‘apartments’ of the Dulwich Gallery.} In 1998, the first complete illustrated catalogue of the Dulwich collection was assembled by Richard Beresford, including a more succinct account of Desenfans’s and Bourgeois’s collecting activities,\footnote{Richard Beresford, \textit{Dulwich Picture Gallery—Complete Illustrated Catalogue} (London: Unicorn Press, 1998).} but even in those few instances where they have escaped the confines of Dulwich’s own publications, they are still bound to the final resting place of both their collection and their remains. In Carol Duncan’s discussion of galleries as memorials, Dulwich assumes the ultimate significance on the basis of its unique architectural features and symbolism, with their mausoleum serving as an integral part of the structure of the gallery, and thus, the arrangement of the pictures.\footnote{Duncan, 1995.}

In researching how Desenfans and Bourgeois came to be bound up so closely with the institution they were so instrumental in establishing, tantalizing references to their other activities are abbreviated or collapsed entirely.

Being French born, and associated with the commercial enterprise of picture dealing, one would hardly anticipate Desenfans’s participation in the debates of the day—he was neither an affluent English patron of the arts nor a member of the Royal Academy, and the existing literature suggests these are the only people who were influential or who could comment with any hope of recognition.\footnote{For the Royal Academy’s influence in particular, see Hoock 2004.} But Desenfans’s ‘success’ or lack thereof in this regard is not the only way to measure his participation, or that of Bourgeois.
Chapters Three and Four attempt to recover the dynamic reactions and participation of Desenfans and Bourgeois as they negotiated ownership of the collection in reaction to their respective changing situations—something that is completely denied by the existing literature. This recovery enables a discussion not only of their participation within what will be shown to have been a growing, collective movement towards establishing a national public collection of pictures, but of their response to that impulse when circumstances resisted their participation. The final ‘success’ represented by the Dulwich Picture Gallery subsumes the dynamic processes of Desenfans’s and Bourgeois’s activities and is made to seem inevitable, though neither man anticipated it at all. The end of the story eclipses the details that preceded it.

*The Old Servants’ Old Masters: The Collection of Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792)*

Chapter Five addresses Joshua Reynolds’s ambition in the last part of his life for the suitable disposition of his large personal collection of Old Master pictures. It serves as a more speculative epilogue to the previous two case studies. In the context of the period and of his own career, Reynolds’s relationship with Old Master pictures might have placed him ideally in the position to dictate the fate of this collection, but instead that relationship provides a revealing commentary on the state of the politics of culture in London in the late eighteenth century.

As the first president of the Royal Academy, his status as a painter and lecturer on the fine arts, and his role as arbiter of taste, Reynolds has been the subject of extensive study since the early nineteenth century. Yet his activities as a collector have long been overshadowed by the study of his artistic output.
In 1789, Reynolds proposed to transfer his collection—a staggering 1000 or more pictures—to the Royal Academy for the regular use of students and artists, and for viewing by a larger public. In spite of these public-minded plans, which he envisioned as a way to contribute to the establishment of a public gallery of sorts based around his collection of Old Master paintings and works on paper, historically the offer has attracted very little discussion.\textsuperscript{72} In the wake of the proposal’s rejection, Reynolds determined the best redress was to mount a temporary public exhibition of a portion of the collection. This was advertised as ‘Ralph’s Exhibition’, as the entrance fees were to be directed towards a retirement fund for his aged manservant, Ralph Kirkley.\textsuperscript{73} Not only did the proposal to transfer the collection itself fail to materialize, but also after bequeathing the collection to his niece, Miss Palmer (later Lady Inchiquin, the Marchioness of Thomond), Reynolds’s collection was dispersed in a series of sales that occurred periodically over the course of 25 years.\textsuperscript{74}

Reynolds’s thoughts on the benefits to students and artists of having access to the examples provided by the work of Old Masters are well known, as they were in his own time. They are invoked throughout his Discourses, beginning with his inaugural lecture as President of the Royal Academy, delivered in 1769.\textsuperscript{75} His views were sufficiently

\textsuperscript{72} The only recent scholarly treatment I have found to date is Hoock 2004, 3.
\textsuperscript{74} Lugt no. 5433, 14-16 April 1794; Lugt no. 5213a, 21 May 1794; Lugt no. 5284, 11-14 March 1795 (though dated 11-14, this sale took place 13-17 March); Lugt no. 5299a, 27 April 1795; Lugt no. 5755, 8 May 1798; Lugt no. 10042, 18-19 May 1821. See Lugt, 3.
\textsuperscript{75} Joshua Reynolds, Discourses on Art, ed. R.R. Wark (New Haven: Yale UP, 1975), 15.
well known to be commemorated in criticism and satire, both written and visual. Yet specific references to his own collection and his intentions for its future are scarce.

There are never more than passing references to his collection by contemporaries, and it does not appear to have been sufficiently reputable to secure a reference in Martin's *The English Connoisseur* of 1766. By the time that writers such as Anna Jameson and Gustav Waagen were producing guides to English galleries, his collection had already been bequeathed to his niece and dispersed.

Sporadically, aspects of Reynolds activities as a collector, his plans for the collection, and the circumstances surrounding the failure of those plans are discussed in biographies of his life. Reynolds's love of collecting is alluded to in the account of his work produced by his friend Edmund Malone, just a few short years after Reynolds's death in 1797. He does not discuss the proposal to transfer ownership of the collection to the Royal Academy, but asserts that Reynolds considered Old Master works by Titian and Rembrandt to be the best kind of wealth.

---

76 A chief example of visual satire being Nathaniel Hone's painting, *The Conjurer* (1775, National Gallery, Dublin). At the time of its production, this painting was understood to be a critical commentary of the deliberate selection of references to Old Master pictures used by Reynolds, contributing to the realization of his 'Grand Manner'. See Cullen, 23-24. Discussion will follow in chapter 5 of this thesis.

77 Few references to Reynolds' collection of pictures may be found in contemporary newspapers. These occur for the most part after his death, and are largely to do with his will, the settling of his estate, and the subsequent sales of his collection.

78 Edmund Malone reported that Reynolds had stated this. See Edmund Malone, *The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds, Knt...containing his Discourses, Idlers, A Journey to Flanders and Holland, (now first published), and His Commentary on Du Fresnoy’s Art of Painting...to which is prefixed an account of the Life and Writings of the Author* (London, 1797). For discussion of Malone’s reference, see also William Cotton, *Sir Joshua Reynolds and his Works. Gleanings from his Diary. Unpublished Manuscripts, and from Other Sources*, (London and Plymouth, 1856), 190.
No direct mention of Reynolds’s collecting activities appeared in the biography of Reynolds produced by his former pupil, James Northcote (1746-1831), where the offer of the collection to the Royal Academy is described simply as a “failed attempt” that demoralized Reynolds in the last years of his life.\textsuperscript{79} Northcote explains that Reynolds proposed to the Royal Academy the purchase of his collection at an unspecified ‘reasonable price’, and that the conditions of the proposed sale included the building of a facility by the Royal Academy to house it. The details of the temporary exhibition mounted by Reynolds after his offer was rejected also are briefly discussed. Northcote imbues the whole account with a sadness and fragility with which he characterizes all of Reynolds’s endeavours in his last years. His focus is almost entirely on Reynolds, and as such, he does not attempt to provide an explanation for the Academy’s rejection of the offer.

Joseph Farington skirted the issues of the collection almost entirely in his own biography of Reynolds.\textsuperscript{80} He avoids even the impression of casting aspersions or questioning the judgments of those involved with rejection of the proposal by restricting his references to the temporary exhibition mounted in its wake. There is no mention at all of the offer that preceded it.

Charles Robert Leslie and Tom Taylor, writing in 1865, present much of what Northcote did in his earlier work, though fleshing out much of the information provided


\textsuperscript{80} Joseph Farington, \textit{Memoirs of the Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds; with some Observations on his Talents and Character} (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1819).
by earlier sources and supporting it with references to the correspondence of Reynolds’s contemporaries, and in some cases, Reynolds’s own notes and commonplace books.  

A biography of Reynolds by Stephen Grower from 1902 makes little reference to the collection except to say that it was left to his niece—the process of its assembly, the offer of it to the Royal Academy, and Ralph’s Exhibition had already been written out. Grower states simply that Reynolds bequeathed the bulk of his paintings, property and fortune to his niece: “The fortune was a very considerable one, the greatest which had ever been made by an English artist; it amounted to over one hundred thousand pounds. Besides this Reynolds left his niece a great collection of paintings and a rare collection of drawings and studies by the great Italian and Dutch painters.”

Given the reality of the bequest, it seems to have been determined by the author that there was no need to reference any other intentions Reynolds might have had for the collection.

The two principal late nineteenth-century writers on the history of art sales in London, George Redford and William Roberts, both address the Reynolds collection exclusively from the point of the sales that occurred after Reynolds’s death. The details of the sales were recorded incorrectly, resulting in confusion about their dates as well as their contents. Though both writers frequently indulged in repeating any gossip and

---

81 For instance, the diary of Fanny Burney is used to flesh out references to some of sitters for Reynolds’ portraits; Horace Walpole’s correspondence is also used to provide additional perspective, to name only a few instances. See Charles Robert Leslie and Tom Taylor, *Life and Times of Sir Joshua Reynolds, with Some Notices of his Contemporaries* (London: John Murray, 1865) 2: 289, 374.

anecdote where they found it, it appears that the circumstances leading up to the sales were either unknown to them, or not of sufficient interest. \footnote{See Redford 1888, 1:53-4, and Roberts 1896, 44-48.}

In the mid-twentieth century, two of the original sales catalogues were published, in an effort to establish the kinds of pictures Reynolds had collected, but though the documents themselves were published, serious scholarly treatment of them was not forthcoming. \footnote{See Graves and Cronin 1899-1901, 4:1595-1608.}

In 1978, a catalogue was produced in conjunction with an exhibition in London, for the British Museum’s holdings of works on paper by Reynolds and his contemporary, Thomas Gainsborough. An essay by Martin Royalton-Kitsch that examines Reynolds’s collection of drawings constitutes the first real study of the artist’s habits and tastes as a collector. It, too, perpetuates previously recorded erroneous details of sales, and further entrenches the errors of past sources. \footnote{The author recorded incorrectly the dates of the sales, and neglects to mention two of them (1794 and 1804). Martin Royalton-Kisch, “Reynolds as a Collector”, in London: British Museum, \textit{Gainsborough and Reynolds in the British Museum} (London: British Museum Publications for the Trustees of the British Museum, 1978), 62-75.}

In 1986, the Royal Academy mounted a retrospective exhibition of Reynolds’s career, and in his introductory essay, Nicholas Penny briefly discusses both Reynolds’s collection and his attempts to deal with it by arranging for it to be housed by the Royal Academy, but no attempt is made to situate the proposal within any other context. \footnote{Nicholas Penny, \textit{Reynolds} (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1986).}

An unpublished dissertation on Reynolds as a collector by F.J.P. Broun remains by far the most complete investigation to date of Reynolds’s complex relationship to his
Broun’s dissertation represents the first attempt to determine and catalogue the basic information about the collection; to clean up the details; correct the errors and oversights which plague the scant existing literature; and provide a solid base for all further work on Reynolds as a collector. His painstaking assembly of Reynolds’s collection through records of the artist’s purchases at sales, the artist’s own notes and correspondence about some of them, and wide range of contemporary references to individual pictures provides the most complete impression of the collection. The task was so considerable that he opted not to provide a catalogue of the complicated and largely unidentifiable Italian portion of the collection, or of the drawings and works on paper.

Broun illustrates something of why we know so little about this major chapter in Reynolds’s life: not only are surviving details of the offer scant, but also the dispersal of the collection itself began almost immediately after the painter’s death. The collection did not remain intact, and was captured only in fragments by Reynolds’s own notes and catalogues. With no real record of the collection, or means to envision it, subsequent writers simply ignored it. A recent chronology of the events of Reynolds’s life does not even note the fact of his proposal to the Academy—it was a failed, unrealized event, and has been written out the history.

The curious failure of Reynolds’s proposal to the Royal Academy constitutes an important part of the history of impulse towards the creation of a public collection of Old Master pictures for Britain, and to leave its story unexplored seems an obvious oversight.

---

Though it technically was not offered to the nation, but rather to the Academy for ‘national’ use, within the context of his own lifelong relationship with Old Master pictures, his offer made a great deal of sense, yet was nonetheless rejected. Though many of the particulars are lost to us now, the example of Reynolds’s failed offer provides a tantalizingly unresolved aspect to the developing impulse towards the establishment of a public collection of Old Master pictures.

Conclusions

Chapter Six brings aspects of each case study together to summarize what has been demonstrated. It can hardly be said that the subjects of the three case studies represented in this dissertation are little known, yet, as the project aims to illustrate, there is value in turning over the stones on a seemingly well-trodden path. As the surveys of existing scholarship and the case studies themselves demonstrate, it is impossible to recover, let alone determine, which of the surviving details actually contribute to the shaping of events. But in pursuing those ephemeral details, each study highlights understudied facets and dimensions revealing of the different aspects of a multifaceted, contradictory yet common growing ambition, which punctuated public and private discourse in late eighteenth-century Britain: the establishment of a gallery for Old Master pictures for the nation.

The evidence of this impulse being cultivated, made public and reacted to in a period of dynamic cultural growth can be clearly observed from different quarters, with different motivations and purposes. The inability of its various proponents to make this
impulse manifest, and the success of others to manifest alternatives, can be situated within specific contexts and, in so doing, demonstrate distinct pieces of a larger whole.

The fact that a public, national collection did not become a reality in this period prompts us to observe and acknowledge the alternative courses of action that took place in the space of this absence, by accident and design. The examples of Robert Walpole’s collection and the projects which uniquely and dramatically enabled its afterlife, of Noel Desenfans’s and Francis Bourgeois’s negotiated ownership, and of Joshua Reynolds’s failed plans for the bequest of his personal collection, should not be seen simply as the ‘prehistory’ of what was to come in the first quarter of the nineteenth century with the establishment of the National Gallery in London.

Ultimately, all three case studies demonstrate that collapses of information reinforce divisions that obscure rather than elucidate. To speak of the Walpole Collection seamlessly transferred to the Hermitage with only Horace Walpole to mourn it is misleading: through various circumstances, the Walpole Collection continued to function and enjoyed a very vigorous afterlife. It became a central part of the narrative that reminded the nation of the gaping cultural lacunae that needed to be filled, while at the same time arguably filling that gap in ways no one could have anticipated. In the case of Desenfans and Bourgeois and their ever-changing relationship to a collection that was not intended for them, to dismiss or write out their various activities prior to the ultimate, accidental success of the installation of part of their collection at Dulwich, is to write out entirely their participation in a growing dialogue to remedy the very lacunae identified by events like the sale of the Walpole collection. And in the case of Joshua Reynolds we find a curious, negative example. The social and professional elements
that might have been expected to work in his favour did not: his response to the absence of an accessible collection of Old Master pictures for the public was unsuccessful. The attempt that was ridiculed in his own lifetime is almost totally excised in ours.

While illustrating the impulses towards filling the cultural lacunae created by the absence of a publicly accessible national collection of art, this thesis and its case studies expose the restrictive framework imposed by a history of art that favours and privileges histories of institutions. This thesis moves outside that framework of insistent inevitable progression, and explores the developing contexts for a growing impulse towards a public collection of pictures for the nation. It demonstrates the recovery of that impulse as generated in individual cases as various cultural needs were being identified and articulated for publics real and imagined, and in doing so, also explores how the dynamics of authority in cultural commentary played out in this context.
Chapter Two:

Presence, Absence, and Narratives of Loss: Robert Walpole (1676-1745) and the Collection at Houghton Hall

In the spring of 1773, the London publisher and print seller John Boydell (1719-1804) sent a small troupe of artists to Houghton Hall in Norfolk.  

The artists were charged with producing detailed drawings of the pictures in the collection assembled by Sir Robert Walpole for use in the production of a series of reproductive prints. By 1773, Boydell was already enjoying success with his multi-volume set of prints entitled *A Collection of Prints Engraved after the Most Capital Paintings in England* (hereafter referred to as the *Most Capital Paintings*). This series generated considerable and continuous sales in France and Germany as well as in England, and went a long way towards establishing a reputation for both the English collections on which the prints were based, and for English printmaking itself. With international interest in his publications established, Boydell set about engaging a national audience, by speculating on a developing public interest in English country

---

1 See Bruntjen, 44. A reference in the diary of Joseph Farington suggests that Boydell’s artists were working at Houghton in the fall of that year, though Farington later recollected that in October of 1795, it had “been twenty one years” since he “met J. (Josiah) Boydell at Houghton”, which indicates 1774 is the correct date. Multiple trips could explain this discrepancy. Farington, 2:390.


house collections, and by proposing to commemorate one of the most famous among
them.

In September of that same year, Horace Walpole wrote a sad little missive to his
good friend, the Countess of Upper Ossory (1738-1840). During a visit to Houghton
Hall, his father’s once grand estate, Horace observed for himself the ruin into which the
house was settling at the hands of his profligate nephew, George, the third Earl of Orford
(1730-1791). It was a constant concern to Horace that George periodically toyed with
selling the art collection to cover his various and mounting debts.\(^4\) During this visit of
1773, Horace devoted considerable time and energy to putting the ever-worsening affairs
of the estate in order, but was ultimately frustrated at the lack of progress he was able to
effect on any front. He informed Lady Ossory of the “load of business and
mortification” he had brought from Houghton, where he had been forced to stay longer
than intended in an effort to deal with the numerous problems he found there.

After describing the general state of disrepair of the house and many of its
fixtures, including sagging interior staircases, which were increasingly exposed to the
elements through leaking skylights, and the wet rot creeping into the rooms in the wings,
Horace described what appears to have been the chief consolation of the whole disastrous
visit:

I stole from the steward and lawyer I carried with me, to peep at a room
full of painters, who you and Lord Ossory will like to hear, are making
drawings from the whole collection, which Boydell is going to engrave.\(^5\)

---

\(^4\) Though Horace Walpole was periodically forced to acknowledge that it might be
necessary to alleviate the debts bearing down the estate by selling the pictures, he seems
always to have doubted his nephew’s ability to do this in a manner appropriate to the
value of the pictures. See Walpole to Sir Horace Mann, 10 May 1758, *HWC* 21:200, and
Walpole to Mann, 1 May 1774, *HWC* 21:569.

\(^5\) Walpole to Anne, Lady Ossory, 1 September 1773, *HWC* 32:142.
Horace’s attachment to his father’s collection is in no way surprising; his own efforts in helping to assemble the collection, and his careful ministrations in producing a deluxe catalogue of the works were steeped in his own deep investment. Walpole projected onto Lady Ossory and her husband what likely felt himself: relief that a record of the pictures as assembled during his father’s lifetime would survive, in spite of the sad fact that the house seemed to be falling down around them, and that their partial or complete dispersal was a recurrent prospect. His impotence in matters of the collection’s maintenance and, ultimately, its ownership, was a matter of particular and constant aggravation, evidenced in his correspondence from the late 1740’s to his own death in 1797.\(^6\)

Boydell’s interest in the collection at Houghton was obviously quite different: he capitalized on a dramatic opportunity to make the most of growing public interest in noble and aristocratic art collections, and to further cultivate a native market for English-made prints. I would further suggest that he identified and pursued the chance to facilitate a patriotic interest on the part of a larger public in the collecting habits and accomplishments of Englishmen.

In 1773, the print series based on the collection at Houghton had not yet been produced, but the project was already being invested with a wealth of significance and meaning. In the years it would take to reach fruition, the series would represent many things to many people. It would also help shape different ways in which the collection at

---

\(^6\) See Walpole to Horace Mann, ca. August 1748, *HWC* 19: 496; Walpole to Mann, 15 June 1755, *HWC* 20: 481-82; Walpole to Mann, 10 May 1758, *HWC* 21: 199-200. See also the letter to Lady Ossory, cited above. See also Brownell, 58-68.
Houghton could be viewed and understood, and provide symbolic spaces in which it could be remembered, and could continue to exist.

This chapter deals primarily with the *Houghton Gallery* project developed by John Boydell to commemorate the art collection assembled there by Sir Robert. I argue that Boydell’s print project, in conjunction with other commemorative documents such as Horace Walpole’s *Aedes Walpolianae* and his *Anecdotes of Painting in England*, provided a new means through which the collection itself existed and continued to exist even after its physical reality had changed, in terms of location, configuration in, and proximity to the framework provided by Houghton Hall.

Walpole’s collection was sold *en bloc* to the Empress Catherine II of Russia, and was removed from England in early 1779. Though it was begun many years prior to the sale, the completion of Boydell’s print series postdated this event by nearly a decade. This curious fact changes the ways in which both the series and the collection that inspired it may be read. Boydell’s print project, and the circuitous route to its fruition constitute an engaging entrance point into the social life of collections.8 Due to the particular circumstances of its ownership and the various documents created to commemorate it, the Walpole collection at Houghton enjoyed a double life: serving to represent one of the greatest cultural losses of the nation while continuing to function as a celebrated monument to national taste.

---

7 Reported by the *Cambridge Chronicle*, 5 February 1799.
The Formation of Robert Walpole’s Collection

Robert Walpole’s collection of pictures was assembled largely through numerous agents, relatives and contacts between 1717 and around 1743, when the bulk of it was installed in his Norfolk estate, Houghton Hall, to its best advantage. He never embarked on the Grand Tour to France and Italy that most gentleman of the age undertook at least once in their lifetimes, to enhance their education, cultivate taste and pursue fashion. Though he made purchases at sales in London in the early years of the formation of his collection, as well as capitalizing on opportunities to acquire famous pictures when other noble families were forced to part with their collections, an “army of learned individuals” which included his brothers and his sons, did most of the buying on his behalf, both at his request, and to curry favour.9

Richest in Italian works of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the collection also boasted first-rate examples of Flemish, Dutch, French, Spanish, and English works, in accordance with the fashions, trends and tastes of the day, including Salvator Rosa’s *The Prodigal Son* (c.1640); Anthony Van Dyck’s *The Holy Family (Rest on the Flight into Egypt)* (c. 1630), Bartolomé Estaban Murillo’s *Assumption of the Virgin* (c.1670), Rembrandt’s *Abraham’s Sacrifice* (1636), Claude Lorrain’s *Morning in the Harbour, the

Bay of Biscay (c.1649), and William Dobson’s Portrait of the Artist’s Father (c. 1630).\textsuperscript{10}

It was generally regarded as one of the best collections in the country, both for the range and quality of works it contained.

Robert Walpole’s public role undoubtedly enhanced public curiosity about the emblems of his power and status he assembled for himself and his family. As England’s ‘Prime’ Minister from 1721-1742, the material manifestations of Walpole’s social and political stature—even his person—were topics of public interest, and were subject to coverage in a variety of media.\textsuperscript{11} Satires and criticisms both literary and pictorial were a large part of this public circumstance, and inform the degree of notoriety that the man, his activities, and the material trappings of his very public life, attained.\textsuperscript{12}

Walpole’s ambition for luxurious acquisitions were typical of a man bent on climbing further up the political and social ladder, and his ambitions could be launched

\textsuperscript{10} All works in the collection of State Hermitage Museum. Due to an oversight in an early inventory of the collection at Houghton Hall from 1736, the subject of the portrait by Dobson was mistakenly identified as being after the artist’s father, and appears in both the Aedes Walpolianae and the Houghton Gallery as such. While compiling the Anecdotes of Painting in England, Horace Walpole found the correct provenance and title in the Notebooks of George Vertue, and made note of them, but the correct identity of the sitter as Abraham van der Doort did not appear in State Hermitage Museum literature until the 1860s. See Elizavetta Renne, “Entry 193, Catalogue of the Houghton Paintings Sold to Catherine II” in Dukelskaya and Moore, 291.

\textsuperscript{11} The term “Prime Minister” was not in common use, and was mainly pejorative. Walpole’s chief role as a principal minister to George II was in his capacity of First Lord of the Treasury and Chancellor to the Exchequer. He retired as his professional star was waning in 1742, the titles of Earl of Orford having been conferred on the family.

\textsuperscript{12} Robert Walpole appeared to spend far beyond the means of his government salary, and the rumours and assumptions that government funds and ill-gotten gains went to fund many of his pursuits were certainly popular. Widely published anonymous prints, such as The Stature of a Great Man or the English Colossus, and Idol Worship, or the Way to Preferment, both dating to 1740, ridiculed and criticized Walpole’s appearance, his love of excess, and his questionable influence in economic and political affairs.
with remarkable speed and scope, given his high profile.\textsuperscript{13} Country estates were an important part of the assertion and display of power in the eighteenth century and, as was the intent, Walpole’s Houghton Hall made distinct impressions on his friends and neighbours, as well as his political enemies.\textsuperscript{14} The oft-cited remarks of Walpole’s rival, the Tory Edward Harley, 2\textsuperscript{nd} Earl Oxford, give an indication of the mixed responses the house inspired:

This house at Houghton has made a great deal of noise, but I think it is not deserving of it. Some admire it because it belongs to the first first Minister; others envy it because it is his, and consequently rail at it. These Gentlemen’s praise and blame are not worth anything, because they know nothing of the art of building, or anything about it. I think it is neither magnificent nor beautiful, there is very great expense without either judgment or taste.\textsuperscript{15}

Even Harley, who identified the house as a hulking tasteless monstrosity clearly found opportunities to visit it. He noted that

In the saloon are a great many fine pictures, particularly the famous Markets of Snyders. But I think they are very oddly put up, one is above the other and joined in the middle with a thin piece of wood gilt. It is certainly wrong because as these pictures of the markets were painted to one point of view, and to be even with the eye, they certainly ought not to be put one above the other, besides that narrow gold ledge that is between the two pictures takes the eye and has a very ill effect.\textsuperscript{16}

Even if critics such as Harley derided the arrangements of objects in the interiors of Houghton, they found it impossible to dismiss the quality of Robert Walpole’s pictures.

\textsuperscript{13} Moore noted that the collections built in a quarter of a century matched what other families took generations to amass. See Dukelskaya and Moore, 34-5. The house itself was an ongoing project, and was constantly being worked on, expanded, adapted and changed throughout Walpole’s residence there.

\textsuperscript{14} Walpole’s brother-in-law, Lord Townsend, who resided at the neighbouring estate of Raynham detested Houghton and resented its proximity to his own great house. See Girouard, 4.

\textsuperscript{15} Edward Harley, published by the Historical Manuscripts Commission, of a journey in East Anglia taken in 1732. As cited by Moore, 60.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid. See also Dukelskaya and Moore, 40.
Engraver and amateur historian of the arts George Vertue (1683-1757) noted in 1739 that the collection was “the most considerable of any in England”. Vertue enjoyed the support of a number of affluent patrons, and this afforded him opportunities to visit the houses and country estates of his patrons, where he could examine a variety of collections of art, antiquities and curiosities. Though his observations reflect personal opinions based on his experience, he was well situated to make them.

As touring the English countryside became a more regular and desirable pursuit, not only for artists but also as a leisure pursuit for an increasing range of people, Houghton Hall and the collection displayed within it became something of a tourist attraction. As Andrew Moore has noted

A visit to Houghton was an experience for countless visitors who were eager to record their reactions as the house became one of the prime set down points for travelers on tours of the eastern region or more specifically the ‘Norfolk Tour’. In this context Houghton as a destination became a focus for travelers as the European centres, which had originally been home to so many of the paintings.

19 The extent to which the touring phenomenon developed was amply evidenced in novels and pictures of the time. For multiple contemporary documents of all descriptions, see James Lees-Milne, ed. *The Country House* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982); Fabricant, 254-275; Christie 2000; and Ousby 1990.
20 See Dukelskaya and Moore, 36.
The house and the collection thus assumed a grand reputation, which was entirely in keeping with that of the owner, both during and after his lifetime. Even as late as 1761—over fifteen years after the death of Sir Robert—Horace Walpole was able to note in passing to his friend Montagu:

A party arrived, just as I did, to see the house, a man and three women in riding-dresses, and they rode past through the apartments I could not hurry before them fast enough—they were not so long in seeing for the first time, as I could have been in one room to examine what he knew by heart. I remember formerly being so often diverted with this kind of seers—they come, ask what such a room is called, in which Sir Robert lay, write it down, admire a lobster or a cabbage in a market-piece, dispute whether the last room was green or purple, and then hurry to the inn for fear the fish should be overdressed—how different my sensations! Not a picture here, but recalls a history; not one, but I remember in Downing Street or Chelsea, where queens and crowds admired them, though seeing them as little as these travelers!  

By this point, Horace was perhaps indulging in personal nostalgia that cast a rosy light on Houghton and the pictures as objects of his father’s great fondness and enjoyment. As Robert Walpole’s more immediate heirs—first his eldest son Robert, and then Robert’s son George—grappled with the most immediate concerns of managing the property and its debts, Horace Walpole’s position low on the list of inheritors to the title and the estate gave him ample time to indulge in broader speculation about significance of his father’s material legacy. His recounting of the incident to Montagu provides some insight into the attention both the pictures and the house attracted—as much by those who were actually interested in both, as by those who understood there was a certain social distinction to being among those who had visited such a worthy landmark, wandered

---

21 Walpole to George Montagu, 25-20 March 1761, HWC 9:348
though its rooms and hallways, and recorded the details so that they might be included in
letters or journals and thus remembered.

By the time of Robert Walpole’s death in 1745, his elaborate lifestyle, spending
habits and risky investment schemes all combined to leave the estate riddled with debt.
Though there were periodic small sales designed to alleviate some of the financial
pressure bearing down on the estate, Houghton, its art collection, and its debts eventually
passed first briefly to Robert’s eldest son, then to his grandson George, the third Earl
Orford.22

George Walpole’s own lifestyle of excess was punctuated by illnesses which
rendered his behaviour unpredictable; many of his contemporaries concluded he was
mentally unfit to manage the estate. This was confirmed to his uncle Horace and to many
members of the public, when, after years of rumours and protracted negotiations, the bulk
of Walpole collection was sold to the Empress Catherine II of Russia in 1779. As
negotiations were being concluded, Horace Walpole made a final appeal to the King
through his cousin the Lord Chamberlain, but neither the crown nor the government
attempted to intervene.23 His long-held anxiety about the remains of his father’s glory
being “pulled to pieces” came to pass.24

A thing of considerable reputation, the collection at Houghton was emblematic of
the wealth, taste and discernment of its influential owners, nationally and

---

22 Moore has compiled archival information that suggests several picture sales were
mounted over the years to generate funds, sometimes under false names. For details, see
Moore, 56-64. See also Andrew Moore and Edward Bottoms, “A New Walpole
Discovery,” Burlington Magazine 148, no. 1234 (January 2006), 34-37; and Brownell,
60. For references to earlier sales, see Pears, 88.

23 Francis Seymour-Conway, Earl of Hertford to Horace Walpole, 2 August 1779, HWC
39:337. Conway occupied the position of Lord Chamberlain in the King’s household.

24 Walpole to Mann, at the death of his brother Robert, 1 April 1751, HWC 20:239.
internationally. It was also a locus around which family squabbles were played out, from which commercial ventures were launched, and where private, public and national interest in the arts intersected. The Walpole collection left England to glorify a foreign court, but distinct and lasting impressions and memories remained.

But what elements came together to enable and inform these distinct and lasting impressions? Conditioned by the reputation and status of collection, even before the sale in 1779, the process was well underway for understanding the private Walpole collection as a very public entitlement. In part this was due to a general growing awareness that Britain lacked a collection of princely paintings and the national stature implicit in such a collection, and had done since the dispersal of Charles I’s collection in 1649. It is also attributable to a deliberate and specific intervention on behalf of the public, which was registered in Parliament, and in the newspapers.

**Private Pictures, Public Loss: The Proposal of John Wilkes, and the Sale of the Collection**

Throughout the 1770’s, it was rumoured that George Walpole, third Earl of Orford, planned to sell the collection at Houghton in order to settle some of the ever-increasing debt that plagued the estate. With no involvement from other members of the Walpole family and its circle (and indeed to their great surprise) the Whig Member of Parliament

---

25 Catherine the Great’s correspondence with her ambassadors in France, particularly Baron Grimm, indicate how well known the collection was, even outside of England. See Dukelskaya and Moore, 70. Impressive purchases made at sales on behalf of Robert Walpole may have drawn attention to the collection. Also, John Boydell’s internationally successful series of *Most Capital Paintings*, which included several plates after images in the Walpole Collection at Houghton, may have helped increase its high profile abroad.
John Wilkes (1725-1797) proposed in Parliament that the nation should intervene and purchase the collection [See Appendix B].

After the publication of the speech in the press, Horace Walpole’s friend and correspondent Horace Mann wrote to him in May 1777, and his reaction to the news of Wilkes’ speech indicates something of the mixed reception it garnered even from those close to the family:

…My nephew and I were much surprised to see in the last public papers a speech of Wilkes recommending to Parliament the purchase of the Collection at Houghton. Was it a thought of his own, or suggested to him by anybody? I approve the proposal, but fear that the time is improper.  

In the context of a larger proposal made by MP Edmund Burke, which requested a bigger budget be granted to maintain and improve operations at the British Museum, Wilkes proposed that, if the Walpole Collection should be put up for sale by its unpredictable owner (and he speculated this would be imminent), rather than see such a magnificent collection dissolved and dispersed to parts unknown, Parliament should vote to purchase it for the nation and let it enrich the picture-poor holdings of the Museum.

The proposal was not acted upon for a number of reasons—chiefly, the unwillingness of the parties involved to commit any additional funds to the British

---

26 Horace Walpole to Horace Mann, May 1777, HWC 24:303-4. Though perhaps the rumblings about possible sale constituted part of the motivation for Wilkes, it is unlikely that the idea for parliament was suggested to him directly by George Walpole, who was unwell that Spring. See also Horace Walpole to Edward Walpole, HWC 36:22-3.
27 The British Museum had been established in 1753, funded by a state lottery, and consisted of the collections of natural specimens, artifacts and libraries of Hans Sloane, Robert Cotton, and Robert Harley. See Crook, 46-51.
28 The larger proposal put before Parliament on behalf of the Trustees of the British Museum, requested an increase in their annual budget from 3000 pounds to 5000 pounds in order to improve operations at the museum and pay for the employment of more attendants to the collection, thereby improving its accessibility to the public. See W.T. Whitely, Artists and their Friends in England: 1700-1799 (London, The Medici Society, 1928)1: 325. See also Conlin 2001, 369.
Museum. Wilkes’ reputation as a political trouble-maker and his promotion of popular causes may also have prejudiced his case. His dissatisfaction with the state of affairs seems to have been designed to shame both the King and government that no public, national collection of pictures yet existed:

Can there be…a great mortification to any English gentleman of taste, than to be thus deprived of feasting his delighted view with what he most desired, and had always considered as the pride of our island, as an invaluable national treasure, as a common blessing, not as private property? 29

Wilkes was critical of what he regarded as the low priority of making art accessible to the public, demonstrated by the inefficient practices for admission to the British Museum, and such actions as the removal of the Raphael Cartoons—understood by many to be a publicly owned national treasure from the time of King William III—to a private residence. 30 Wilkes’ ties to republican French thinkers and writers may have coloured the reception of his ideas; so, too, the reputation he had garnered for himself among the English with his radical ideas about public entitlements.

The public role Sir Robert occupied already underscored the perception of his collection and public interest in it, but I believe this issue was brought more squarely into focus when Wilkes’ well-publicized proposal was made to Parliament in 1777 to save the collection both from its troubled owner and for what he and others perceived as a

---

30 The Raphael Cartoons had been housed at Hampton Court Palace during the reign of King William III, where there were opportunities for the public to view them. By 1763, they had been moved to Buckingham House (now Buckingham Palace) by George III, and were no longer publicly accessible.
The attempted intervention in the fate of the collection, simply by being entered formally into parliamentary and public debate through its publication in the newspapers shifted the matter into the realm of polemic, and determined in large part how the collection would be understood from that point on. Regardless of its physical location and circumstances, what was a private collection was elevated to the symbolic status of a national resource and treasure, in spite of the fact that such status was never officially afforded it.

Even as auctioneer James Christie was putting the finishing touches on the evaluation of the collection for the offer of sale to be made to the Empress of Russia in 1779, he suggested to his colleague Carlos Cony that there was still time, if those involved “had a mind to”, to arrange the purchase of the collection and its installation at the British Museum, for the practical benefit of the country’s artists, the public at large, and for the international reputation of Britain. Whether or not he actually had the connections to enable this is immaterial: Christie’s remarks not only suggest an obvious familiarity with Wilkes’ proposal two years earlier and the outcry that would result if and when the collection was allowed to leave, but also indicate the growing understanding that public access to such a collection would improve Britain’s reputation abroad as well as the education of native artists.

With Wilkes’ proposal, the challenge was issued for the government to rise to the occasion and provide the nation with a means to acquaint its people with the highest

---

31 Conlin 2001. Conlin’s article constitutes the first in-depth treatment of Wilkes’ proposal, situating it within the broader context of Wilkes’ equally understudied interest in the arts in Britain.

32 James Christie to Carlos Cony, 29 November 1779. Excerpts reproduced in Moore, 154.
quality examples of fine art. While Parliament could deny his request and refuse to examine the matter further, there was no way to undo what Wilkes had entered into public, official dialogue. Specifically, the proposal functioned as a place-holder of sorts, reserving space for a projection of what the Walpole collection was, and for the cultivation of entitlement to what it could have become in a national context. It also laid the foundation for a collective, shared memory of it.\textsuperscript{33} Within this space, other elements could conspire to enable the collection to retain its presence and continue to function as a national collection.

The very fact that the vast bulk of the collection was sold to a single owner enabled it, ironically, to continue to be understood intact as the ‘Walpole Collection’ in England, rather than that of the Russian Empress.\textsuperscript{34} This conditioned the reception of regular references to the collection and the sale which appeared in contemporary newspapers. It also informed the developing reception and significance of projects that commemorated and celebrated the collection.

Because a foreign buyer who had every intention of transporting the Walpole Collection abroad at her earliest convenience purchased it almost in its entirety, there was no opportunity for English collectors to purchase pictures and reposition them within the

\textsuperscript{33} To draw loosely upon Benedict Anderson’s assertion that print media is the means through which imagined collectives or communities are formed, the presentation of Wilkes’ speech in newspapers may be understood as having projected onto a reading public a symbolic rallying point of national concern and significance. The dynamic impact of this would continue to develop as plans for the Walpole collection were made and as plans for its commemoration were adjusted in response. See Anderson, 37-46.

\textsuperscript{34} When purchased by the Empress, Walpole’s pictures became just a small part of her much larger collection, which was already comprised of several entire collections purchased in France and England.
contexts of their own collections. Under more typical circumstances, a collection dissolved through an auction sale could expose the narrative constructions of picture collections, and allow the story told by their assembly and for which purpose to be challenged and changed through the redistribution to new owners of the objects themselves. An opportunity to reconfigure, and the potential to redistribute these items is provided by the setting and context of a sale, and the promise and possibility of this dismantling could be as important as the physical reality of pictures changing hands and houses within the nation. The Walpole Collection and the sale itself could hardly be understood to be typical, but a basic principle applies: because the bulk of the collection was purchased at once and removed to another country, the same opportunities to view the collection at this juncture in its history, and contemplate or engage in purchasing parts of it were denied. I would argue that this made it easier for the collection to continue to be understood and remembered as a whole and to be associated with its English owner, rather than as the sum of its parts.

35 Even the dissolution of the Royal collection of King Charles I’s collection in 1649 allowed for this possibility, with some of the pictures purchased by English noblemen who absorbed them into their own collections. See Francis Haskell “Charles I’s Collection of Pictures,” in The Late King’s Goods: Collections, Possessions, and Patronage of Charles I in the Light of the Commonwealth Sale Inventories, ed. Arthur MacGregor (London: Alistair McAlpine for Oxford UP, 1989), 227-8. See also Jerry Brotton, The Sale of the Late King’s Goods: Charles I and his Art Collection (London: Macmillan, 2006). Indeed, many pictures in the Walpole Collection had been plucked from other prestigious collections, both for their high quality, and for their impeccable provenances which Horace reveled in when producing his deluxe catalogue of the collection, the Aedes Waloplianae. See Dukelskaya and Moore, 32-33.

36 Using as her subject the auctioneer James Christie, Cynthia Wall examines the cultural implications of the auction in late eighteenth-century England—the realities and potential of managed public spectacles not only to break down and redistribute the material emblems of prosperity, but also to re-imagine new possibilities for reconstructing their parts. Cynthia Wall, “The English Auction: Narratives of Dismantlings,” Eighteenth-Century Studies 31, no. 1 (1997), 1-25.
Expressions of panic and loss surrounding the Walpole Collection, deployed as they were through the press on the public, drew continuous attention to its absence, and determined in part the way the Walpole collection continued to function as a testament to the particular character and perceived superiority of English taste. As demonstrated by the range of references to the collection that were published in the newspapers at the time of the sale, the Walpole Collection retained a definite presence in public consciousness, even adopting a heightened significance that manifested itself in a number of ways with the public’s increased sense of entitlement and investment in its fate, and its understanding of the impact of the loss. When news of the sale broke in the spring of 1779, one newspaper correspondent speculated that the Empress Catherine had purchased the collection for 43,000 pounds:

Such is the fate of this first collection in Great Britain; which, exclusive of presents, cost its noble proprietor near 100,000l. to form, and which ought to have been added to the Devonshire or Bedford collection; but it’s gone, if it survives the hazard of the sea or the risques of war, to assist the slow progress of the arts in the cold, unripening regions of the north.  

The removal of the collection was already being counted as a terrible tragedy of national significance: rumoured to have been sold for far less than its economic worth, and bound for a place where, to British sensibilities, its cultural worth was likely to be undervalued or lost entirely. The contrasting implication was that Britons themselves most certainly recognized and appreciated its significance. The fact that the collection was not only being subjected to extreme risk when being transported, but essentially being sacrificed to a nation so foreign it was best described as ‘cold and unripening’

---

37 The Gentleman’s Magazine, 31 May 1779, 270-71. Later in the year it was reported incorrectly that a delay in shipping had been occasioned by the Empress insisting on the inclusion of a portrait of Robert Walpole with the collection. The Gentleman’s Magazine, 30 September 1779, 469.
suggests the fruitlessness of the apparent sacrifice to a region where it would only be enjoyed by an Empress who selfishly poached it for her own personal and private collection.\textsuperscript{38}

In late 1779 it was widely rumoured that the pictures had been lost \textit{en route} to St. Petersburg, beginning with a report in the \textit{Whitehall Evening Post} that the ship which was carrying them, the \textit{Natalia}, “had foundered”.\textsuperscript{39} Even the thought of the entire collection being destroyed in a single incident increased the understanding of insult added to already injurious loss. Horace Walpole received a frantic letter from his friend William Cole: “I hope and wish that the news we had in all our papers, that the Houghton Collection of pictures are at the bottom of the sea, is false. Good God! What a destruction! I am shocked when I think of it!”\textsuperscript{40}

By 1782, the sale and its attendant loss was still a subject of discussion, and was even being incorporated into broader discussions of the British Empire as proof of its decline. “C.D.” wrote to the \textit{European Magazine},

\begin{quote}
The removal of the Houghton Collection of Pictures to Russia is, perhaps, one of the most striking instances that can be produced of the decline of the empire of Great Britain, and the advancement of our powerful ally in the North. The riches of a nation have generally been estimated according as it abounds in works of art, and so careful of these
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{38} ‘Cold and unripening’ were adjectives commonly used to describe the sorry state of the arts in places perceived to be uncivilized. The same language appears in Wilkes’ parliamentary speech, emphasizing the anxiety that, without a national collection of pictures, Britain might have appeared so.

\textsuperscript{39} The rumour of the shipwreck appeared in the \textit{London Chronicle}, 11-14 December, and the \textit{Whitehall Evening Post}, 14-16 December 1779.

\textsuperscript{40} Referenced in a letter from William Cole to Horace Walpole, 30 December 1779, \textit{HWC} 2:183. Dukelskaya and Moore have noted that, though reports to the contrary were published by December 28, 1779, this rumour persisted in until well into the nineteenth century. See the watercolour picture \textit{Lee Shore, with the Wreck of the Houghton pictures...} by John Sell Cotman (1838, Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge). See also Miklos Rajnai, \textit{John Sell Cotman 1782-1842} (London: The Herbert Press, 1982), 140.
treasures have some states been, that, knowing their value and importance, they have prohibited sending them out of their dominions.\textsuperscript{41}

The failure to retain the collection, argued the author, was a sure sign to other countries of a major lapse in judgment that deprived Britain of what were now understood to be the cultural treasures that demonstrated the nation to be great.

The impact of the loss, too, was being constructed as a specific, significant part of commentary on the state of the arts in England, not only for connoisseurs and a projected gallery-going public, but particularly for artists. Engraver and Associate member of the Royal Academy Valentine Green (1739-1813) published a pamphlet in 1782 that compared the progress of the arts in France and England. His critical observations on the lack of state patronage and sponsorship for artistic endeavours in England were the primary point of contrast, and spoke to some extent to a general anxiety about how England arguably failed to measure up to other nations in many matters related to the fine arts. The perceived failure of the government to rise to the occasion and save the Walpole Collection not only for the nation’s artists but also for the public was identified as an unparalleled lost opportunity, squandered at the expense of the nation’s reputation.\textsuperscript{42}

Continued presence for the collection was demarcated and claimed through the steady stream of newspaper notices and references in printed ephemera such as the examples cited above, but these were not the only opportunities for the loss to be underscored. Literary and print projects, as well as physical sites and locations, created

\textsuperscript{41} Letter to the editors from “C.D”, \textit{The European Magazine}, February 1782. See also Moore, 152.
\textsuperscript{42} Green, 65, 69-72.
alternative spaces for the Walpole collection. This began with, though was certainly not restricted to, the efforts of Robert Walpole’s youngest son, Horace.

“Our Charming and Opinionated Cicerone”\textsuperscript{43}: Horace Walpole, the \textit{Aedes Walpolianae}, and the \textit{Anecdotes of Painting in England}

Horace Walpole undertook an ambitious project upon his return from his Grand Tour in the early 1740’s. Having seen several Italian examples in his travels, he determined to produce a deluxe catalogue of his father’s art collection at Houghton Hall; the first catalogue of its kind in England. Though he maintains in the introduction that description was not his primary purpose, Horace undertook to provide context, not only by describing the pictures in the collection, but also by citing where they were displayed in the house, thereby enabling readers to get some sense of where the pictures were located in relation to each other, and to imagine their disposition room by room.\textsuperscript{44} In so doing, he created a guide that could also function as a memorial of sorts, to the collection as it existed at that time.

With the catalogue, Horace manufactured the opportunity to situate his father’s collection amongst the great Italian collections he had seen in his travels, and to rank his father’s more highly, particularly where the quality and condition of the pictures is concerned. He notes,

> There are not a great many Collections left in Italy more worth seeing than this at Houghton: In the preservation of the Pictures, it certainly excells

\textsuperscript{43} Lipking, 132.
\textsuperscript{44} He states “The following account of Lord Orford’s collection of pictures, is rather intended as a Catalogue than a Description of them. The mention of Cabinets in which they have formerly been, with the addition of measures, will contribute to ascertain their originality, and be a kind of pedigree to them.” Walpole 1752, vii.
most of them. That noble one in the Borghese palace at Rome, is almost destroy’d by the damps of the apartment where it is kept.\textsuperscript{45}

In cataloguing the contents of the collection, and providing provenance wherever possible, Horace was attempting not only to pay tribute to his father, but also, more generally, to showcase the value of recording and preserving for posterity the treasures of one of Britain’s great collections.\textsuperscript{46}

The first edition of the \textit{Aedes Walpolianae}, published in 1747, was limited, but the catalogue did go through two more editions, in 1752 and 1767, corrected, more elaborate and with wider distribution than the previous.\textsuperscript{47}

Regardless of whether or not those who had access to the catalogue also had opportunity to see the paintings \textit{in situ} at Houghton, they could certainly get some sense of the subjects of the pictures, and visualize their surroundings using the catalogue: through the text, it is easily determined which rooms contained which specific pictures, and sometimes even where they were located in relation to each other. In many cases, detailed descriptions of the pictures are not provided beyond their titles, though useful

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{46} Beyond this, the project reflects his longstanding interest in the history of collections in general. Horace Walpole expressed similar sentiments about the importance of preserving not only objects themselves, but any related information, as demonstrated by his promotional notices for his publication of the catalogues compiled by the Keeper in Pictures to Charles I of the Royal Collection. See Oliver Miller, “Abraham van der Doort’s Catalogue of the Collection of Charles I,” in \textit{Walpole Society} 37 (1960), 1-229. See also Dukelskaya and Moore, 57.
\textsuperscript{47} Some confusion exists on the exact number of copies of this first edition. In Horace Walpole’s \textit{Short Notes}, he recollected that “but 200 copies” had been printed, “to give away”. 83 were personally presented to friends and associates of the family. Morris Brownell, 46, has suggested the remaining copies were to serve as guidebooks to the house and collection for visitors. Brownell may have overlooked Allen Hazen’s observation that Walpole’s own correspondence contradicts this hypothesis: in a letter Horace Mann in August of 1748, Walpole states that only 100 copies were printed. Allen T. Hazen, \textit{Bibliography of Horace Walpole} (1948; repr. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1973), 26-32.
\end{flushright}
details sometimes are given about arrangement and location of the rooms near each other.

For instance, in his description of the Coffee Room at Houghton, Horace explains,

> Returning thro’ the *Arcade*, you ascend the Great Stair-Case, which is painted in *Chiaro Oscuro*, by *Kent*. In the middle four *Doric Pillars* rise and support a fine Cast in Bronze of the Gladiator, by John of *Boulogne*, which was a Present to *Sir Robert* from *Thomas* Earl of *Pembroke*.48

And in his description of the Library,

> This Room is twenty-one Feet and half, by twenty-two and half. Over the Chimney is a whole Length, by Sir *Godfrey Kneller*, of King *George* I, in his Coronation-Robes, the only picture for which he ever sat in *England*.49

This is the only information provided about this room, in contrast to that given in the Descriptions of the Gallery. As one of the rooms created for the display of valued pictures, it receives more extensive attention. More information is provided about the pictures installed there, as well as their provenance, and any related anecdote that Horace found interesting or that added to the prestige of the picture, as demonstrated by the description of the picture he provided for number 228:

> Over the other Chimney, the Prodigal Son, by *Salvator Rosa*. This Fine Picture was brought out of *Italy* by *Sir Robert Geare*, and carried back by him when he went to live there. On his Death it was sent back to *England* to be sold. Eight feet three inches high, by six Feet five and a half wide.50

The rooms with the greatest numbers of pictures displayed received the most detailed treatment—The Salon, The Cabinet, and The Gallery. The pictures in these rooms frequently are given more attention, in terms of both anecdotal evidence, history and provenance—details which would enhance the esteem of the picture and add to the

48 Walpole 1752, 42.
49 Walpole 1752, 50.
50 Walpole 1752, 78.
overall impression of quality and significance of the collection. Ground plans were included, providing the potential for readers to visually relate which rooms (and thus which pictures) were near each other.\footnote{See Hazen, 26-31. Hazen’s bibliography provides background to the three editions of the \textit{Aedes Walpoliana}e published and overseen by Horace Walpole in his lifetime.}

Prior to Horace’s foray into this more elaborate and extensive catalogue of a collection with the \textit{Aedes Walpoliana}e, catalogues and guides were already understood not just to record, but to represent the collection on paper.\footnote{On the general origins of this see: Waterfield “The Town House…,” 46. See also Fabricant, 254-275; and Francis Haskell \textit{The Painful Birth of the Art Book} (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1987).} The information was basic and perfunctory, and in spite of its brevity, it served practically to signify, represent, and prompt memories and associations for the visual recreation of collections among those who already shared a common visual vocabulary. While Horace’s detailed catalogue was clearly directed towards a polite readership, the added celebratory and descriptive indulgences he constructed increased the possibility for a wider readership not only across certain class lines, but also provided access to a significant fixed point in the history of the collection as time passed.

Additionally, the text Walpole composed to describe the collection appeared in several others sources, including Thomas Martyn’s \textit{The English Connoisseur}.\footnote{Martyn, 1: 48-70.} The potential for Horace’s literary endeavours to capture the collection for posterity was already being realized. Philip Yorke noted in his travel journal after a visit to Houghton that “the exact plans of this place, that are already in print, and the complete catalogue
lately given of the pictures by Mr. Horace Walpole…make it needless to enter into a particular description of it”.\textsuperscript{54}

Horace’s commemorative tribute to his father’s collection had the potential to greatly extend the significance of the collection after its sale and removal that even he could not have anticipated, particularly as portions of the text made their way into other sources both formally published and ephemeral. While initially created as a tribute to his father during Sir Robert’s lifetime, the first edition of the \textit{Aedes Walpolianae} establishes for a controlled audience the status of the collection as cultural patrimony. Over time as the editions were corrected, amended and their print runs and circulation expanded, and as circumstances with the collection began to change, so did symbolic attachment to the collection. And this attachment was bolstered and encouraged by other external factors as time passed, such as Wilkes’ proposal to Parliament.

Each component was lent authority and the impression of permanence by virtue of the other: the very fact of its publication conferred a certain status on the collection, just as the high profile of the collection, the owner and the house they had occupied, ensured interest in the catalogue.\textsuperscript{55} The \textit{Aedes Walpolianae} was not just an inventory list of

\textsuperscript{54} Philip York, as cited in Dukelskaya and Moore, 44. The plans and elevations of Houghton Hall at a number of stages had been published several times during the eighteenth century. See Colen Campbell, \textit{Vitruvius Britannicus}, vol. 3 (1725, repr. New York: B. Bloom, 1967-1972). See also Isaac Ware and Thomas Ripley, \textit{Plans, Elevations, and Sections; Chimney-pieces and Ceilings of Houghton Hall in Norfolk} (London: 1735 and 1760).

\textsuperscript{55} Horace Walpole’s choices of anecdotes, and the opinions he expressed in the \textit{Aedes Walpolianae} have long compromised the reception of the catalogue as a ‘serious’ effort. He recognized himself that as time passed his own opinions changed, and acknowledged that many of them had been formed by an impulsive young man. For further discussion, see Pears, 203.
contents, but in fact a guide to the collection that took the reader through an existing space. In so doing, the space and the objects were not only captured and given the impression of permanence, but could be reactualised at different points in time by readers of the catalogue.56

Whether or not the readers had been to Houghton, or used the *Aedes Walpolianaee* as an actual on-site guide, the book may be understood to participate in a developing culture of descriptive literary mapping and facilitate reader participation in this mapping. As conceived by its author, the function of the *Aedes Walpolianaee* was doubtlessly dependent to some extent on a set vocabulary which a polite readership would have possessed, of the types of rooms in which existed in grand houses. Yet the success of the volume to recreate the space and the pictures within in was not entirely dependent on this shared, set vocabulary.

I would argue that, with spaces identified as ‘Coffee Rooms’ and ‘Blue Damask Bed Chambers’, it did not ultimately matter if those perusing the book had seen the particular rooms at Houghton: for the book to recreate symbolic spaces for the collection, it was sufficient for readers to be able to picture a coffee room, and a bed chamber, and construct the house in their imaginations with all the aids provided in the book. Touring the house and viewing the pictures could occur mentally, directed by Horace’s organized room-by-room text. Framed and shaped by the inclusion of a floorplan, he made visitors of readers, even in the absence of reproductive images.57

57 Having said this, wealthy book owners had a number of options at their disposal when engaging with the objects, from rebinding books in a collection to match one another, to restructuring them to allow for the insertion of publication notices, letters, images or
Descriptions occupied a particular function, to map or sketch out a “space” for the reader. By the 1760’s, the essayist and biographer Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) had characterized description as capturing the most essential features of an object or a space and providing a ‘just representation’, rather than indulging in potentially superfluous minutiae that distracted from rather than enhancing understanding.  

Cynthia Wall, in the course of her discussion of narrative geography in eighteenth-century literature, has posited that the audience for different kinds of books no longer necessarily had the shared experiences and observations of the smaller, more unified ‘polite’ readership of past ages. If the readership was changing, authors and publishers could no longer count on that readership to bring stock observations, experiences and memories to the table.

As the century progressed, different groups of people were participating in a wider range of activities and in the consumption of different objects, as well as locations and sights—descriptions were called upon to create realities as well as simply invoke or recall them. Though Horace’s *Aedes Walpolianae* began as a celebratory monument of other documents the owner determined would add to the appearance or function of the book. See Timothy Clayton, *The English Print, 1688-1802* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1997), for discussion of the flexibility available to wealthy book and print owners, to determine if prints would be hung, bound in folios, or kept in drawers. Horace Walpole spent many years augmenting his own copy of the *Aedes Walpolianae* as prints of the pictures in the Collection became available, and other amended copies have been noted by Dukelskaya and Moore, 20. See also Marcia Pointon, *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993), for discussion of ‘grangerizing’ books with portrait engravings. 

---

the fruits of his father’s taste and discernment, by its later editions, it assumed additional significance as a means through which the collection could be *visited*, for posterity.

As Horace Walpole grew more confident in his connoisseurship and his love of indulgent anecdote, he drew up a second art-related project much more broadly conceived than the first: *The Anecdotes of Painting in England*, published in five volumes between 1762 and 1780, through the press at his Twickenham home, Strawberry Hill. Having acquired the notebooks and research on art production and collections compiled and recorded by engraver George Vertue, Horace imposed his own authorial voice on the material, and produced a history of art in England in which discussion was organized according to which artists were active during the reigns of consecutive monarchs.

Though it indulges more often in judgments and assertions than in specific analysis of individual pictures, the *Anecdotes* nonetheless contain many references to specific pictures in major collections, to Horace Walpole’s own collection at Strawberry Hill, and to the collection which had been his father’s at Houghton.  

60 Threaded throughout, these references re-enforce the idea that the collection at Houghton was a standard by which all others should be measured. In Walpole’s discussion of Godfrey Kneller, for instance, we find this reference, in the context of a discussion of a portrait of King William at Hampton Court Palace:

> My opinion of what Sir Godfrey’s genius could have produced, must not be judged by the historic picture of King William in the palace just mentioned: it is a tame and poor performance. But the original sketch of it at Houghton is struck out with a spirit and fire equal to Rubens. The

---

60 Horace Walpole visited and viewed many of these houses and collections, with an eye towards producing a guide of sorts, though the project never materialized in his lifetime. See Paget Toynbee, ed., “Horace Walpole’s Journals of Visits to Country Seats,” *Walpole Society* 16 (1927-8), 9-81.
hero and the horse are in the heat of battle.\textsuperscript{61}

Even when measured against a formal, finished royal portrait that had been given pride of place in a royal residence, the preparatory work at Houghton is asserted as being superior in all ways. References like this, sprinkled throughout the \textit{Anecdotes}, served to embed the significance of the collection at Houghton and the notion that it represented the highest standard. As the collection with which Horace was most familiar (next to his own), he made mention of specific paintings in the collection at Houghton that he and his father had particularly admired, at once establishing them and relying on them as well-known reference points.

The \textit{Anecdotes} were more widely published than the \textit{Aedes Walpolianae}, and with different intentions, but were no less effective in reminding readers of the perceived significance of the Walpole Collection. The more general nature of the work, as a putative history of the visual arts in England, also gave it a different appeal—though Horace’s efforts, as a gentleman connoisseur, were not to everyone’s tastes, he nonetheless made a significant contribution to the published history of the visual arts in England when he culled and constructed Vertue’s material into an entertaining and informative series of volumes.\textsuperscript{62}

Both the \textit{Aedes Walpolianae} and the \textit{Anecdotes}, in their respective ways, confirmed the significance of the Walpole Collection; moreover, they enabled a proud contemporary reading public to gain and retain familiarity with the collection as it existed at Houghton in the time of Robert Walpole, as well as to form and sustain attachments to it. They provided auxiliary, complimentary spaces in which it could continue to exist,

\textsuperscript{61} Walpole 1969, 2:203.
\textsuperscript{62} Walpole to Montagu, 5 May 1761; See Appendix A.
even as the physical circumstances of the collection were changing. To differing degrees, the *Aedes Walpolianae* and the *Anecdotes* provided descriptions and context for the collection, preserving the details of its contents, and perpetuating the idea that it represented the standard against which all other collections might be measured.

Horace Walpole’s writings enabled the impression of permanence the Walpole Collection would ultimately achieve. In conjunction with John Wilkes’ formal introduction of the collection into parliamentary and public discourse, they helped prepare a contemporary audience for the reception of what I identify as the most significant contributing element in the extension of presence of the Walpole Collection: the print project known as the *Houghton Gallery*, embarked on by printmaker and entrepreneur, John Boydell (1719-1804). Boydell’s project provided visual record of paintings in the collection, and through many aspects of the process of its materialization, provided lasting and significant contexts for it. It commemorated the collection, and, as circumstance had it, also served to mark its loss.

**John Boydell and the Development of the *Houghton Gallery***

Boydell is best known to us today for his ambitious Shakespeare Gallery, established in London’s Pall Mall in the late 1780’s, and the several painting and print projects which developed around it.63 With it, Boydell aimed to nurture and foster a genuinely English taste for the arts in England, by employing primarily English artists to paint the most

---

63 Boydell has been the subject of several doctoral dissertations in the last 35 years; three of them devoted in whole or in part to the Shakespeare Gallery. See Bruntjen 1985; Friedman 1976; Vivienne Painting, “The Commercial Maecenas—A Study of the Life and Principal Business Concerns of John Boydell” (PhD diss., University of Keele, 1996); and Rosemarie Dias, “John Boydell’s Shakespeare Gallery and the Promotion of a National Aesthetic” (PhD diss., University of York, 2003).
“English” of history scenes and subjects available to them—those culled from the plays of William Shakespeare.

His interests in facilitating a truly national school of art, and in cultivating a broad audience for that art, is often located by authors around the various Shakespeare enterprises, but in fact those interests had many different facets and outlets. In practice, both as a business, and through the course of his civic duties he regularly had a range of different projects underway, which catered to various tastes. Over the course of his career, he published hundreds of English landscape views, prints after modern history scenes (including Benjamin West’s *Death of General Wolfe*), and prints after Old Master paintings housed in England’s country house collections. While all of these projects were above all designed to make his business as a printer and publisher profitable, they should also be understood as part of his interest in establishing a national appreciation for English involvement in art.

The line is very sharply drawn by some authors in locating the patriotic aspects of Boydell’s enterprise *exclusively* in his work with contemporary British painters of the eighteenth century. Boydell recognized that the opportunity to have contemporary

---

64 For instance, during his tenure as Mayor of London (1790-91), Boydell proposed plan to employ British artists and promote history painting by having every successive alderman of London commission a history piece while in office. This project was not implemented. See Leslie and Taylor, 2:597.

65 Gregory Rubinstein asserts that when international fame was at its greatest with the *Most Capital Paintings*, Boydell also began to cultivate national audiences. See Rubinstein 1991, 3-27.

66 Such as the *Collection of One Hundred and Two Views, &C. in England and Wales* (1755), the *Collection of Prints, Engraved after the Most Capital Paintings in England* (1769-1792), and *An History of the River Thames* (1796).

67 Both by direct and indirect reference. See the treatment of the Shakespeare Gallery in Altick 1978, which focuses on new and novel developments. See also the various editions of Arthur M. Hind’s *A History of Engraving and Etching*. 
artists translate Old Master paintings into a different medium also held a great deal of promise for that purpose. With the *Houghton Gallery*, he was able to showcase the great collection—and, ostensibly, the superior taste—of an Englishman of considerable reputation, while using a number of English artists to accomplish the task. As such, the venture directly incorporated many of Boydell’s artistic and patriotic interests towards an ultimately commercial goal.

Whether or not Boydell detected a sense of urgency about the fate of the Walpole Collection in the early 1770’s, as some authors have suggested, we do know that the *Houghton Gallery* project was initiated in the summer of 1773, when Boydell sent artists to the house to begin producing drawings after the paintings in the collection.

I believe the *Houghton Gallery* project functioned in several ways to keep the Walpole Collection “present”. The remainder of this chapter discusses how, by accident and design, this “presence” established the Walpole Collection as an integral part of the growing debate about public collections, and, specifically, the public sense of entitlement to collections such as Walpole’s. The vehicle of the print not only reproduces the pictures, but also replicates the collection in a symbolic space and thus makes permanent that which was ephemeral.

The prospectus for the *Houghton Gallery*, which advertised the project and solicited subscribers, was published by Boydell in March of 1775, two years after Horace Walpole had encountered the artists at Houghton Hall.\(^6\) It announced the production of a sequence of eighteen “numbers” or fascicules, which would contain at least ten prints each at a time, and promised high-quality reproductive images after the pictures in the

---

\(^6\) See above, 46-47.
collection at Houghton [See Appendix C].  

Boydell proudly reported that the first set had already been completed, and the list of its contents included in the prospectus shows a range of works of different genres by a variety of artists from the Italian, Flemish, Dutch and French schools, to represent just how well-appointed the collection of pictures at Houghton was, and by extension, to give an impression of how rich the completed volumes would be.

Boydell must have anticipated that interest in this first grouping would be sufficient to embark on the project—long before the added fortuitous publicity of Wilkes’ proposal to Parliament. By the close of 1775, the first twenty-three prints of the project—two fascicules with more than the estimated ten prints per fascicule—had been produced, and the artists Boydell had engaged were continuing their efforts to record the entire collection.

The production of prints within these sets took a significant amount of time, perhaps owing in part to Boydell’s involvement in other projects during the period, and also to the developments both rumoured and confirmed, as the fate of the collection continued to unfold. Gregory Rubinstein has proposed that Boydell may have aligned his project with John Wilkes, in the hopes that the Wilkes’ proposal to save the Walpole collection for the nation would be successful. This may not have been such an

---

69 Prospectus bound within the second edition of Horace Walpole’s *Aedes Walpolianae* (1752) in the Cambridge University Library.
70 Most drawings were executed by George and Joseph Farington, and Josia Boydell. Sven Bruntjen asserts that Richard Earlom made up the fourth member of the drawing party, but gives no source for this information, and it seems not to have been the case. See Bruntjen, 45.
71 Rubinstein presents as possible proof of this connection a portrait drawing by Richard Earlom from 1777, traditionally identified as John Wilkes, in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery in London. Earlom worked almost exclusively engraving for
unreasonable result to anticipate, born out by the close margin of votes by which the proposal was defeated.\textsuperscript{72} If this were the case, and Wilkes and Boydell were preparing for the possibility of success of this plan, it is possible that Boydell may not have felt any particular urgency to complete the project at the expense of his other endeavours.

However, the equally slow production of several of his other series suggests that it is just as likely that the project simply lost momentum, with Boydell’s energies divided amongst a number of other equally ambitious business projects, as well as the civic duties in which he was frequently engaged.\textsuperscript{73} Even with the use of newer and slightly less time-consuming techniques such as mezzotint, reproductive prints of the calibre Boydell was engaged in were labour intensive enterprises.

Of the 129 numbered plates eventually produced after pictures in the collection, the publication date of each complete set indicate no more than twenty images for the\textit{Houghton Gallery} were ever produced in the same year, and this only happened once, in 1778.\textsuperscript{74} On the basis of the dated plates, the most productive years project seem to have

\textsuperscript{72} Defeated 74 votes to 60. See Conlin 2001, 368.
\textsuperscript{73} In addition to his various large and small scale print projects, Boydell occupied a number of civic roles throughout the 1780’s and 1790’s, including serving as the Alderman of his ward of Cheap in 1782, and sheriff of London in 1785. In 1790, he became Alderman of London. See Bruntjen, 197; and Freidman, 43.
\textsuperscript{74} Determining the final publication date of the\textit{Houghton Gallery} is not straightforward. A.E. Popham suggested that the set was published in 1775 and re-issued in 1788; Vivienne Painting discovered documents attached to the autobiography of John Boydell reproduced in the papers of the Flintshire Historical Society, on which manuscript it is noted that the two volumes were “published 1775-76-78”. Painting also made use of the correspondence of one Matthew Boulton in the Birmingham City Library that suggests
been 1775 (in which nineteen prints were produced), 1778 (twenty prints), 1779 (thirteen prints) and 1781 (twelve prints), respectively.\textsuperscript{75}

This is the time frame in which the vast majority of images for the first volume were completed. With the exception of the frontispiece, and the title and dedication pages (all produced in 1787 and 1788, as the project was nearing completion), the majority of the prints are dated to 1775-1778, with only three being produced between 1779 and 1781. The majority of plates for the second volume were produced between 1779 and 1784, with less than ten of the dated prints being produced in 1787 and 1788.

This slow progress was clearly a source of frustration to Walpole—the optimism he had expressed to Lady Ossory in 1773 was already beginning to wane by 1775. The projected issuance of ten plates at a time, at the pace at which Boydell was proceeding, seemed woefully insufficient. Walpole registered his fears to the Rev. William Cole that “it would be twenty years” before the set was complete, and that even the subscribers would lose interest “in a quarter of the time.”\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{75} 123 of the 129 numbered plates after pictures in the collection are dated, and were produced as follows: four in 1774; nineteen in 1775; nine in 1776; ten in 1777; twenty in 1778; thirteen in 1779; eight in 1780; twelve in 1781; four in 1782; five in 1783; three in 1784; seven in 1785; four in 1787; and five in 1788. No prints were produced in 1786.

\textsuperscript{76} Walpole to Rev. William Cole, 14 December 1775, \emph{HWC} 1:385.
Ultimately, the entire *Houghton Gallery* project was not engraved as had been initially envisaged, and thus the finished volumes of 1788 do not reflect the entirety of the Walpole collection, as it existed before its sale to Catherine the Great.\(^77\)

It is not clear how many of the paintings were recorded in preparatory drawings, though a complete list of paintings engraved can be found in Boydell’s stock catalogue.\(^78\) The changed status of the collection between December of 1778, when the sale was confirmed, and the spring of 1779, when it departed for St. Petersburg, in turn changed Boydell’s plans, and suggests that even by that late date he did not yet have drawings for all of the pictures he wished to include in the project.

In two instances he was compelled to make use of similar pictures housed in other noble collections in England, because those in the Walpole Collection had already left for St. Petersburg.\(^79\) He also made the decision to include four engravings that had already

---

\(^77\) There is some room for confusion. After stating in his prospectus that the collection at Houghton contained upwards of 200 pictures, Boydell explains his intentions that at least 180 pictures be engraved in groups of ten or more. Many family portraits, or differently valued contemporary pictures were never intended for inclusion from the outset of the project. Regardless, only 129 numbered prints after paintings in the collection appear in the finished volumes. Walpole in the *Aedes Walpolianae* described some 260 pictures, but between 1748 and the 1770’s, several small sales had removed works from the collection. See Moore, 56-8.

\(^78\) In some cases drawings for prints that might never have been intended for inclusion were made, including portraits after assorted members of the Walpole family. 21 such drawings appeared in the exhibition of drawings after the pictures at Houghton mounted at Boydell’s Shakespeare Gallery which occurred in 1790. A list of the paintings engraved can be found in Boydell’s catalogue of prints kept in stock: *A Catalogue of Historical Prints, Various Subjects...published by John and Josiah Boydell* (London, 1787), 48-58.

appeared in the earlier volumes of the *Most Capital Paintings* project in order to render the second Houghton volume more complete. The original paintings on which three of these engravings were based had been located in Houghton’s most prestigious rooms for pictures, the Gallery, Salon and Cabinet, and the pride of place clearly afforded them in the house may have influenced the decision to re-use the existing plates rather than forego their inclusion.

Remarkably, several other engravings that had previously been published by others were also rounded up for inclusion in the *Houghton Gallery*, including engravings after portraits of King Charles I and Queen Henrietta Maria by the Amsterdam engraver Pieter van Gunst, and twenty-eight plans and elevations and other engravings after various features of Houghton Hall which had previously been published by the architect Isaac Ware in 1735, and again by their engraver Pierre Fourdrinier, who reissued them in 1760 accompanied by text culled from Horace Walpole’s *Aedes Walpolianae*.

Though these unusual measures suggest Boydell was attempting to record the collection as completely and uniformly as possible, he was unable to do so. Gregory

---

80 These four were Salvator Rosa’s *Prodigal Son*, first issued in *Most Capital Paintings* I, pl. 41 in 1767 (reissued for the *Houghton Gallery* II, pl. 32 in 1781); Peter Paul Rubens’ *Lions at Play* (Now attributed to Frans Snyders) first issued in *Most Capital Paintings* II, pl. 38 in 1769 (reissued for the *Houghton Gallery* II, pl. 37 in 1782); Eustace Le Sueur’s *Stoning of St. Stephen*, first issued in *Most Capital Paintings* II, pl. 20 in 1773 (reissued for the *Houghton Gallery* II, pl. 38 in 1782), and Sébastien Bourdon’s *Jacob Burying Laban’s Images*, first issued in *Most Capital Paintings* I, 1766 (reissued for the second volume of the *Houghton Gallery*, 1785). See Rubinstein 1991, 16-26.

Rubinstein has noted that sixty-one plates were executed in mezzotint, fifty-five were line engravings, seventeen were stipple engravings, and one was an aquatint.\textsuperscript{82}

Each of the two completed volumes are introduced by a portrait: the first with the Empress Catherine the Great, and the second with Robert Walpole. These are followed in both volumes by an elaborate ornamental title page which acknowledges the change in ownership, and firmly links two great collectors with the collection, and by a dedication page which proclaims the Empress to be “an avowed Patroness of Genius, and Protectress of the Arts” and celebrates her “transcendent Wisdom” (fig. 1, p. 84):

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{dedication_page}
\caption{Dedication Page to Catherine the Great, from John Boydell’s \textit{A Set of Prints Engraved after the Most Capital Paintings in the Collection of Her Imperial Majesty the Empress of Russia, Lately in the Possession of the Earl of Orford at Houghton in Norfolk}. 2 vols. London, 1788.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{82} Rubinstein 1996, 66. The high proportion of the prints were mezzotints, largely due to the heavy involvement of one of the artist’s Boydell favoured in a number of projects, Richard Earlom. Earlom particularly excelled at this method, and experimented with combining etching and mezzotint techniques. See also Rubinstein 1991, 16.
A table of contents is provided by the inclusion of an abbreviated reproduction of Horace Walpole’s descriptions for the pictures (reprinted from the *Aedes Walpolianae*) arranged according to the contents of the respective volumes, before the twenty-eight pages of Ware’s plans and elevations, details of decorative components are provided, facilitating ample material for the reader to envision the grounds, the layout and parts of the interior of the house. The first volume contains sixty engravings published between 1774 and 1781, and the second contains sixty-nine engravings printed between 1774 and 1788. In spite of the changed nature of the representation, the appearance of the complete collection is lent. The ‘collection’ is not completely represented, yet the appearance of this is established, in large part due to the inclusion of the elevations and plans.

**The Audience for the Houghton Gallery**

Gregory Rubinstein has suggested that the *Houghton Gallery* project was designed for a domestic market, and that there is every reason to think Boydell was capitalizing on the success of his previous ambitious efforts, and adapting them specifically to suit a smaller, domestic audience. Rubinstein bases his assessment on the predominance of mezzotints in the series (a method unsuitable for large print runs), and the limited projected subscription of 400 complete sets of first impressions.\(^{83}\)

Starting in the mid 1760’s, Boydell used the subscription method to attract necessary funding for his several projects—after proposals for projects were distributed in shops and published in the newspapers, interested parties could register, generally

\(^{83}\) Prospectus dated 25 March 1775; See Appendix C.
agreeing to pay half the price at the outset, and the other upon delivery.\textsuperscript{84} Undertaking projects by subscription was standard practice among publishers of books and prints, but it was speculative and unpredictable.\textsuperscript{85} If interest was sufficient, it provided obvious ways to finance the projects, but prolonged delays in production could seriously affect the outcome. The success of the process was dependant on how well the publisher understood the demand for and interest in his project, and thus how long subscribers might be prepared to wait for the finished project. This had to be balanced against practical concerns—as time passed, so did the fates and fortunes of subscribers: any number of things could alter contractual obligations including deaths, bankruptcies and insolvencies, changes of address. The lack of interest foreseen by an anxious Horace Walpole was only part of the potential difficulties posed by long delays.

The prospectus for the \textit{Houghton Gallery} published in 1775, promoting a carefully chosen range of images from so many highly collectable artists, does establish what Rubinstein has termed the “sumptuous exclusivism” of the project.\textsuperscript{86} In it, Boydell asserts the importance of the collection at Houghton, “universally allowed to be the first in this Kingdom”, and the significance of its illustrious collector, Robert Walpole. He assures prospective subscribers of the high quality of the reproductive prints, and of the limited run of four hundred sets. Invoking nationalist and patriotic sentiment common to so many of his endeavours, Boydell explains “The Proprietor exerts his utmost Care to have the Work performed in a Manner which shall render it an Honour to our Country, a

\textsuperscript{84} Friedman, 45.  
\textsuperscript{85} Painting, 35, 47-49.  
\textsuperscript{86} Rubinstein 1991, p. 16.
faithful Imitation of the Originals from which it is taken, and a Credit to every Artist employed in it.”

In keeping with the ideals he routinely cultivated for both his commercial ventures and as his socio-political and artistic ambitions, Boydell assigns the copyists and draftsman as well as the engravers the same level of esteem as the original paintings. In asserting the greatness of the originals, he elevates the efforts of his artists to the same level.

Though in the case of the *Houghton Gallery* many of the specific individuals who subscribed cannot be identified, subscription ledgers for several of Boydell’s other projects, such as the *Most Capital Paintings*, suggest that the names of noblemen, artists, merchants and booksellers often appeared on the same subscriptions list for deluxe volumes. The latter two groups sometimes committed to multiple sets, presumably for resale. In no case could all copies of a given project be accounted for, indicating that some sets must have been produced simply for sale to interested parties after completion.

The subscription system provided a sense of public participation in

---

87 Prospectus dated 25 March 1775; see Appendix C.
88 Though the data is not available for the *Houghton Gallery* volumes, Vivienne Painting’s findings in her dissertation as related to the *Most Capital Paintings* project, as well as the *Shakespeare Gallery* project give an idea of Boydell’s usual practices for subscription. For the *Shakespeare Gallery*, see Painting, 48-49. It was announced that the *Houghton Gallery* set was complete and available for sale to subscribers, for a price of two guineas, at Boydell’s establishment at Number 90, Cheapside, as well as at the newly opened Shakespeare Gallery in Pall Mall. Unpaginated advertisement published within *A Catalogue of the Pictures in the Shakespeare Gallery, Pall-Mall* (London: 1789). Sheila O’Connell rightly suggests that print projects of limited runs were likely to be more expensive, and from this we may assume that the upper end of the market is the intended aim. The emphasis of Boydell’s projects seem to have been towards catering to the range of customers that could afford them. See O’Connell, 11.
ownership of the commemorated collection, changed though it was by the truncated representation in Boydell’s haphazard volumes.

A letter published in the *Whitehall Evening Post* in July 1779, in the wake of the news that the Walpole Collection had been sold and would soon be removed to St. Petersburg, demonstrates how closely Boydell’s project came to be aligned to the actual collection it promised to commemorate. The anonymous author wrote: “Government have been sufficiently warned of this event so that there is not an excuse left to them for suffering the most valuable collection in the Kingdom to depart from it. The only consideration that is left for this loss is that the very spirited Mr. Boydell has furnished us with beautiful drawings of the principal of them”.  

This echoes the private sentiments of Horace Walpole, when he wrote to the Countess of Upper Ossory in 1773. At that time, the loss of the collection was only a possibility; by 1779, it had become a reality. The sentiment expressed in the article united for a contemporary public the changing situation of collection with the production of Boydell’s print project, as though it somehow mitigated the loss.

The prints themselves are in many ways the most obvious conduit through which the finished volumes of the *Houghton Gallery* could perpetuate a sense of the continued presence of the Walpole Collection as it had existed at Houghton Hall. Particularly after the sale had been concluded and publicly announced, and the pictures moved to St. Petersburg, Boydell clearly had a vested interest in continuing to assert the relevance of the collection at Houghton, and the best way to do this was to continue treating it much as

---

89 As reported in the *Whitehall Evening Post*, 17-20 July 1799.
he had in the earliest days of the project: as a coherent monument which could assume national proportions as the pinnacle of English culture and its taste in fine pictures.

But there was only so much Boydell was able to accomplish within the changed parameters, and while there were elements of the project that may appear haphazard, he nonetheless strove for consistency among those images he was able to include. This consistency was in large part achieved by the inscriptions accompanying each plate. These provided not only the usual information—the names of painters, draftsman and engravers in most cases, as well as Boydell’s own name as publisher and the address of his shop in Cheapside—but also the titles of the pictures, and their precise location in the rooms of Houghton Hall during the lifetime of Robert Walpole [fig. 2, p. 89 and fig. 3, p. 90]. The inscriptions had the power in each case to associate an image within a specific space in Walpole’s house, and to extend the space of Walpole’s house to the viewer.

In an essay examining the hand-coloured engraving by Pietro Martini after J.H. Ramberg, which displayed a varied crowd of onlookers taking in the Annual Exhibition of the Royal Academy in the spring of 1787, C.S. Matheson has suggested a similar extension of space by virtue of the print’s inscription. Matheson argues that the inscription “establishes the print’s position as a continuation of material fabric of the exhibition room”, ratifying the particular official and endorsed experience of the Royal Academy’s exhibitions and its policies (unlike other prints which represented the crowds of visitors to the annual exhibitions but did not include the same Greek inscription). Matheson proposes that Martini’s print “nominally recreates the passage of the public into the Great Room itself” by extending the space of the exhibition room after the event of the

---

The inscription at the bottom of Ramberg’s print transfers and transcribes the Greek phrase inscribed above the doorway to the main exhibition room of the Royal Academy, translated as “Let no strangers to the Muses Enter”, or “Let none but Men of Taste presume to Enter”. Matheson 2001, 47. See also William Sandby, *History of the Royal Academy* (1862, repr. London: Cornmarket Press, 1970) 15, 157.
exhibition had closed and was no longer physically accessible.  

In similar fashion, Boydell’s precise inscriptions in the *Houghton Gallery* prints extended the space of Houghton Hall, and permanently anchored individual images within the English context of the great house. While sufficiently powerful as a unifying feature among the engravings by virtue of their common font type and type of information, the significance of the inscriptions is intensified by their denotation of the physical locations of the pictures they represent.

Boydell’s inscriptions make it obvious that from the outset he aimed to commemorate the grand collection, the grand house, and the grand name with which they were associated, for anyone who owned the volumes or saw the prints—like other illustrated volumes, they were intended to function mnemonically as a gallery on paper.  

His intentions were uniquely enhanced by the changed circumstances of the sale and removal of the pictures. Though the prints were not produced or arranged in the volumes according to the rooms the originals were located in (as the descriptions were in Walpole’s *Aedes Walpolianae*, for instance), there is nonetheless the possibility to recreate a kind of tour through the house, facilitated by the inclusion of Isaac Ware’s plans of the house and grounds.

This possibility would have had a particular resonance with those who had been to Houghton Hall, but was by no means exclusive to them. The new physical circumstance of the original pictures and their location was denied entirely by the inscriptions and details which, by the time of publication, could not be changed without

---

91 Matheson 2001, 47.

92 Such as *A Description of the Earl of Pembroke’s Pictures* (London: 1731), and *Catalogues of the Collections of Pictures of the Duke of Devonshire, General Guise, and the late Sir Paul Methuen* (Strawberry Hill, 1760). See Waterfield, “The Origins....”
revamping the whole project. Ultimately the inscriptions had to remain, securing to some degree the faulty notion that the collection was intact and remained part of a larger whole at Houghton, and this turned the project to its utmost advantage. The fact that, ultimately, the Walpole Collection was not published by Boydell in its entirety is not the primary point—the impression was that of the whole collection being present by virtue of its preservation through reproduction, and *this* is what had lasting effect. Between the covers, with prefaces and dedications, and with the itemized list of contents culled from the text of Walpole’s *Aedes Walpolianae*, the impression was one of completeness and containment.

Two related processes are at work through the prints and their inscriptions: at the same time that it can be observed that works are anchored in their places as Robert Walpole had arranged them in his lifetime, prior to the sale and their movement to St. Petersburg, it is also true that the actual space of the house, as a framework for the collection, is extended far beyond its physical limitations and the experience of its owners. What began more conventionally as an ambitious commercial enterprise to record and celebrate a great collection for a limited projected public with the means to subscribe to and participate in the project, was transformed through time and circumstance to a larger, more inclusive purpose, which commemorated and symbolized a reality no longer extant. The symbolic reality of the collection as national patrimony could operate for a much larger public, in large part through the volumes of the *Houghton Gallery*.

In examining how Boydell’s project participates in a growing impulse towards a public collection of pictures, and how the project may be seen to renegotiate distinctions
between ‘private’ and ‘public’, it is important to note that subscribers to the series were not the only persons who could gain access, view and potentially even own prints and drawings associated with the *Houghton Gallery* project. The potential for Boydell’s project and the processes and activities associated with it to provide to a changing public a sense of collective entitlement to the Walpole collection and extend this, through increased accessibility, is not tied exclusively to subscription to the complete two volume set of prints. Boydell’s prospectus allows for the possibility for non-subscribers to buy remaining copies. Boydell’s arrangements for his other projects suggest that he routinely had two different price lists, for subscribers and non-subscribers, that the quality of available prints could be determined on the basis of the quality of paper used, with prices fixed accordingly. It is likely that the sale of prints produced for the *Houghton Collection* followed a similar pattern.

### Sustained Presence for the Walpole Collection: Spaces and Places of Viewing

Another significant contribution to the continued presence of the Walpole Collection had nothing to do with buying prints, either as part of the *Houghton Gallery* volumes, or individually. The artists’ drawings after the paintings in the collection on which the prints were based were promoted by Boydell as a key display feature in his Cheapside gallery and shop premises in the mid 1780’s, after the Walpole Collection had been

---

93 Boydell’s business exchanges with Joseph Farington, regarding the *Views of the Thames* project, in the spring of 1796 suggest this was a fairly regular practice: a price of 6 guineas per two volume set was initially projected, with final prices of 10 guineas a set for subscribers, and 12 guineas for non-subscribers. See Farington, 2: 514, 542.
moved to St. Petersburg, and prior to the complete set of engravings being issued. The exhibition of the drawings seems to have functioned not only as a short-term place-holder and promotional tool for the incomplete two-volume set, to keep existing and prospective subscribers invested in the project, but also as an attraction in their own right. As evidenced by his own catalogues and guides, the drawings were also given pride of place when Boydell first opened his *Shakespeare Gallery* in Pall Mall in 1789, making the move to these more prestigious quarters, too.

Boydell’s own gallery and showrooms provided an obvious venue where many people who might not have been able to purchase a deluxe set of books, would have been able to view the preparatory drawings for the set. Boydell’s commercial spaces and the various facets of his activities around the *Houghton Gallery* project repeatedly established new ways for viewers to actively experience the collection through partial representations of it. He created and maintained a constant tension between supplying his customers with a representation of the collection to view, while underscoring the sense of collective loss that might make the drawings attractive in the first place.

---

94 A notice in the *Morning Post* from 14 November 1786, probably placed by Boydell, asserts that the drawings after the pictures from the Walpole Collection at Houghton were as “spirited and worthy of attention” as the original pictures on which they had been based.

95 A notice in early catalogues for the Shakespeare Gallery advertises complete sets of the *Houghton Gallery* project available to subscribers on the premises. See *A Catalogue of the Pictures in the Shakspeare Gallery, Pall-Mall* (London: 1789). An undated exhibition catalogue advertises an exhibition of the drawings, which was held “in the room across from the Gallery”: *Drawings after the Most Capital Pictures formerly in the Possession of the Earl of Orford at Houghton in Norfolk. Lately purchased by The Empress of Russia*. As has also been noted by Gregory Rubinstein, this exhibition catalogue was published with page numbers continuous to another catalogue, for a related exhibition of drawings left from the *Most Capital Paintings* project, and is dated 1790. See *A Catalogue of the Pictures in the Shakspeare Gallery, Pall-Mall* (London: 1790). See also: Rubinstein 1991, 8, note 19.
Rosie Dias has effectively illustrated the intersection of commercial, cultural and social interests that convened within the geographic space of Pall Mall in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Pall Mall was an area that developed rapidly in this period to accommodate a variety of developing entrepreneurial and artistic interests and market demands regarding the show and sale of art, making it accessible to a varied audience. From the late 1760’s, the area was associated with the production of contemporary art, with the premises of the Royal Academy located at 125 Pall Mall. At the departure of the Academy in the early 1780’s to take up residence at Somerset House, the dynamic was greatly changed when 125 Pall Mall was used to host sales and shows of significant collections of old master pictures, including the Orléans Collection, that of Noel Desenfans, and the Bishop of Bristol.\(^6\) A range of different establishments, including print shops, auction houses, artist’s studios, and specific theme-based spaces in the area began to provide alternatives to what was offered by the Royal Academy at its annual exhibitions, as well as different ways to engage with art, in some cases reframing that interaction entirely.\(^7\)

As Dias has shown, the one-shilling entrance fee to Boydell’s Gallery was promoted as a patriotic participation in collaborative patronage, successfully construed as an inclusive activity, generating the appearance of investment in worthwhile cultural pursuits.\(^8\) As such, Boydell’s practice appeared to be a sharp contrast to the fee insisted upon by the Royal Academy, which was widely criticized as having been designed to

\(^{96}\) Desenfans’ relationship to his collection is examined in Chapters Three and Four.  
\(^{97}\) Dias 2004, 92-113.  
\(^{98}\) Dias 2004, 97, 107. See also Dias 2003.
exclude whole segments of the population.99 The significance of the entrance fee as a device that enabled positive public engagement can only have heightened the symbolic attachment to the Walpole Collection.

In providing a central and fashionable location and the opportunity to visit and view a mnemonic representation of the Walpole Collection as represented in the drawings and prints he commissioned, Boydell encouraged a sense of public occasion around it; out of the rubble of a private collection and the transaction which removed it to another country, over time he cultivated, developed and maintained a public monument of sorts. He successfully negotiated public investment not only in the collection’s commemoration, but specifically its Englishness, in the context of his Shakespeare Gallery. In so doing, he confirmed the sentiment of public entitlement that had been developing around the collection through various means and media for years, all while capitalizing on that sentiment.

By translating the images into a new medium and expanding opportunities for engagement, Boydell reframed and translated the collection as it had been at Houghton Hall under the private ownership of Robert Walpole. Boydell’s reproductions could act as surrogates for the original paintings themselves, relocating them in an increasingly public environment.

It was of course not unusual for high quality reproductive prints and drawings to stand in for original paintings of past ages.100 In the cases of well-known Old Master

---

99 Implementation of the one-shilling entrance fee to the annual Royal Academy exhibitions met with controversy, as it was seen by some to be designed to keep a portion of the population out. This rankled those who felt that any institution operating with Royal endorsement and support should in theory be open and available to the benefit of all, and supported by its Royal patrons, not its public. See Murdoch, 20-3.
pictures, artists and collectors used prints and drawings after famous works to expand their theoretical and practical knowledge bases of technique, composition and iconography. In 1795 engraver Valentine Green issued for show and sale reproductions after the collection of paintings owned by the Elector Palatine at Dusseldorf, which had been produced with a view towards Green developing a series of engravings. In that case, the original collection had been damaged and destroyed by fire, and Green’s images served as the primary record of the Old Master pictures in that collection.¹⁰¹

Further evidence of reproductions specifically related to Boydell’s project may be found in a contemporary news article in a London newspaper dated to 1790. It appeared under the heading “That Gallery of Shakspeare Drawings,” advertised the availability of the drawings after the Walpole Collection for viewing, and reinforced the idea that they were not only worthy in their own right, but also that they made admirable stand-ins for the paintings themselves:

NEAR five hundred drawings after the most capital paintings in England, the Orford Collection, &c. are exhibited in the adjoining rooms, and are all engraved, or in the hands of the engraver.

This collection exhibits a kind of history of the progress of the arts in Great Britain, from the time when Wotton’s portraits of hounds and horses, grooms and squires, embellished with a distant view of a dog distant view of dog kennel and stable, and Hudson’s gentlemen in great

¹⁰¹ Advertised for show and sale in several London newspapers, in May 1795. See National Art Library, Press Cuttings from English Newspapers on Matters of Artistic Interest 1686-1835, 3:642, 650. It should be noted that such advertisements appeared alongside announcements for important exhibitions and sales of original Old Master pictures, with little distinction made between them—in this case, the Orléans collection. See also Redford, 1:58. Again, Redford approached his account of this sale the same as any of original pictures, taking care to note the prices for copies after works by Peter Paul Rubens, Gerrit Dou, and a number of other Flemish painters whose works were sought after in the eighteenth century.
coats and jockey-caps were almost the only originals which came under the burin of the English artist. Generally speaking, the engraver was worthy of the painter. How different is the state of the arts at this period. We here see the greatest part of that series from which were copied those prints that have brought English engraving into such deservedly high estimation on the Continent; prints which gave our artists celebrity among the nations, and turned the course of a great stream of wealth, which formerly flowed into other countries, but now centres in our own. These circumstances form an era in the history of commerce, and render this collection highly interesting to the merchant as well as the Virtuosi, to the politician as well as the Connoisseur.¹⁰²

As suggested by this article, which may have been paid for by Boydell himself to maintain interest in his project and maximize profits from the Houghton Gallery even after its completion, the drawings are called upon to stand in for the original paintings of the collection. Emphasis is placed squarely on Robert Walpole, who is lauded for his exceptional taste in pictures, and the collection is still promoted for the cultural esteem and significance it brought to England. The drawings constituted an additional point of interest to attract visitors to his gallery, and Boydell made the utmost use of them—cultivating and sustaining value and interest in recreations of the original pictures from what was still understood to be Walpole’s collection.

The article continues in discussion of three select drawings. The descriptions blur the line between evaluating the drawings based on their respective qualities, and actually employing them to discuss the merits of the paintings on which they were based:

Among those narrations which are rendered interesting and impressive, by their adherence to nature, variety of incident, discrimination of character, and sublimity of language, the history of Joseph has a very high place. It is a story which attaches itself to every heart, every reader feels an interest in the catastrophe, and the catastrophe forms a lesson of morality, and exhibits an encouragement to virtue. This story was worthy

¹⁰² Undated clipping from an unidentified London newspaper, in National Art Library, Press Cuttings, 2: 567, positioned with clippings that have been hand-dated to 1789 and 1790.
of the talents and taste of Guercino; he has told it in a stile that would have given him a very distinguished rank in the arts, had he never delineated anything besides. Mr. Boydell’s drawing displays a very faithful idea of the manner of the master; the characters are forcibly marked, the outline is decided and clear, and the whole has a freedom and spirit which copies rarely attain.\textsuperscript{103}

In the case of the three drawings described in this article, while the subjects are described, the drawings and their artists are themselves overlooked, except to assert that they constitute worthy representations:

Considered as works of art, they in general give a very good idea of the different masters, and constitute a source of high entertainment to those who have not seen the originals from which they are copied; many of them are highly worthy of a minute inspection.\textsuperscript{104}

These descriptions depend not on the familiarity of the reader with the picture, but on the ability of the reader to go and see the drawing, collapsing distinctions in media and circumstance, and rendering original paintings the reader might never have seen one with the reproductions.\textsuperscript{105}

A final stage in Boydell’s efforts to commemorate and commodify the Walpole Collection contributed to extending its reception even further. Throughout his career, as his commercial fortunes ebbed and flowed, Boydell was periodically forced to sell off stock, including the preparatory drawings for many of his print series.\textsuperscript{106} In late April and early May 1792, the drawings after the Walpole Collection were put up for auction.

\textsuperscript{103} National Art Library, \textit{Press Cuttings}, 2: 567
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 2: 563.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid, 2: 562-563.
\textsuperscript{106} In two separate sales in December and April of 1771, Boydell sold off his collection of drawings to alleviate financial strain on his business. Sales in 1792, 1803, 1808 and 1818 also contained drawings and prints after the collection at Houghton, including what seem to be left-over volumes of the complete Houghton Gallery set. Winifred Friedman has suggested this was an expected, acceptable way the Boydell’s generated funds from time to time, and was factored into their operations. See Friedman, 46-7.
Over the three days of this sale, over one hundred drawings after pictures in the collection were sold, as well as three sets of the two-volume *Houghton Gallery*.

The newspaper advertisements promoting this sale reinforce the importance of the collection at Houghton for Britain’s cultural heritage as something every Briton could take pride in: all the more remarkable for the fact that the pictures were long gone to a foreign court. One such advertisement, which also explained that drawings from other projects would also be sold “for want of room” at the Shakespeare Gallery, appeared as follows:

**MESSRS. BOYDELLS beg leave to acquaint the Public, that on account of the great number of New Pictures that will be added to the SHAKSPEARE GALLERY, during the present season, they will, for want of room, be obliged to dispose of some of the Drawings that are there now exhibited.**

They propose therefore, some time in April next, to sell by Auction, if not before disposed of by Private Contract….All that capital COLLECTION of high-finished DRAWINGS, made at a very great expense from the Pictures of the late Earl of Orford’s Gallery, at Houghton, since purchased by the Empress of Russia.

Concerning this Collection, consisting of upwards of One Hundred and Fifty different Subjects, it is perhaps sufficient to say, that no Cabinet in Europe contains such a Selection of highly finished Drawings, where the manner of the great masters from whom they are made are so faithfully preserved.

Even after Boydell’s death, when his nephew Josiah assumed control of their printing and publishing enterprises, sales continued to make images commemorating

---

107 *A Catalogue of that Capital Collection of High-Finished Drawings…from the Gallery of the Late Earl of Orford at Houghton, now it the possession of the Empress of Russia…, April 28, 30, and May 1, 1792* (London: 1792). Prices for drawings ranged between 1.-11.-6, and 40 pounds (for a drawing after Vanderwerff). By contrast, the grandest of the 3 sets of prints (bound in Moroccan leather) yielded 30 pounds, with the other two sets fetching 20 pounds each.
parts of the Walpole Collection available. In June 1818, a large sale of Boydell’s stock opened up many more of the images to public availability and ownership. The description in the catalogue reads:

The pictures being well known, it is almost unnecessary to say, are generally by the first masters, and the plates engraved by the best artists of this country, who lived at the time of their publication…the number of plates is 131, forming two volumes grand eagle folio, preceded by a short description of each picture, and 28 plates, plans of Houghton Hall; likewise two of the finest specimens of ornamental writing…being the Dedication of the work to the Empress, by John Boydell, and title to the volumes; which with all the remaining impressions, both proofs and prints, comprise this lot, together with 140 sets of text, and 6 sets of the plans. The number of proofs is about 4000, the number of prints is about 3650, also 135 in colours, 39 of which are finished.  

Boydell’s sales accidentally enabled the practical dismantling of the collection and re-ordering of the pictures that was denied at the point of the sale of the original paintings to Catherine the Great. By this point in time, the representations of the paintings had long been invested with all the significance of the loss of the collection.

Legacy and Loss: The Afterlife of Robert Walpole’s Collection

The Houghton Gallery was clearly part of Boydell’s developing ideas about encouraging an appreciation of art in England, and about changing and reshaping the parameters of reception; as the circumstances around the project changed, they conspired to further these ends and focus them.

Through his various enterprises, Boydell made ingenious use of every conceivable opportunity to foster and promote a collective public attachment to the Walpole Collection, and his tactics only intensified as the project began to take shape.

---

108 Emphasis in the original document. *A Catalogue of more than Five Thousand Copper Plates Engraved by the most Esteemed British Artists*... (London: 1 June 1818), 50.
Responding imaginatively to changes he likely could not have anticipated at the outset and capitalizing upon them, Boydell created a space in which the collection could be commemorated in its absence and celebrated in its presence.

Throughout the various lapses in productivity and changes to his plans, Boydell was keen to maintain the project’s relevance. Keeping the public invested and interested in the *Houghton Gallery* was important, and the entrenchment of the idea that it could have been a national, public collection had Parliament chosen to act, was clearly a significant part of his strategy. The consequences and impact reached farther than Boydell himself might have planned or anticipated.

The *Houghton Gallery* series was finally published in 1788 as *A Set of Prints Engraved after the Most Capital Paintings in the Collection of Her Imperial Majesty the Empress of Russia, Lately in the Possession of the Earl of Orford at Houghton in Norfolk*. The changed circumstances of ownership of course dictated Boydell’s adaptation of the title of his project, but in the end, the print series cemented a tension that is often overlooked. In finally confirming the loss of the collection to its Russian owner, and commemorating it, Boydell’s project celebrates the integral role of an English collector and his legacy of taste in assembling what was, by then, acknowledged to be a prestigious foreign imperial collection.

Collective perception of the significance of the Walpole Collection is evident in the fact that it continued to factor in the broadening debate around the notion of art for the public, not only as a requirement for the fine arts produced in England, but also as a vehicle for improving the reception of the fine arts. Wilkes’ speech of 1777 which called for ‘saving’ the collection for the nation, introduced the Walpole Collection formally into
this growing public dialogue. The perceived failure to maintain the collection on British soil had important ramifications.

Newspapers references demonstrate the degree to which the perceived loss of the Walpole Collection pervaded news of the arts, and continued to do so in the years after the sale. As discussion about public access to art, and opportunities to engage with it, increased with such significant developments as the geographic concentration of galleries and showrooms in and around Pall Mall, an anxiety about the potential for sudden loss also became more pronounced. Any exhibitions that were delayed or sales that ended too quickly were immediately suspected as having been “poached” by the Empress of Russia, just as the Houghton collection had been.

In December 1790, the impeding arrival of the Flemish and Dutch holdings of the Orléans collection from France for show and sale in London was rumoured to have been blocked, and the thought of being deprived access to it put people in mind of what had been denied them by Parliament years before:

> The Orléans collection of pictures, it is finally determined, will not find their way to this country. The [French] National Assembly has interposed to prevent their being removed from their present situation. This is a severe disappointment to the connoisseurs of painting, as this collection would have made some amends for that which went from Houghton to Russia.\(^\text{109}\)

Several days later it was reported that the Orléans collection had indeed been secured by a group of gentlemen who had raised, by subscription, sufficient funds to make an acceptable offer to the Duc d’Orléans and secure the transfer of the pictures to

England. Even the thought of its arrival being delayed or cancelled was sufficient cause for lament, and provided further opportunity for criticism of the government on this front.

When the collection of Charles Alexandre de Calonne went up for sale in 1794, the anxiety was again made apparent: rumours abounded that the English people would be deprived of its riches at the hands of the Empress of Russia: “We are assured that Monsieur de Calonne’s Collection of Pictures will be shipped for Russia the latter end of this week. The view of them closes either the end of this week, or the beginning of next.”

Even when the rumour was proven to be untrue, and the collection was sold in a larger group sale at the hands of the dealer Mr. Bryan, with parts of Sir Joshua Reynolds’ collection and that of Baron Nagel, lingering associations with Houghton could not be shaken, for in that instance another failure of sorts had been allowed to happen:

The magnificent Cabinet of Pictures, collected by M. CALONNE, are now scattered like the leaves of the Sybills; considering the very perfect state in which many of the Capital Works of the greatest masters were preserved, it is much to be regretted that they should be separated. Together they would have formed a collection, that would have done honour to the nation that possessed them.

It is not surprising that even as plans were coming to fruition for London’s National Gallery to finally be established, and enthusiastic announcements were being

---

110 Ibid., 2:578. The details of this second notice were exaggerated, suggesting as many as 20 men raised 5 thousand guineas each; but the basic fact that the collection have been secured was accurate.
111 Ibid., 3:670.
112 Initially, Mr. Bryan did not reveal that De Calonne’s pictures constituted part of the sale, but it soon became apparent. National Art Library, Press Cuttings, 3: 712.
113 Ibid., 3: 734. Dated April 1795.
made in the newspapers, the significance of the loss of the Walpole Collection, and the perception that the public had been deprived of its riches, still lingered.

A generation later, in his 1824 *Memoirs of Painting*, William Buchanan aimed to describe not only his own experiences and involvement as a key figure in London’s network of artists, patrons and collectors, but to provide a history of the “Importation of Pictures by the Great Masters into England” since the time of the French Revolution. Buchanan’s introductory dedication indicated that he felt the time was right for such an account; that, by virtue of royal interest in fostering and endorsing artistic institutions, the increasing development of “galleries of a public nature”, and the general prosperity of the country, a cultivation of interest in the arts was well underway, and thus, he felt an interest in presenting a history of this interest in Britain was both entertaining and historically pertinent.  

Buchanan made general remarks about the political events and upheaval that occurred in Europe the thirty years before he was writing to provide a contrast with what he constructs as Britain’s international and domestic reputation of economical strength and political stability. His proof of this strength and stability, which tidily roots his whole discussion in contemporary notions of culture and taste in Old Master Pictures, revolves around instances of foreign collectors who brought their great collections to London for safekeeping, or for outright sale. The arrival of distinguished collections, including those of De Calonne and the Duc d’Orléans “roused an emulation and a taste for the acquisition of works of Art” which, Buchanan reminds his readers, had been

---

“almost dormant since the days of its illustrious patron and protector, Charles the First”. Though Buchanan’s memoirs focus on the increasing opportunities in London to both view and purchase works by the most revered, lauded sixteenth- and seventeenth-century artists during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, he first reconstructs the reasons why England was lacking such objects up to this point.

In his lengthy chapter on the significance of arrival of the Orléans collection in London, Buchanan succinctly recounted how England came to have such weak stores in the area of Old Master pictures which held the greatest appeal to affluent collectors and men of taste at the time. After citing the painter Benjamin West’s (1738-1820) remarks, made in his capacity as second President of the Royal Academy, that nations are honoured by the great works of art which enrich them, Buchanan refers to what his audience of art lovers and collectors knew all too well: that, in terms of its objects of taste and virtu, Britain was perceived to have been put at great disadvantage, culturally speaking, by two major events which were understood to have deprived the country of its most significant cultural holdings:

The irreparable loss which this country sustained in the dispersion of the magnificent collections which had belonged to King Charles the First, a collection formed upon the soundest principles of good judgment, aided by the elegant and refined taste of the monarch himself; the subsequent diminution of its riches in the transfer of the Houghton collection to a northern Potentate, the meager state of the collections which remained to us, in the works of the Italian school, made us strongly feel in our own case the truth of the worthy president’s remarks, and the public was prepared to avail itself to the first opportunity which should occur, to remedy in part these heavy losses.

115 Buchanan, 1: xiv
116 Indeed, his thorough account takes up nearly two hundred pages (the bulk) of the first of two volumes of Buchanan’s Memoirs. For further discussion, see Herrmann, 127-8.
117 Buchanan, 1: 9-10.
By invoking the loss of the Walpole Collection and allaying it with the dispersal of the royal collection the previous century, Buchanan drew upon a narrative of formalized entitlement and loss with which his readers were by then long familiar, set in motion by John Wilkes’ unsuccessful proposal in 1777. By virtue of that proposal, the Walpole Collection at Houghton had been irrevocably linked to the notion of an as yet non-existent public cultural institution within the context of public discourse. It was claimed for the public, regardless of the outcome of the proposal. Alongside the many means through which the presence of the Walpole collection was manufactured, cultivated and retained, so its absence took on a presence of its own.

The Walpole Collection and the afterlife it enjoyed through the commemorative projects such as Boydell’s *Houghton Gallery* underscore two related aspects central to the growing impulse towards public interest in a national collection of Old Master pictures and which lasted into the first quarter of the nineteenth century. The manufactured presence of the Walpole Collection enabled the cultivation of a sense of collective public entitlement to it.

Representations such as Boydell’s refocused attention in to the continued failure of government to establish a national collection. During the extended period in which Boydell was producing the *Houghton Gallery* and turning this in his favour, he sustained interest in the establishment of public collection while underscoring all the while that one did not exist: the direct result of this ensured that any potential loss of cultural goods
became an opportunity to invoke the shameful removal of the Walpole Collection from its rightful place among the English people.\textsuperscript{118}

\textsuperscript{118} References, to rumoured reasons behind the premature closure of an exhibition known as the ‘Imperial Collection’, to alarmist announcements the about dispersal of M. da Calonne’s collection, were associated with both the Empress and the foreign fate of the Walpole Collection. See National Art Library, \textit{Press Cuttings}, 3:670 and 754.
Chapter Three:

Noel Joseph Desenfans (1744/5-1807), Francis Bourgeois (c. 1756-1811), and the Problem of Negotiated Ownership

In underscoring the absence of a public, national collection, the afterlife of the Walpole Collection not only stimulated discussion and encouraged speculation about how such an absence might be addressed, but also, more specifically, it created a climate in which the chance to establish such a collection might have been welcomed.

In early 1799, the London-based picture dealer Noel Joseph Desenfans published a lengthy and ambitious plan for cultivating and sustaining the visual arts in England. This plan, addressed to the Trustees of the British Museum, expressed some of Desenfans’s many vested interests, including the training and promotion of contemporary English artists and their work. The concerns of collectors of Old Master paintings and fine art regarding the futures of their collections were also addressed. Most importantly, his plan called for the establishment of a multi-purpose set of galleries for a publicly-accessible art collection. Though Desenfans’s plan attempted to account for and accommodate the many opposing viewpoints of the day on such varied matters as collecting practices, artistic production, and the marketing of sales and exhibitions, ultimately, the plan received little support.

By exploring Desenfans’s proposal, it is possible to show how one man responded to and participated in the growing sense of need for a public collection of art for Britain, and attempted to direct it towards his own objectives and intentions. By examining the possible reasons for its failure, and the ramifications this had on Desenfans’s ideas about
his own collection of pictures, it is also possible to explore how reputations of individuals might affect the perceived value of their ideas, just as issues of provenance could affect interest in pictures.

The broader scheme of art and collecting histories of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Britain positions Noel Joseph Desenfans and his friend and associate, Peter Francis Bourgeois almost exclusively in relation to their significant roles in the establishment of the England’s first purpose-built public picture gallery, at Alleyn’s College of God’s Gift, in Dulwich, then outside London, in 1817. But the collection they formed developed sporadically over a number of years, and was shaped with intentions that were redirected in response to changing events several times before parts of it were eventually bequeathed to the college. The various activities Desenfans and Bourgeois engaged in were thus overlooked in favour of the notable end to which their collection eventually came. The present chapter and that which follows seek to examine and explore some of the events of their lives and careers, and provide different readings of their histories that call into question the truncated versions of what has become a standard narrative. By recovering something of both Desenfans’s and Bourgeois’s perspectives, different ideas about that narrative to which they have so long been restricted may be explored and expanded.

An Outsider Established in London: Noel Desenfans’s Professional Beginnings

Not much is known of the origins of Noel Joseph Desenfans. Born at Douai in 1744 or 1745, his youth and early education in that town was followed by a period of study at the
University of Paris in the 1760’s. By 1770, he had emigrated to London, and was employed in the modest position of language tutor.¹

Sometime between the ages of ten and thirteen, Peter Francis Bourgeois, the son of a Swiss watchmaker who had attempted to make a life in London, was left with Desenfans when the failure of his business and his subsequent financial embarrassment forced the elder Bourgeois to return to his home country.² The early history of their lives together is unclear in the accounts left to us, but an essential detail remains common to the various versions: that Desenfans encouraged his young ward to follow his apparently natural inclinations to become a painter.³ Desenfans arranged for Bourgeois to be sent abroad for the purposes of study, and then secured for him an apprenticeship with the French landscape painter, Philippe-Jacques de Loutherbourg (1740-1812), who had settled in London in 1771. Bourgeois’s career was thus, in many ways, facilitated

¹ Peter Murray provides a date of 1745, following the author of Desenfans’ posthumously published memoir. See Murray, 18. Giles Waterfield asserts 1744 in the Washington catalogue, but cites no source for his information. It is unclear when he actually settled in London: most authors follow the early lead set by Anna Jameson—that “around 1770”, Desenfans settled in London. See Jameson, 436. See also Washington, Collection for a King, 10.

² The connection between Isaac Bourgeois and Desenfans is unknown. As Giles Waterfield has noted, information on the early years of Desenfans’s relationship with Bourgeois’s son is difficult to sort out. It is possible that Bourgeois was left in the care of Desenfans as early as 1764, when the former was eight years old. See Waterfield 1989, 36. However, Joseph Farington records contradictory reports of the events several times in the course of his Diary, reporting that in 1805 Bourgeois recounted to him that he had lived with Desenfans since the age 10 (which would have been 1766). See Farington, 9:3446. By Desenfans’s own assertion in a document of 1802, he states he had been in England for thirty-two years at that time, putting his arrival in the country sometime in 1770. See Desenfans, Letter to Benjamin West, President of the Royal Academy, In defence of some Passages in a Descriptive Catalogue of Pictures (London: T. Cadell and Davies, 1802).

³ Chieflly, the roughly contemporary sources which discuss the details of Desenfans’ life are the ‘Memoirs’ of Desenfans’s life, and the multi-volume diary of Joseph Farington. ‘J.T.’ [John Taylor?] 1810. For specific references to Bourgeois’s apparent desire to become a painter, see Jameson, 2:436, and Farington, 9:3445.
and at times even directed by Desenfans, who promoted the younger man at every opportunity.

Upon his marriage in 1776 to Margaret Morris, Desenfans seems to have set himself up as a self-styled gentleman picture dealer, perhaps relying on his wife’s moderate income to do so. A variety of accounts suggest different ideas about the sources of his wealth—“J.T.” states in his memoirs of Desenfans’s life, that his money initial came from the bequest of a wealthy uncle; J.T. Smith, author of *Nollekens and his Times*, who favoured the idea that Margaret Morris had a considerable income, also reported that Desenfans had been ‘a dealer in Brussels lace’ as well as a French teacher.4

As for Desenfans’s introduction to the world of picture dealing, it is often recounted as a happy accident of chance. Smith reports in 1828 that, while on his honeymoon, indulging in a little recreational speculation, Desenfans purchased “a few old pictures, which, on his return to London, he sold to such advantage that he considered it in his interest to follow up the trade.”5

However he came by his money and established himself as a dealer, Desenfans was certainly buying and selling pictures and drawings in the 1770’s, and by the mid 1780’s had amassed enough stock to mount several sales through Christie’s auction

4 The author of Desenfans’s posthumous Memoirs maintained that Desenfans’s money came from the bequest of a wealthy uncle, but several other sources suggest it came instead from his wife’s family. See Smith, 326. See also Murray, 18. Waterfield felt this was not possible, and that Margaret Morris’s income was nowhere near the 5000 pounds often stated. See Washington, *Collection for a King*, 10.
5 Smith, 326. A later version of this story suggests that Desenfans had considerable taste, and was frequently seen at sales: “At one of these he bought a small picture by Claude, so advantageously, that when he sold it to George III for 1000 pounds, the profit he made induced him to turn his whole attention to picture-dealing.” See Roberts, 39.
Newspaper notices and sale catalogues show that he acquired drawings and paintings from a range of artists whose works were in demand by London collectors, from various regional Italian schools, as well as Flemish, Dutch, French, Spanish, and English paintings. Typical for the time, advertisements for sales listed the names of artists whose works were (thought to be) included. Attributions to Rosa, Giordano, Teniers, Reni, Poussin, Murillo, Cuyp, Rubens and Van Dyck were frequently cited in advertisements for Desenfans’s sales, demonstrating that his wares were consistent with the tastes and trends of the day.

Desenfans’s sales in the mid 1780’s seem at first glance not to have been particularly successful. Though it is difficult to specifically identify many individual

---

6 Redford identified seven sales; Roberts doubted this strongly, as he only seems to have located two catalogues that survived through Christie’s. Roberts, 1: 40. See Frits Lugt, Répertoire des catalogues de ventes I (The Hague: 1938) nos 3341 (1781), 3814 (1784), 3879 (9-10 May, 1785), 3882 (11-14 May, 1785), 4022 (April 1786), 4370 (December 1789), 4503 (November 1789). Sales listed by Lugt sourced from the records of Hofstede de Groot have not been located or confirmed. Peter Murray identified another catalogue which escaped Lugt’s notice, in the National Art Library, dated to 28 February 1795. See Murray, 18. The best-known of the sales, that of 1802, not recorded in Lugt, will be discussed later in this chapter. Lugt’s records show that a last known sale involving Desenfans’s collection of pictures took place took place in March 1873, when paintings owned by a descendent of Desenfans’s wife, a Colonel Morris, came up for auction in London. See Lugt 1938, III, no. 33723.

7 In examining the Burney Collection of newspapers in the British Library, I found five separate notices for two sales of Desenfans collections—a sale of drawings, mounted 9-11 May 1785, and a subsequent sale of pictures on 11-14 May. See the Public Advertiser, the Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser. Further investigation in the collection of newspaper clippings at the National Art Library contained several advertisements for these sales and others promoting viewings, and describing the contents in detail. See National Art Library, Press Cuttings, 2: 302, 304, 306. The specific newspapers from which the clippings were taken are unidentified.

8 The best evidence for this assumption is the Preface to Desenfans’s sale catalogue of 1786, in which he warmly thanks the auctioneer, James Christie, for buying in those pictures of value that threatened to go for paltry sums. The poor results of the sales is in part related to the glut of pictures flooding the market in the last two decades of the eighteenth century, due to political upheavals in France. See A Catalogue of the truly
pictures moving through the sale rooms at this time, as they were typically identified summarily by brief and non-descript titles in advertisements and catalogues, many of Desenfans’s pictures seem to be listed in more than one of his various sales. Nonetheless, there were certainly times when objects moved in and out of Desenfans’s collection with ease through private and public sale, and he seems to have earned enough to sustain his small household in the manner to which they were rapidly becoming accustomed: Desenfans and Bourgeois were able to pursue their social and professional ambitions, while continuing to acquire pictures.  

The two men had the opportunity to befriend the Polish king Stanislaw Augustus Poniatowski through his brother, the Prince Primate, who visited England while in exile from his own country in 1790. The royal family was sufficiently impressed with Desenfans and Bourgeois in capacities both social and professional, and in that same year, they were commissioned by Stanislaw to assemble a collection for him, picking and choosing the best pictures available on the English market at the time. Desenfans was named Consul-General to Poland, while Bourgeois became a Painter to the King.  

Like Stanislaw, Desenfans was a foreigner and outsider who found himself attracted to all things English, and this may have been a factor in the King’s decision to

Superb, and well-known Collection of Pictures...of Monsieur Desenfans (London: 18 April 1786).

9 Though the sums were not always exorbitant, clearly Desenfans made sales. For instance, Farington noted, on 17 May 1797 that “Bourgeois said when Desenfans broke up his collection, Smith laid out 8000 pounds,--Slade about 9000 pounds,--Lord Lansdowne made it up 25000 pounds.” The particular details of their respective purchases are not specified. See Farington, 3: 840.

10 Butterwick, 218-219.

11 Bourgeois was also inducted in an Order which carried with it a knighthood. He appealed to George III and was granted permission to use this title while in England. See Waterfield 1989, 38.
retain his services. It is also possible that Desenfans’s connections with French collectors and dealers—receiving and moving works for them at seemingly regular intervals—made him a desirable and appropriate contact, and enhanced for Stanislaw his professional reputation as a dealer.\(^\text{12}\) Stanislaw was well-informed on the state of the art market and the pictures flooding into England from the collections of European aristocrats and émigrés. From the 1770’s he had been trying to acquire works by his favourite artists through contacts in England, and in Desenfans he identified another opportunity to pursue this aim.\(^\text{13}\) An active network of buyers and agents worked on Stanislaw’s behalf in many cities, including Paris, Naples, Genoa, Venice, Amsterdam, Stockholm, Berlin and Dresden.

Stanislaw was a serious collector, and his was certainly a working collection.\(^\text{14}\) As essays in the Dulwich Picture Gallery Catalogue for its exhibition, *Treasures of a Polish King*, demonstrate he collected sales catalogues, and inventories of collections in Europe whenever possible, using them for comparative purposes to better determine the

\(^\text{12}\) The archives at Dulwich College contain correspondence between Desenfans and the French picture dealer, J.P. LeBrun, discussing ongoing sales each was engaged in, and inventories of pictures. Lebrun to Desenfans, 25 February 1789, and LeBrun to Desanfans, 14 December 1789. See Warner, 212-219. Desenfans was also a friend and associate of Charles-Alexandre de Calonne, apparently from their school days at Douai. Farington had from Bourgeois that dinner parties at Desenfans’s home frequently included “Frenchmen of distinction” who may also have bought and sold parts of their collections through Desenfans. See Farington, 2: 1795.

\(^\text{13}\) A Tadeusz Burzynski was in England in the early 1770’s, specifically with instructions to acquire pictures by Anthony Van Dyck on behalf of Stanislaw; he was not successful. Butterwick, 218.

\(^\text{14}\) Nineteenth-century authors, such as Anna Jameson and George Redford, asserted that Stanislaw was intending to open a Polish Royal Academy, and use as its basis his royal collection. Certainly, plans were proposed in 1766 and 1777 to formally establish a royal academy at Warsaw, and the effort was renewed in the early 1790’s. J. Wazbinski, “Projet de l’établissement d’une Académie Royale de Peinture et Sculpture dans la Ville de Varsovie…,” in Academies of Art, ed. Anton W.A. Boschloo et al (The Hague: SDU Uitdeverij, 1989), 406-433.
kinds of works and artists that were valued, and what might come available on the market. He also worked closely with a series of advisors who helped manage his collection—in terms of his own expenditures, advice on gaps which he might wish to fill, and the organization of pieces once they were acquired.\textsuperscript{15} He was keen to share the collection’s resources, and to encourage the development of arts in his country and bring them in line with contemporaneous artistic production in other countries. The Parliament, or ‘Seym’ of the country heavily curtailed Stanislaw’s political authority, and as a result his efforts seem to have been redirected towards cultural improvements that he was in a position to shape. His cultural efforts were informed by his experiences during his youthful travels to Paris, London, Austria and St. Petersburg.\textsuperscript{16}

An inventory from 1795 reveals that an impressive range of drawings, prints and engravings, Old Master pictures, numismatic objects, and the odd cast or copies after examples of ancient art could be found in his collection, and it was his intention that these objects provide his country’s native artists with references and models for their own works, particularly as inspiration for composition, and reference for costume. Some 70,000 prints were arranged in 400 albums, having been divided into subject groups including “Antiquities”, “Portraits”, “Military subjects”, “Works by Old Masters”, and “Architectural views”. Over 2,000 paintings and several hundred miniatures and coloured drawings in pastel and gouache demonstrate the king’s keen interest in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century pictures from the French, Flemish, English and

\textsuperscript{15} Dulwich, Dulwich Picture Gallery. \textit{Treasures of a Polish King: Stanislaus Augustus as Patron and Collector}, exhib. cat. (Dulwich: Dulwich Picture Gallery, 1992), 32-36. Hereafter identified as Dulwich, \textit{Treasures}....

\textsuperscript{16} See Dulwich, \textit{Treasures}..., 21 and 26-27.
Dutch schools. Smaller in number, though clearly to the King’s taste, were examples of Italian pictures of the High Renaissance.\footnote{Stanislaw’s activities as a collector and the objects of his collection are discussed in Dulwich, Treasures..., 32-36, and in Butterwick. On the basis of a 1795 inventory, a number of first-rate pictures can be identified, including Rembrandt’s so-called \textit{Polish Rider} (c. 1655, Frick Collection, New York) and several other works attributed to Correggio, Guido Reni, the Carracci, Titian and Veronese.}

Stanislaw’s picture collection was strongest in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French and Dutch works. Desenfans was seemingly free to purchase the best examples from every national (and in the case of Italian works, regional) school of painting available, according to his own opinions and judgments. Dutch and Flemish pictures were the focus of his purchasing, determined both by what was available on the market and by Desenfans’s belief that Italian paintings were easier to forge, evidenced in part by the proliferation of them on the British market.\footnote{Desenfans, \textit{A Descriptive Catalogue with Remarks and Anecdotes never before published in English of some Pictures, of the Different Schools…} (London: 1802). His opinions on the ease of forgery with Italian pictures comes from notion that not many were actually available to be seen by the London public; specifically those who had not been able to travel abroad or who had no access to public collections. Dutch pictures, so Desenfans suggests, were more familiar to British connoisseurs and thus more easily observable and likely to be authentic. The 1802 catalogue is discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.}

In the mid 1790’s the fragile political situation in Poland finally collapsed under Russian authority, and Stanislaw was forced to abdicate in 1795.\footnote{In the London newspaper, \textit{The Observer}, on 25 March 1795, issue 173, part of a letter from the “Unfortunate Stanislaus to the Empress of Russia” was reproduced, announcing his resignation of his crown.} It became clear that the King would neither be able to receive the paintings nor pay for them, and when he died in 1798, Desenfans was left with the 180 or so pictures he had collected on Stanislaw’s behalf. He appealed initially to the English Ambassador to Russia, and then directly to the new Tsar, Paul—sweetening the pot with additional paintings purchased...
after Stanislaw’s deposition—in the hopes that the arrangements made with the former
King of Poland would be honoured, and his debts paid. These endeavours proved
fruitless, though, and traditional literature has Desenfans trying to offload this collection
in England first en bloc and eventually, piece by piece, for the rest of his life, until, at the
death of his friend Bourgeois, the pictures become the focus of a new, purpose-built
gallery at Dulwich.

In fact, more than a dozen years passed between the collapse of Desenfans’s
arrangement with the Polish King and the establishment of the Dulwich Picture Gallery,
and subsequent arrangements for the collection assembled by Desenfans and Bourgeois
to be installed there. During that time, Desenfans pursued business opportunities,
continued to orchestrate his and Bourgeois’s professional and social success, and may
even have contemplated keeping the whole collection of pictures for himself. These
events, and others, might combine to give us a different lens through which to examine
the impulse for establishing public collections in England at the time, and the kinds of
people who contributed to it.

In the most recent complete catalogue issued by the Dulwich Picture Gallery,
Desenfans’s is described as being “active as a picture dealer from the 1770s”, and:

> in 1790-5 he was engaged in assembling a collection of old master
pictures for the King of Poland. However, because of the King’s forced
abdication in 1795, this was never delivered. After failing to persuade the
Government to establish a British National Gallery; and finding himself
unable to dispose of his collection on satisfactory terms, Desenfans

---

20 Dulwich College Archives contain two handwritten copies of Desenfans’s account of
these protracted enquiries to the Russian Emperor Paul I, which may have served as
partial drafts for the introduction to the extensive sale catalogue he published in 1802.
See Desenfans to Paul I, 6 May 1798, Item 2a MS XVI f40r & f40v, Archives, Dulwich
College, London. See also Warner, 220.
bequeathed the pictures to his friend Sir Francis Bourgeois, who in turn bequeathed them to Dulwich College.”  

Of course the whole story cannot be recounted each time: when text has to perform specific functions, efficiency and brevity are sometimes necessary. This perfunctory summary of the two men and their collection represents a standard account that is often pressed into service as a springboard from which to discuss the establishment of the Dulwich Picture Gallery. But when sifting through the details of what remains to us, the reality seems to have been significantly more dynamic. I am particularly interested in another, equally understudied aspect of the activities of Desenfans and Bourgeois, one that begins more specifically with Desenfans, and possibly with his decision in 1796 to keep the putative Polish Royal Collection.

In William Roberts’s 1896 account of the partnership of Desenfans and Bourgeois in his Memorials of Christie’s, the author focuses his attention on the period after Desenfans’s death in 1807, during which all the pictures were left jointly to his widow and to Bourgeois, and eventually, came to form part of what was bequeathed to Dulwich College expressly for the establishment of a public gallery. But there is a curious statement that is more or less thrown away by Roberts: “In 1799 [Desenfans] published a plan for the advancement of the fine arts in England, by the establishment of a National Gallery. If the scheme was carried out, he offered to contribute liberally to it in pictures.

---

21 Beresford, DPG28, 169.
22 In a conversation of 21 March 1796, after visiting the house of Desenfans and Bourgeois, Farington reported that the “collection of Pictures is now completely arranged [and] is very fine. Sir Francis told me that it was intended for the King of Poland; but that He, Mr. D. has now resolved never to part with one of them.” See Farington, 2:512.
Roberts’s brief description reveals nothing further, but rather moves perfunctorily into a discussion of Desenfans’s death and the details of his bequest. This is perhaps not entirely surprising: whereas Desenfans was not able to implement his plan, the significant bequest to Dulwich College had in fact occurred, less than a hundred years previously.

Desenfans’s proposal, *A Plan... to Preserve Among Us, and Transmit to Posterity, the Portraits of the Most Distinguished Characters of England, Scotland, and Ireland,* incorporates a number of interesting facets, ostensibly for the encouragement and betterment of the production and reception of the fine arts in Great Britain [Appendix D].

The *Plan* was published in 1799 after a brief flurry of promotional discussion in Desenfans’s complicated social circle. Joseph Farington records several instances in which Desenfans, with the help of Bourgeois, distributed the proposal personally to several members of the Royal Academy and other people whose support he sought.

Desenfans proposed that Great Britain seize the opportunity to establish a first-rate picture gallery of nationally-recognized heroes, and historic events, and in so doing, opportunities for the regular employment of the current school of English painters. He also suggested that, as this documentation of noteworthy events and personalities got underway, other public galleries of fine art objects of the highest quality could also be established by donation from collectors. Through the establishment of these new

---

23 Roberts 1:40. The earlier source by George Redford, also on eighteenth- and nineteenth century art sales, makes no mention of the Plan, nor does Anna Brownell Jameson in the extensive pre-history of the Dulwich Picture Gallery. See Redford, 1: 42-45, and Jameson, 435-478. While the Plan has been mentioned in passing in a number of more recent studies, it is rarely discussed.

24 *Desenfans 1799.*

galleries, Desenfans sought to facilitate a celebration of the history of British heroes and their deeds for posterity, to encourage the range of skill and quality in British arts and manufacture, and to provide education and employment for contemporary English artists, helping them master skills by making available fine examples from all genres from which they could glean inspiration and practical training. None of this, he suggested, would require the financial involvement of either Parliament or the Crown.

The Plan is divided into two parts. In the first part, Desenfans provides a review of the state of the fine arts in England, establishes his inspiration and motivation for the proposal, its probable benefits for diverse groups, and demonstrates how its implementation would enable Britain to distinguish itself against other countries in terms of the encouragement of the fine arts, and the commemoration of its own history. The second part of the proposal details, in a series of twelve points, the means by which the Plan might be put into action by retaining artists to increase production of works for display, and generating revenue to pay for development and maintenance.

“Guarded with a Jealous Care”: Commemoration and Preservation for the Nation in Desenfans’s Plan

Desenfans also attempts to anticipate and address possible criticisms to the plan. He contrives to ingratiate himself and flatter his audience of adopted countrymen from the outset by attempting to demonstrate to his readers how attuned he is to events in British history and to the country’s heroes. He states that the idea to develop his proposal occurred to him while musing about the inspirational potential of the impending erection of several monuments to British military heroes on the grounds of St. Paul’s Cathedral.
“I felt a secret pleasure”, he says, “on reflecting, that those brave officers, who fell in defense of their king and country, will live in marble, and serve as memorials of patriotism, loyalty, and heroism.” He laments the lack of a portrait gallery, and speculates on the benefits both to morale and to the general well-being of the people of Britain. The establishment of a commemorative gallery would set Britain apart from other nations, he argues, to have portraits of noble military men and “distinguished characters” assembled “in order to afford us the daily enjoyment of them, and be transmitted collectively to posterity.”

Desenfans maintains that such commemoration is of particular importance, for, while the families of such men might revere their memories and care for portraits in their lifetimes, the fate of such objects and histories might be lost at the hands of unscrupulous descendents, “and those portraits which should be guarded with a jealous care, and excite public admiration, may be fated to moulder into dust at the door of a broker’s shop”. To gather the pictures together, and present them in such a way that a consistent heroic narrative might be preserved for the nation is a course of action that Desenfans seems to have anticipated would appeal to the sense of anxiety amongst collectors about their material legacies.

The other great impetus for the Plan identified by Desenfans is to sustain the growing momentum for interest in the fine arts in Britain. Desenfans expresses the idea that, for arts and manufacture to flourish, people must have access to inspirational and

---

26 Desenfans 1799, 26.
27 Ibid., 3.
28 Ibid., 3.
noble examples—very much in keeping with Stanislaw’s own ideas, and his intentions for the collection Desenfans assembled for him.

Desenfans provides a patchy history of the arts in England, using as his starting points the respective courts of (Tudor) King Henry VIII, and (Stuart) King Charles I. In Desenfans’s narrative, these two monarchs represent the only bright spots in an otherwise dim history for the arts in England in general, until the advent of the Royal Academy. Desenfans describes the noble efforts of native English painters, struggling against a lack of proper patronage, support and even instruction, until the establishment of the Royal Academy in 1768. Taking for example the reputation and successful career enjoyed by the recently deceased Joshua Reynolds, Desenfans demonstrates how a British school of painting was at last beginning to flourish with the structure provided by the institution.

This brief history is designed to give Desenfans the opportunity to discuss the power and potential of good painting to represent the noble histories and display the best talents of a country. However, in England, he identifies a prejudice against the works of modern artists, which he traces to the deposition of King Charles I in 1642. The events surrounding Charles’ removal from the throne and subsequent execution, and the dismantling of both his court and collection, removed from England the presence of any eminent painter of the past, as well as evidence of those presences. In the absence of access to appropriate examples, he suggests, painters set to work with no proper instruction or models to guide them. By comparison with artists of the English courts prior to the Restoration, such as Hans Holbein, Peter Paul Rubens and Anthony Van Dyck, British artists could not hope to be received favourably: all modern productions
were judged unfairly against that standard from which they had little opportunity to benefit.

With the revival of the fine arts established by the creation of the Royal Academy, Desenfans identifies the potential to turn the whole process not only to cultural and social advantage but also to practical and commercial ends. A poor showing of cultural holdings compromises the reputation of the country, he argues, to itself as well as to other powers on which it seeks to make a meaningful impression.

After this lengthy ‘Review of the Arts’, Desenfans delves into the specifics in the second part of his proposal, laying out several steps by which his vision may be implemented, and anticipating possible criticisms with ready answers.

Having shown how periodic attempts in the past to cultivate the arts have made slow progress, Desenfans attempts to instill a sense of urgency in his audience in this second section of the plan, and continues to reinforce the cultural lacunae he identified in the first part. He wastes no time reminding the reader that Great Britain alone of all the great countries of Europe has no splendid collection of “superbly costly pictures, for the enjoyment of the sovereign, and to which, now and then, the public are permitted access.”

Desenfans professes an understanding of the budgetary restrictions on the King, that the Royal allowance is so small that the possibility of establishing a Gallery “such as France possessed, and such as are in Vienna, Spain and other countries, whose monarchs
have absolute control of the public money” would be impossible.\textsuperscript{30} He makes pointed references to the few “capital pictures” the king had scattered in different locations, including the Raphael Cartoons, but explains that, even if assembled in a single location, the English Royal Collection could not come close to rivaling those of the Louvre, and Escorial, and many princely collections of Europe in terms of scale and scope.

Desenfans makes particular mention of the Orléans Collection, large portions of which was exhibited and sold in London in between 1792 and 1799, and how it had presented an opportunity to “fulfill at once the wishes of the Student and the Connoisseur…”.

…but I am informed those pictures have been offered to Government, and that, on account of the necessities of the State, it has been judged proper to decline the purchase. Therefore, since that grand object cannot be obtained at once, we must endeavour to obtain it gradually; and for that purpose I have traced a plan, by which, without any expence to Government, Great Britain will acquire a Gallery of the Portraits of our most distinguished characters, since the accession of his Majesty to the throne; another with the productions of our Historical, Battle, Landscape, Sea, and Miniature Painters, Sculptors, and Engravers; and a third Gallery with Antiques, and celebrated Pictures of the Old Masters.\textsuperscript{31}

Speculation about a possible purchase of the Flemish and Dutch portion of the Orléans collection seems to have been quashed in the early 1790’s.\textsuperscript{32} Additionally, Desenfans does not seem to have been aware at the time the plan went to press, that Benjamin West, then President of the Royal Academy, had unsuccessfully attempted to

\textsuperscript{30} The impossibility Desenfans refers to has its basis in the dispersal of the royal collection by the Commonwealth Protectorate, after the execution of Charles I. See MacGregor 1989.
\textsuperscript{31} Desenfans 1799, 33
negotiate the purchase of 150 Italian pictures for the use of the Academicians and their students.\textsuperscript{33}

Desenfans’s point was an important one, nonetheless: opportunities such as that posed by the Orléans sales, to acquire large numbers of fine pictures of distinguished provenance \textit{en bloc}, were few and far between, and perhaps other measures, which would complement the other elements of the Plan, should be undertaken. In addressing the growing concern of many collectors by providing an opportunity to preserve the best parts of their collections from vagaries of time and the fickleness of their heirs, Desenfans suggested a way through which many different purposes could be satisfied.

In the course of the twelve separate articles of the Plan, he suggested that all of these various elements could be established for the betterment of the arts in Britain, if implemented around the already established British Museum. He acknowledges that his plan, which would involve such things as implementing revisions to the system for admission to the museum, and establishing a new salaried position of director to oversee expanded management of the new facets of the collection, could not be carried into practice without an act of legislature. In recognition of this need, the pamphlet was dedicated to the kind consideration of the current Trustees of the Museum. So sure was he that these twelve steps would facilitate the undertaking of the Plan, that he had them published in the London papers early in 1799.\textsuperscript{34} The newspaper coverage was also addressed to the Trustees.

\textsuperscript{33} Farington, 4:1132.
\textsuperscript{34} See National Art Library \textit{Press Cuttings}, 3:792. An abbreviated version was also published a few days later: See \textit{Press Cuttings}, 3:806
“Nothing is Good but what is Old”: Ascribing National Value to Old Master Pictures

Given his personal and professional interests in Old Master pictures, it is not surprising that Desenfans attempted to focus the attention of his readers towards the importance of recognizing good pictures and bad, and the ramifications this could have for a nation if its collectors did not know the difference. It was insufficient to have a superficial grasp of the idea that “nothing is good but what is old,” for this situation on the art market was complicated. Desenfans issued this remark in the context of cautioning the ignorant against buying contemporary pictures that had been made to look old by forgers and frauds, and this could be extended to support the value of his entire proposal, that the greater exposure all collectors had to genuine examples, the chances of being duped were significantly lessened. The value of a national collection of Old Master pictures as conceived by Desenfans was thus expressed in this circular manner: a national collection established by donations of high quality examples could in turn educate collectors who might then later make donations themselves.

Given his recent failed arrangement with the King of Poland, Desenfans must have been keenly aware that even the best laid plans of collectors were subject to change, and a particularly legitimate concern was the potential problems of leaving pictures and objects of value to heirs and descendents who might not care for them. He makes a very impassioned case in the flowery prose that he favoured, to express the importance of art and its particular value to the collector:

35 Desenfans 1799, 24.
...[H]owever precious that metal [gold] is, the superiority of fine pictures over it, is beyond comparison. The possessor of gold shares it in common with thousands; but, an original picture cannot be in two places, its proprietor may boast its exclusive enjoyment.

A connoisseur, who is true lover of the art, dreads nothing more than the dissolution of his cabinet after his decease: it is natural enough to carry, even beyond life, our attachment to such innocent amusements as have contributed to render it agreeable.

The connoisseur may, it is true, order in his will, that his collection shall not be sold; but the testator, who considers such a restriction necessary, must have perceived that his legacy would give his heirs no gratification; it is like bequeathing a man a house, in which he is determined never to live, and which you bind him down neither to let nor sell.\footnote{Desenfans 1799, 45-6.}

The great risk of such arrangements, Desenfans seems to be saying, is that they might ultimately serve no one. By invoking his earlier comments about paintings being left to molder in shops, uncared for and underappreciated, he signifies the extent to which he privileges this issue of the burden of the care of paintings. Such unnecessary waste of the objects of taste and the emblems of a collector’s legacy could be avoided, if only there were a repository to which collectors could bequeath their pictures—objects that, at the time Desenfans was writing, not even the law could protect:

A gentleman some years since, who, I understand, had no near relations, left a collection of considerable value, the sale of which was prohibited in his will, in the most positive and direct terms; it was notwithstanding, sold: as the legislature, doubtless for good reasons, annulled the restriction. I mention the circumstance, only to suggest, that had the establishment I now propose existed at that time, the testator would, probably, have enriched it with the gift of his pictures, which were sold for the comparatively paltry sum of eight or ten thousand pounds, although a great part of them were immediately after resold at very high prices to foreigners, who carried them to Paris, where they are now placed in the new Public gallery of the Louvre.\footnote{Emphasis in the original. Desenfans 1799, 47.}
The power of such an anecdote for the purposes of Desenfans’s plan does not depend on its truthfulness; simply conjuring the possibility (enabled equally by notorious sales past and present such as those of Charles I, and the Walpole Collection, as well as the more modest examples written up in the newspapers) would be sufficiently disturbing as to prompt the concern Desenfans intended it to. It speaks not to those who would have had, or imagined opportunities to purchase, items from reputable collections, but rather from the perspective of those collectors who would not want their goods dissembled or dismantled in the first place.

Desenfans proceeds to address a specific contemporary example, supposing that, had the suitable repository existed:

…the late Earl of Orford, who collected with great judgment, would have bequeathed his pictures to his country; for nothing is more flattering to a collector, than the objects of his curiosity and amusement should afford pleasure to others.\(^{38}\)

There is no evidence that Horace Walpole would have had any such intention: the time and care that he devoted to the installation of his collection of pictures and ephemera at his home, Strawberry Hill, demonstrate that he meant the items to stay there, especially given the fate that so disappointed him of the sale of his father’s collection to Catherine the Great. Conjuring the possibility, nonetheless, would have been sufficient to make Desenfans’s point.

\(^{38}\) Desenfans 1799, 47. Desenfans refers here not to Robert Walpole, but his son Horace, who had died two years earlier. Walpole intended to leave his own collection intact and *in situ* when he bequeathed his ‘little gothic castle’ at Strawberry Hill to his close friend, Anne Seymour Damer. His collection was eventually broken up and sold off in 1842. See Twickenham, Orleans House Gallery, *Horace Walpole and Strawberry Hill*, exhib. cat. (Twickenham: Orleans House Gallery, 1980).
By referring to a recent and specific example, spurious or otherwise, Desenfans is attempting to shift emphasis away from the market value of a picture, or what it might command through private sale. He urges his readers towards thinking about a different kind of value, that of collections kept intact as memorials to their owners and for the benefit of others. The money to be made at sales might well be incomparable to the overarching cultural value of a good collection, and to the possibilities for instruction and enjoyment when the integrity of collections is maintained, and made accessible to various publics.

The dissolution of collections, and the potentially embarrassing problems that might result from lack of their appropriate care was both a subject of amusement and a cause for concern the late eighteenth-century, as this contemporary newspaper article reveals:

A Gentleman very lately bought, at an auction of pictures, a head of an old man, that happened to please his fancy, for which he paid a pretty large sum. On a particular survey of it at home, he found it was the picture of his own grandfather, which he had sold some years before, among other family pictures, for a third part of what he paid for this alone”.\(^{39}\)

As in Desenfans’s own anecdote, cited earlier, neither the foolish man nor the painting are identified, and the incident itself may or may not have been true. What is clear through such anecdotes is that such events had entered into the public discourse. The very suggestion that something so embarrassing could happen would have resonated with collectors as a kind of cautionary tale: were their own treasures safe? One needed only to look at the newspapers replete with similar anecdotes for the amusement of their readerships, to see the silliness (and loss to both finances and reputation) that could

\(^{39}\) See National Art Library Press Cuttings, 2:564. Mounted with items hand-dated to the spring of 1790.
occur, when proper care was not taken to ensure the future of one’s collection and its legacy.

Though it is at times quite convoluted, Desenfans’s plan presents a particular and focused message, one which he intended to inspire in his readers a sense of patriotism, duty and the spectre of lost opportunities, while asserting his own willingness to participate in a solution agreeable to all. In congratulating Britons on their patriotism, he begins to lay the foundation for a plan that will encourage yet more patriotism and generosity, in the field of the fine arts. The proposal itself seems to proclaim that all paintings, and perhaps even all artists and their publics, need to be “guarded with a jealous care.”

Through his overtly expressed themes of patriotism, commemoration, and national reputation, Desenfans does a tidy job of advocating for the arts. Patriotism is the conduit through which Desenfans sought to introduce and make appealing the various aspects of his plan: commemoration, innovation and commercialism. What is introduced in the first instance as due tribute to British heroes presented in a way that would enable contemporary publics to see a commemorative narrative within a controlled space, guarding against the possibility for people and deeds to be contained or even lost within the histories of individual families. Desenfans proposes that the very personal matter of preserving private collecting legacies be expanded, in the name of publicly encouraging the arts.

Desenfans’s plan seems to have been a regular topic of conversation among the complicated network of artists, patrons, and critics whom Desenfans counted among his friends, acquaintances and enemies. As revealed in the diary of Joseph Farington, it
became a kind of lightening rod for different issues relating to the arts in the 1790’s, and
even, at times, for a raft of private and political agendas. However, in spite of its
relatively wide promotion and the acknowledgement of its merits, the proposal was never
seriously considered for implementation by those in a position to do so.

On 6 January 1799, Farington noted that he had dined with several others at
Desenfans’s home, and that Desenfans informed the party that he had written a pamphlet
on the subject of encouraging the arts. 40 By the ninth of the month, Farington noted in
his diary that Bourgeois dropped by leave him a proof copy of Desenfans’s plan. 41 It
seems to have been a frequent topic of discussion at social and business gatherings for
several weeks following.

In a letter to Desenfans following his reception of the document, Farington
expressed his hearty support of the ideas expressed therein:

Dear Sir, I have read with great pleasure your proposal for promoting the
Arts in Great Britain. The Plan is simple and might, with so little
preparation or difficulty, be carried into execution so as to ascertain its
effect, that it seems only to require to be determined upon. I am too much
interested in the prosperity of the Arts not to be particularly gratified by
the warm and intelligent manner in which you exhibit its solid advantages
which a nation may derive from their being liberally cultivated. It is
certain that the vulgar notion of the fine arts goes no farther than to
consider them as elegant amusements purchased at a considerable
expense. To prove, therefore, to a Commercial people that by contributing
to support the Arts they are encouraging what will enrich as well as
embellish their country is to present the subject to them in a new light,
which must operate powerfully and usefully on every reflecting mind.
The noble and lasting reward you propose for brave, and able men would
stimulate valour and improve morality.

Thus concurring with you in sentiments I hope that your pamphlet will
have the appropriate effect on the minds of the British Museum. But,

40 Farington, 4: 1129.
41 Ibid., 4: 1130.
should they require to be still further urged on the subject, I shall think very indifferently of our great men who profess to estimate the Arts at their just value if they have not zeal and patriotism sufficient to induce them to press the Trustees to adopt a Plan which would produce such extensive benefits.—I am, Dear Sir, Your obliged and obedient Servt. J.F. Jany 12th, 99.42

Farington’s impressions (at least initially, and as he shared them with Desenfans) were enthusiastic and favourable, and reflect what Desenfans must have hoped would be the universal opinion. Farington could see no reason the plan would not be immediately adopted by those who supported the arts and were sufficiently forward-thinking to imagine the great benefits its implementation of would bring to so many branches of arts and commerce in Britain. And, as Desenfans deliberately contrived, the patriotic note was struck—what true Briton could refuse or deny the merits of such a plan?

On 16 January, promotional notices advertising the plan, with sections liberally cited, began to appear in London’s newspapers, proclaiming:

The want of a NATIONAL REPOSITORY for the Arts of this Country has been often lamented by Men of Taste and enlightened Patriots. The ROYAL ACADEMY is indeed an admirable School for British Genius, and has, in a considerable degree, tended to draw forth the talents of our Countrymen, and to advance the arts of painting. Still, however, there is wanting a NATIONAL GALLERY for the admission of all the remains of Antiquity in Sculpture, and the works of the celebrated artists of the Flemish and Italian Schools. Mr. DESENFANS, a GENTLEMAN well-known to the World for his great knowledge and liberal patronage of the arts, and who possesses one of the first private Collections of Pictures in this Country, has recently submitted to the World a Plan, addressed to the Trustees of the British Museum, by which such an Institution might be established, without any expense, but such as may be drawn from the voluntary contributions of mere curiosity and public taste. 43

42 Ibid., 4: 1133.
43 Hand-dated newspaper article, dated to 16 January 1799. See National Art Library, Press Cuttings, 3: 792. In the days and weeks following, this article continued to be published in an abbreviated form.
The plan, with all its twelve points reproduced, was recommended to “all who are ambitious of a cultivated taste.” Desenfans likely placed and paid for the article himself, thus it is not surprising to read that he is lauded for the “many sound arguments” presented, which “prove its practicability”.

In addition to the newspaper exposure, Desenfans, with the assistance of Bourgeois, continued to make the plan available to many associates both within the Royal Academy and with other institutions, and to court approval and support from as many likely sources as they could.44 Farington’s journal entries indicate that he was advising the two on who they might approach to best advantage, and whether or not other ambassadors for the plan should be pressed into service.45

As the plan circulated, though, it became clear that not everyone found it as appealing as Desenfans had hoped. Farington writes of an encounter with Henry Tresham (1750-1814), a Royal Academician and history painter, who observed that the plan “was well meant”, but spoke “as if insuperable difficulties were in the way” of its execution.46 Farington does not elaborate on what those difficulties might have been, but two days later, at a larger gathering that included critic and author Edmund Malone, a clearer idea begins to emerge:

The subject of Desenfans pamphlet was talked of.—Malone said He had talked on the subject to a Trustee of the Museum who said that some years ago something of the same kind was proposed, which caused the Archbishop of Canterbury to call a meeting of the Trustees who decided against it.—Desenfans said that was on acct. of a proposal to the Duke of

44 Farington’s diary entries for the months of January and February 1799 indicate that Desenfans was throwing dinner parties, with the purpose of discussing the plan with his carefully chosen guests, and Bourgeois was being sent around to various parties, hand delivering the pamphlet. Farington, 4: 1133-1159.
46 Ibid., 4: 1134.
Richmond to sell his collection of Statues to the Nation to be placed in the British Museum.

This suggests that there were several other, competing, possibilities underway, as well as fear that, despite Desenfans’s careful explanation to the contrary, there would a great deal of expense involved. Soon thereafter, and perhaps now influenced by the cooler opinions of friends and acquaintances, even Farington’s thinking on the matter had shifted:

—I gave as my opinion that such measures as that of Mr. Desenfans could only be carried...by possessing the minds of Mr. Long, Mr. Rose and such persons as are abt. and familiar with Mr. Pitt, and who in their domestic intercourse satisfy him of the advantages which wd. result from such a scheme.—That I wd. give up every idea of interfering with the establishment of the British Museum, as the opposition of the Trustees wd. in a great measure be avoided...  

James Northcote, too, expressed the opinion that Trustees of the Museum “were sure to oppose any scheme which proposed to alter their establishment”, and Benjamin West concurred.  

Many agreed that the ideas expressed in the plan had significant potential, but not all agreed on the best way to implement it, or even on the location of the proposed galleries. The artist John Hoppner, after a lunch with Lord Gower and Charles Long, reported their suppositions that “the [British] Museum [was] a wrong place” for them, suggesting instead that something of the kind should be established in affiliation with the Royal Academy.  

Farington, in a letter to Desenfans, speculated that the latter would “hear nothing but approval of the plan except from narrow-minded persons, or from

47 Charles Long (1760-1838), member of the Committee of Taste, and active in the British Institution after its establishment in 1806.  
48 Farington, 4: 1137.  
49 Ibid., 4: 1137.  
50 Ibid., 4: 1152.
others who though satisfied of its utility will conceal their sentiments from an apprehension of being required to exert themselves in forwarding it.”

It is true that implementing the plan would have involved significant effort from a number of quarters. Restructuring the way the British Museum existed physically, and engineering a massive overhaul of the existing operations and management would have been required. The plan involved the addition of staff members, the convening of committees, an adapted seasonal operating schedule, and the addition of an entrance fee, similar to that which had contentiously been recently established for the annual exhibitions at the Royal Academy.

Though already under criticism from a number of quarters, operations at the British Museum were slow to progress in any capacity until 1805. Funding had been inadequate almost since its establishment. MP’s had periodically asked for improved budgets to allow improvements in the maintenance. The arrangement of the exhibits was often deemed confusing to visitors; the staff not necessarily reliable or helpful; and the rules obtaining entrance, restrictive.

While money was occasionally made available by way of parliamentary grant for the purchase of collections, little was done to accommodate any incoming objects once acquired. Donations increased the museum’s holdings, and, while by the early

51 Ibid., 4: 1139.
52 See Murdoch, 20-21.
53 See Chapter Two, 56-7, and Appendix B.
54 See Crook, 63-65. The problems of access and arrangement in the British Museum were sufficiently well known such that the novelist Tobias Smollett could have his Mr. Bramble offer an opinion of them in The Expedition of Humphry Clinker (1771). See also David M. Wilson, The British Museum (London: British Museum Press, 2002), 38.
55 For instance, the purchase of William Hamilton’s collection of antique vases, in 1772. Crook 1972, 67.
nineteenth century it had realized its founders’ aims in assembling impressive collections of antiquities, curiosities and magnificent libraries, poor operations and management of the collections were significant obstacles to the actual accessibility of these collections.

On 17 February 1799, Farington noted that Desenfans had written to him, fearing the existing administrative and budgetary problems at the British Museum might be the biggest obstacle to overcome. Desenfans had met with the Archbishop of Canterbury, who felt that the trustees would not consent to any plan “which interferes with the present establishment of the Museum”.  

In the first place, Desenfans may never have succeeded in introducing the ideas in the appropriate forum. Though he mentions twice in the course of the proposal itself that nothing can be put in motion “without an act of legislature (which he has not the means of soliciting)”, he maintains he will “submit the plan to the trustees of the British Museum—most of whom being men in elevation and power”. He seems to have done so on the assumption that they themselves would do what was necessary to carry the plan into practice. The journalist James Boaden certainly agreed with Royal Academicians West and Northcote that Desensfans had presented the plan in entirely the wrong way, or at the very least, to the wrong people first. West, Farington reports, was the most outspoken on this point:

he was sorry [the proposal] had been published before the purport of it had been stated to the King & Mr. Pitt. If so, the business might have been done & in train in a fortnight, now, as most of the Trustees are set against it, --and the Minister [Pitt] is not likely to forward a scheme proposed so publicly that He cannot have the merit of its having flowed from him, &c. &c.  

56 Farington, 4: 1159.  
57 Ibid., 4: 1137.
It was West’s opinion that seems to have irked Desenfans the most; he and Bourgeois became convinced that West himself was jealous, and wanted any such plans which might have brought such good fortune to the Royal Academy to originate with himself.\textsuperscript{58} West certainly voiced his opinion on more than one occasion that the pamphlet had been published before anything could be discussed with William Pitt or with the King; and had those men been brought onside prior to publication, the pressure for the Trustees of the British Museum to see the positive aspects of the plan would have resulted in a more successful end.\textsuperscript{59} It must have seemed to Desenfans a heavy criticism of his political activities and social acumen.

Farington’s journal entries direct us to many possible reasons why the plan was not accepted. Given the various members of the Royal Academy who saw merit in the plan, one might wonder why it was unable to embrace it towards their own purposes. There was certainly interest amongst many of its members and even some of its affluent patrons, and yet they took no action to bring it to fruition.\textsuperscript{60}

Farington himself seems to have cautioned Bourgeois that they must “take care that the Royal Academy not be injured” by the scheme, and “that it had sometimes been in contemplation to obtain the ground adjoining the Academy and to build a Museum to receive works of Art which may…be purchased, or bequeathed to that institution.”\textsuperscript{61} His

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 4: 1137, 1138 and 1145.
\textsuperscript{59} Farington, 4: 1137.
\textsuperscript{60} On 18 January 1799, Bourgeois reported to Farington that Desenfans had received warm letters expressing approbation of his plan from Sir Jason Lake, Christopher Long, as well as various members of the Royal Academy. See Farington, 4: 1139. A month later, Hoppner told Farington that, while sitting for a portrait, Lord Grenville had spoken of Desenfans’ plan, “and much approved the Idea of a National Gallery”. See Farington, 4: 1159.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 4: 1139-40.
conversation with Bourgeois gives the impression that, if he pursued his ambitions too vigorously, they would run afoul of the Royal Academy’s own vague plans for a similar institution.  

Certain aspects of Desenfans’s plan might have appealed to the Royal Academy more than others, as evidenced by the artist John Hoppner’s thoughts: he suggested that, should the plan fail, “it would answer if artists were to undertake of themselves to paint pictures of great actions and of Men, and stand the chance of an Exhibition for repayment.” His support for the point from which Desenfans began his plan, calling for a commemorative gallery to visually represent the great deeds of the English is clear. That part of the project which guaranteed artist’s employment in the context of a noble cause would have been appreciated; those in which a public collection of Old Masters was constantly on display in facilities quite near the Royal Academy’s own might well have seemed more contentious.

The agenda of the project, and its functionality, would have taken on entirely different dimensions if the plan had been placed in control of the Royal Academy, rather than at the British Museum. Certain aims would be met, in terms of regular employment for many painters, and access to Old Master works to consult for the purposes of instruction: many Academicians believed that study of the Old Master pictures was essential. On the other hand, these same pictures could be understood in two ways: as

62 Ibid., 4: 1140. Royal Academician John Opie and John Flaxman would propose a plan for a “Dome of National Glory”, in 1800, which was envisioned as a Pantheon-like naval monument which would commemorate British heroes, and serve as a British National Gallery. The project, which was lobbied for a number of years, did not come to fruition. See Hoock 2003, 276-285.
63 Farington, 4: 1151.
64 In the years leading up to the formation of the British Institution in the early 1800’s, this sentiment seemed to crystallize. See Pomeroy 1998 and Pullan 1997.
competition for contemporary painters both on the art market, and as unfair standards against which they would be judged.\textsuperscript{65} If Old Master pictures were installed on Royal Academy premises, would they be available for viewing to a public beyond the Academicians? These tensions were unresolved at the time Desenfans’s plan was published, and controversial murmurings about the quality of many of the Orléans pictures would not have helped.\textsuperscript{66}

“\textit{And Better Taste Need not be Enquired After}”: The Playing Out of Desenfans’s Ambitions

Ultimately, it might have been Desenfans himself who was the biggest obstacle to the success of his plan. Newspaper articles, letters, and numerous entries in Farington’s diary all suggest Desenfans occupied a curious place within London’s network of artists, authors, critics, patrons and businessmen.

Desenfans was a compulsive meddler in the affairs of the Royal Academy, particularly in matters related to advancing the career of his friend Bourgeois.\textsuperscript{67} Though it seems that opinions were divided on the matter of Bourgeois’s artistic abilities, Desenfans promoted his young associate’s paintings wherever and whenever possible, including them in sales which were primarily for Old Master pictures, and placing newspaper articles informing the public of Bourgeois’s endeavours, his progress on the

\textsuperscript{65} See Minihan 1977, 2-3. See also Green 1785; and Barry 1798.
\textsuperscript{66} As Jordana Pomeroy has mentioned, the Orléans pictures were not universally admired by the picture-going public. While it is true they constituted one of the first public exhibitions of Old Master pictures in London, and provided an opportunity unlike any the city had previous experienced, the quality and attributions of some of the pictures were much debated. See Haskell 2000, 27-28; and Pomeroy 1997.
\textsuperscript{67} See Farington, 4: 1198; 6: 2160 and 2223.
works he was engaged in for upcoming exhibitions at the Royal Academy, and any particular endorsement by an esteemed prospective patron.\textsuperscript{68} In August 1790, for instance, the following notice appeared in ‘the Arts’ section of a London newspaper:

\ldots Bourgeois is employed for the next EXHIBITION on a subject, the hints of which were given to him by Captain TOPHAM.—It is the removal of some convicts from an old castle, and the disposition of the figures is beautiful and striking…

Desenfans waxes on about the mood evoked by the picture, by its sensitive treatment of light, and the fine qualities of the work in general. Asserting the undoubted success of the picture, the article proclaims proudly “M. Des Enfans has given it the sanction of his taste, \textit{and better taste need not be enquired after}”.\textsuperscript{69} His inflated opinion not only of his own ability to judge, but also of Bourgeois’s abilities to paint, present direct contrast to other circulating opinions, and undoubtedly drew negative attention to both the artist and his friend.

Though he regularly exhibited at the annual Exhibitions of the Royal Academy from 1779 onwards, it took Bourgeois four separate attempts to struggle into position as an Associate Academician in 1787, and four more rounds of campaigning to be successfully elected as a full member, in 1793.\textsuperscript{70} His success in this endeavour was as

\textsuperscript{68} The \textit{St. James’s Chronicle} criticised Bourgeois’s efforts at the Royal Academy’s exhibition of 1793, stating in the May 9-11 issue that his pictures “injured the general effect” of the whole display. Yet his pictures were owned by the likes of Sir Joshua Reynolds, and he was named landscape painter to George III. In Desenfans’s sale of April 1786, Desenfans lists two works by Bourgeois for sale, amongst Old Master pictures ascribed to Teniers, Rosa and Domenichino. This sale, which listed 420 paintings for sale, contained only 20 works by contemporary artists working in London. See Noel Desenfans, \textit{A Catalogue of the truly Superb, and well-known Collection of Pictures…of Monsieur Desenfans} (London: 18 April 1786).


\textsuperscript{70} Waterfield 1989, 36-37.
important to Desenfans as it was to Bourgeois himself: as Giles Waterfield points out, Desenfans was aware of the ever increasing potential social standing and mobility that association with the Academy afforded its artists, and appears to have fully intended to use his young ward’s connections to further both of their professional and social ambitions.  

Desenfans could be a tireless manipulator who was understood by contemporaries to have used Bourgeois as the voice of his own ambitions.

In an effort to secure to best advantage anything that might promote or support the interests of himself and Bourgeois, Desenfans went above and beyond in his efforts. In addition to finagling invitations to the annual dinners of the Royal Academy, he hosted his own parties, paid social calls, and generally managed to make himself present whenever discussion related to elections and operations at the Royal Academy might take place. Though his machinations were not always successful, Desenfans’s almost constant presence became such a source of frustration and annoyance to West that, eventually, he would make complaints about him directly to King George III.

In addition to his tendency to interfere in matters best left alone, Desenfans’s profession, his status, and his heritage placed him on the fringes of the society within which he seems to have sought acceptance and recognition. Together, these aspects

---

71 Bourgeois acted as an advisor to Desenfans, and sometimes also as a cleaner and restorer of pictures. This is discussed in the Preface to the Sale Catalogue of April, 1786, where Bourgeois’ involvement is referenced as a qualifying safe-guard for Desenfans’ own judgement. He is similarly mentioned in the catalogue of Desenfans’s sale in early 1802, which will be discussed further in Chapter Four. See Noel Desenfans, *A Descriptive Catalogue (with Remarks and Anecdotes never before Published in English) of some Pictures of the Different Schools, purchased for His Majesty the Late King of Poland* (London: 1802).

72 Farington, 4: 1157, 1198-9 and 1335.

73 Farington, 6: 2167.
likely combined to keep him firmly outside of the social boundaries he so hoped to penetrate.

As an art dealer, Desenfans occupied a peculiar position. He dealt in luxury objects that were desired for their taste and refinement, but he was, nonetheless, a merchant of sorts.\textsuperscript{74} He also lacked the practical experience and social connections enjoyed some of his peers.\textsuperscript{75}

Accounts of his early forays into dealing in London suggest he constructed a particular kind of story in which art dealing figured as a stroke of good fortune, which serendipitously evolved into a lucrative enterprise that allowed him to embark on the tasteful pursuits in which he already aspired to engage. It was clear that, at least as early as 1796, in some circles the stories were being turned to less glamourous ends, emphasising Desenfans’s ignorance and his potentially dubious foreign associations. West reported to Farington that, when he left his tutoring posts,

Desenfans knew nothing of pictures. He became a picture Dealer in consequence of having lent some money to a Dutchman who had brought over some pictures, and eventually he purchased them and sold them for 100 pounds profit.

Desenfans’s determination to be two things at once—both a gentleman connoisseur and a successful dealer who could turn a fair profit based on the quality of his goods—put him in a strange position, having neither family connections (that were

\textsuperscript{74} Though the reference does not appear to surface until 1806, Farington was told by the lacemaker George Baker that Desenfans had also dealt in Brussels lace (and perhaps not very successfully). See Farington, 8:2812. Farington and John Smith, author of \textit{Nollekens and his Times}, may have shared a source.

\textsuperscript{75} Arthur Pond is an example of an artist-dealer from the generation previous to Desenfans. Other examples, contemporaries of Desenfans, include Michael Bryan, and Benjamin Vandergucht, who was socially well connected in the circle of the 15\textsuperscript{th} Earl of Shrewsbury. See Whitely 1928, 2: 87.
known or recognized in England at any rate), nor any determinable training in the arts. His position as a dealer set him apart, and he seemed compelled to draw attention to this curious status.

The catalogue for Desenfans’s sale of 18 April 1786 is a prime example. The title page of the catalogue proclaims that the sale will contain “that truly superb, and well-known Collection of Pictures, of the Roman, Venetian, Spanish, French, Flemish, Dutch and English Schools

...amongst which are no less than TEN Landscapes with Cattle and Figures by Berchem, and EIGHT by Teniers: Several Performances by Rubens and Vandyck; An undoubted Picture of Gerard Douw; Some precious Landscapes with Horses and Figures by Wouvermans; Three of Vernet, some of Guido, Caracci, and Salvator Rosa, out of the Palace Barbarini; Three by Morillo; Some of Albano, Poussin, Raphael, Corregio, F. Laura, &c &c with Works of some eminent Masters of the English School. ALSO, Four Performances of Claude le Lorraine; one of which is that well-known and so much Admired Sea Port with the History of St. Ursula, which was purchased Some years ago out of the Palace Barbarini, and is reckoned the finest Picture in Europe.76

In stressing the sale’s strengths, the title page is very much in keeping with those that promoted other sale catalogues of the time. But the preface added by Desenfans was not typical.77 Here Desenfans creates an opportunity to align himself more with the ‘nobility and gentry’ he anticipates will attend his sale, than with fellow dealers. This becomes clear almost from the outset:

In the last year Mr. Desenfans, having formed a design of going to reside in his native country, and consequently of disposing of his pictures, sent the first part of his collection to be sold by auction at Mr. Christie’s rooms; resolving to bring the remainder forward as soon as possible. But the season being then far advanced, when most of the Amateurs were gone into the country, and other circumstances concurring at the time of the sale

76 See Desenfans 1786.
77 This can be observed by surveying other sales at the time, and was noted by Redford in his entry on Desenfans for this very reason. See Redford, 1: 43.
to prevent much company from attending, his friends advised him to postpone the further sale of his collection to the present year.\textsuperscript{78}

Desenfans presents himself here as a gentleman connoisseur rather than a dealer, and has to be advised about his prospects in the sale room because he is unfamiliar with the details. It is revealed that pictures that did not sell in earlier sales will be included:

By the very honourable conduct of Mr. \textit{Christie}, some pictures of value which were on the point of being sold at the greatest loss, were reserved, and are annexed to the present collection, which is now offered to the Public, and which has been considerable enriched since that time by the addition of some valuable pictures of the \textit{Venetian}, \textit{Dutch}, and \textit{English} schools; from the \textit{Barbarini} palace, from the cabinet of a \textit{French} Nobleman, and from the collection of the late Earl of Scarborough. These, joined to the rare productions of the pencil which were before in the possession of Mr. \textit{Desenfans}, form an assemblage of works in this species of art, superior to any that has ever been offered for sale in this country. And whether Mr. \textit{Desenfans} continues in \textit{England}, as he is himself inclined, and is sollicited [sic] by his family and friends, or fixes his residence abroad, he is equally determined to part with his pictures, in which the greatest part of his fortune is vested.\textsuperscript{79}

There is an element of tension here—Desenfans has distanced himself from the selling part of the exercise, in favour of detailing the significant provenance of some of the pictures, the vast sums he has invested in them, and the determination he has to part with the “greatest pictures ever offered for sale” in England. He continues, explaining that the pictures offered for sale

\[ \ldots \text{have been obtained by him at a very high rate, and are known to have been so obtained. He cannot therefore deceive himself altogether with the expectation of not being a loser by some, yet this apprehension may in}\]

\textsuperscript{78} See Desenfans 1786, iii. While the mention of travel might have been true, it need not have been—this was frequently given as the reason which ‘fine collections belonging to gentlemen’ might have to be sold to raise money. As reported in \textit{The Public Advertiser}, 2 May 1785, no. 15894; and 11 May 1785 no. 15982, for two examples related to Desenfans; countless others related to anonymous sales also appeared in the \textit{Public Advertiser}, the \textit{London Chronicle}, and assorted other English newspapers of the time.

\textsuperscript{79} Desenfans 1786, iii.
some respects perhaps be reasonably diminished, without flattering the country unnecessarily, when we consider the difference of circumstances, under which it now presents itself in point of taste, from what has ever marked it in any period of time.\footnote{Desenfans 1786, iii-iv.}

The emphasis is placed squarely on the idea that he spared no expense indicates his desire to be seen as a collector, rather than a dealer. He insists on being represented as someone who simply loves and values pictures and would not buy them for purposes of trade or profit.

Desenfans then presents what might be seen as an early version of that patchy history of the taste for the arts in England that would later appear in his plan, before moving on to discuss the encouragement of the cultural state of affairs in the current reign of George III, beginning with his endorsement of the Royal Academy: “The whole Kingdom hath caught the ardour of his royal example. This love of the arts now animates every part of it.”\footnote{Desenfans 1786, v.}

The preface could easily have concluded with this excursion into flattery of the King’s good influence and enlightened benevolence, but Desenfans chooses to push on, into territory he cannot seem to resist vacillating between the two roles he occupies. In describing his particular understanding of dealers’ practices, he clearly distances himself from those same practices:

Unhappily one cause still retards that knowledge which is so necessary to picture collectors. There are Dealers who chiefly occupy their time in studying deceptions, by introducing copies instead of originals. They employ nefarious artists to make these copies, at a low price, from the works of old masters, and these, when soiled over, varnished, and exposed to the sun, decorate their shops as so many rare productions from foreign cabinets. But these impositions cannot last long, while there is a growing
taste in the country, and while there are among its Gentry such competent judges of the works of real masters…

Desenfans is proud of the collections he put up for sale, and could not resist needling his competition, even as he distances himself from their ranks. By creating this distinction, he intends to situate himself in the latter group of ‘competent judges’, along with those whom he hopes will attend the sale and make purchases.

Yet, towards the end of the preface, he confidently attempts to convince any who might not trust the judgement of a collector alone that the works are first-rate:

In the present collection, Mr. Desenfans would wish it to be considered, that he has not always relied solely on his own judgment, but has consulted as much as possible with the best artists. A good artist though he may not always have the experience of a connoisseur, and therefore may possibly be sometimes deceived respecting a master, yet never can be deceived respecting the merit and purity of a picture. To suppose that an eminent artist is not a judge of a picture in this latter respect, is to deny that Pope and Voltaire were judges of a poem, or Handel and Burney judges of music. If the Connoisseur has any advantage over the Artist, without experience, it is this, that he knows the master by the touch, as any of us know the handwriting of our particular friends.

By stating that he has solicited the advice of qualified others, he attempts to suggest that representatives from both camps—artists as well as connoisseurs and collectors—cannot possibly find fault with the quality of the objects presented for sale.

And, finally, just as he attempted to distance himself from dealers who might hawk fraudulent wares to an unsuspecting public, Desenfans is careful to disassociate himself from the less able collectors, as well, asking,

…who is the Connoisseur? for great numbers will pass for such, who

---

82 Ibid.
83 Desenfans 1786, vii.
have not the least superficial knowledge of a picture. And as these seldom possess less confidence than those who have more real skill, they will sometimes, to shew their importance, turn their backs on a work which feasts the judge’s eye, and bestow the most extravagant encomiums on the mere daubings of the canvas.  

Clearly, Desenfans does not intend himself to be counted among those ‘great numbers’ of charlatans and parvenus.

The preface to the catalogue gave insult to dealers whose reputations had been impugned by Desenfans’ generalized swipe in their direction. Desenfans placed a particularly spirited defence of the preface in the London newspapers, which can only have compounded the initial offense:

What exasperates some of the dealers against the pictures of Mr. Desenfans, arises not only from their being exposed in the catalogue of his preface, but because such a collection being open to public view probably hurts their trade, as an eye that is refined by the sight of a fine pictures will hardly afterwards stoop to look at an inferior one. It is a practice with a picture dealer if he has anything above the common in his possession to conceal it if a collector appears, and after shewing him a parcel of daubs bring it to view, when the comparison heightens it to a wonderful production.

The sheer number of newspaper articles Desenfan seems to have placed on his own behalf suggests a strong desire to be credited with incredible luck, good business sense, and effortless success, but without the stigma of appearing to need to work for any of it. Though countered by equally unflattering articles placed by others, the balance Desenfans attempted to strike presents him as a man possessed both of an innate appreciation for Old Master pictures and all things tasteful, and possessed of astute

84 Ibid.
85 George Redford discusses the preface as “long, and amusing enough in its way; full of flattery…”, but make no particular mention of how Desenfans might have been trying to position himself within it. Redford, 1: 42-3.
judgement in all matters related to art. He manufactured as many sites as possible where such qualities might be proclaimed, even if he had to do so himself.

Notices in the newspapers appeared not only regarding individual pictures, but also when Desenfans made extravagant bulk purchases, sometimes for the purpose of obtaining only the choicest examples.\(^{87}\) For instance, in 1790, it was reported that: “The fine pictures of the DESCENT from the CROSS, which M. Des Enfans has imported, comes, as we understand, from the MESSINA PALACE, where it was placed by GUIDO himself. The dead hue of the flesh, is the finest thing imaginable.”\(^{88}\) He frequently puffed his own acquisitions, and attempted to generate interest in his stock by declaring himself unwilling to part with certain pictures in spite of claims of lucrative offers made by other collectors. In an undated clipping from another London newspaper, we find the following short article:

Mr. Desenfans pretends, that his newly acquired Picture of Poussin, called La Vierge aux Enfants, stands him so high, that he could not accept the offer of One Thousand Guineas, which was made him in Pictures by Mr. West, nor of the same offer which was made him in case by Sir Joshua Reynolds. However, the fact is, Mr. Desenfans, eager to possess this Poussin, could not let it go without purchasing the whole Collection in which it was in Paris, but conceiving that the expences [sic]of carriage and duties would amount very high for the whole, he ordered the Poussin to be sent to him, and the other Pictures to be disposed of there, the Sale of which, it is said, turned out so lucky, that the Poussin, it is supposed, does not cost him now twenty pounds; yet the Gentleman cannot think of taking One Thousand Guineas!\(^{89}\)

\(^{87}\) It was noted in another newspaper that “MR. DESENFANS did not add to his Collection all the Italian Pictures he purchased from a French Nobleman; he selected only fifteen of them, and sent the others to a public sale, as not being of the first rank”. See National Art Library, Press Cuttings, 2:330.

\(^{88}\) Paper unknown. National Art Library, Press Cuttings, 2:597. Another item, from December 1790 detailed Desenfans’ expenditure of seven thousand louis d’or to French collector, to obtain the thirty best Italian pictures in the sale. See National Art Library, Press Cuttings, 2:577.

\(^{89}\) See National Art Library, Press Cuttings, 2: 425.
In this instance, Desenfans apparently purchased a collection in order to acquire one picture which had particular appeal, and like a true lover of great pictures, would stop at nothing to possess it. Such stunts were in fact not uncommon in the trade, and draw attention to Desenfans’s peculiar status. The author of the article seems to be suggesting that Desenfans, having turned a significant profit with the sale of those pictures he deemed superfluous, no longer needed to entertain even the most excessive offers for the Poussin declared to be so exceptional and coveted. His published intention to keep the picture may have been a means of distancing himself from pecuniary interests, but it can be read just as easily as the opposite.

Examples like these had two functions: to attempt to impress upon a public and other significant parties who shared his interests that Desenfans was a serious collector, and to keep people apprised of just the kinds of objects of objects moving in and out of his collections.

There were times, though, when it clearly must have seemed he was perhaps not the best judge of his own wares: more than once in the course of his career, Desenfans was involved in high-profile incidents of fraud and deception. In 1787, when he felt he had been deliberately deceived in a business transaction with fellow dealer Benjamin Vandergucht, Desenfans filed a lawsuit against the other dealer. It was found that Vandergucht passed off an inauthentic Poussin for a significant sum of money, and Desenfans did not know the truth of things until he was advised accordingly by other acquaintances. While he had every right to seek reimbursement for his losses, and was ultimately successful, in holding up his own connoisseurial standards of what he believed to be authentic, he revealed more than might have been wise. The lawsuit was very
public, and involved the testimony of members of the Royal Academy as well as other collectors and dealers, who were split down the middle as to the authenticity of the work. The verdict revealed very clearly a major incident where Desenfans proved himself unable to tell the difference between authentic masterpieces and copies.  

In March of 1797, Joseph Farington and Sir George Beaumont visited Bourgeois and Desenfans, with the express purpose of viewing a picture purchased by Bourgeois of cattle and figures by Dutch landscape artist Albert Cuyp. Farington had heard rumours that Desenfans was to sell the picture, and recounted the following:

…I mentioned to Bryant [the dealer, Mr. Bryan] having seen the Cuyp yesterday at Desenfans, and my surprise at his parting with it. —He said He sold it to Sir Francis Bourgeois because He could not hang it in his Gallery knowing it to be a Copy.—I asked him what authority He had for believing it to be a Copy, He replied He bought it of the person who painted it, & could get me as good a Copy from Cuyp as that painted by the same artist. He added the He sold it to Sir Francis as a copy for a 5th part of what He would have otherways demanded for it.—He did not wish to be publickly mentioned, but He said so much in his own defence that it may not be imputed to ignorance in him having parted with the picture.  

As recorded by Farington, the incident reveals generally how fraught with doubt and difficulty such transactions could be. It held great potential to cast doubt on

---

90 The first published reference to the trial is very vague, and appears in William Hazlitt’s *Conversations of James Northcote* (London: Henry Colborn and Richard Bentley, 1830), 260-261, in which Northcote recalls Thomas Gainsborough’s conduct as a witness during the trial. A lengthier account is presented by W.T. Whitley, *Thomas Gainsborough* (London: Smith, Elder and Co, 1915) 276-280. Whitley, who cites no complete source for the anecdote, identifies the picture in question as *La Vierge aux Enfants* by Poussin. In his *Artists and their Friends in England*, he explains that a year later, that Desenfans had tracked down the actual picture and purchased it, to the apparent envy of other collectors, including West and Reynolds. This is confirmed by a newspaper notice from 1788 (hand dating of the item is obscured). See National Art Library, *Press Cuttings*, 2: 425.

91 See Farington, 3: 1789-90.
Desenfans’s judgment and most especially that of Bourgeois, who routinely purchased pictures for Desenfans’ collection.

Giles Waterfield has asserted that both men consciously strove to dissociate themselves from the appearance of picture dealing, but given the degree to which Desenfans seems to have courted promotion in the newspapers, it is difficult to accept this assertion fully. 92 Rather, Desenfans seems to have tried to purposefully manoeuvre between his various activities, and between rungs on the ladder of social respectability. He sought due credit for successful purchases and sales, but in bragging about them at dinner parties, and puffing them about in the newspapers of the day in the hopes of making an impression on his associates in the art world, he cast his own activities in a totally distasteful light.

In and of itself, Desenfans’s occupation as dealer might not have been terribly important, but to some members of the society to which he aspired, particularly the more affluent and influential members of the Royal Academy, he was seen as a man who tried constantly to climb above his station with his social posturing.

It is also entirely possible that the document of the plan itself may provide some of the best evidence as to the reasons it was not adopted, even in part. It certainly had the potential to give as much offence as the preface to his 1786 catalogue.

Desenfan’s proposal itself is a wordy, florid document, in which the author takes the opportunity to wax on at length about many different aspects of the state of the production and collection art in England. He is very free with his opinions, and emphatic

---

in his expression of them. He undoubtedly caused a great deal of offence, and this cannot have helped his cause in any way.

In recounting why he felt England would benefit from a publicly-accessible collection of magnificent paintings, Desenfans could not resist explaining that it would most benefit the vast majority of those contemporary artists currently working in England—primarily most members and pupils of the Royal Academy. He overlooked entirely English painters such as James Thornhill (1675-1734), and others involved with the early attempts to form academies in London, including William Hogarth and Godfrey Kneller (1646-1723). This would undoubtedly have been recognized as a significant oversight. Though in his own day Hogarth’s work and his ideas received mixed reviews, his efforts to establish an English school of painting adopted an increasingly rosy appearance as time passed. For Hogarth to be thus slighted by Desenfans, a man who was not an artist himself, who routinely preferred the works of Old Masters, and whose taste was sometimes called in question would not have been appreciated in many quarters.

What Desenfans thought was elegantly-styled verbosity must have appeared quite clumsy and offensive to his readers. He noted:

I perfectly remember the exhibition made soon after the Royal Academy was founded, and candour compels me to say, I never saw worse productions that those they were composed of, particularly in the painting. Indeed, it seemed as if its rules and principles [of art] had been totally unknown to most of the exhibitors, who had not the least notion of drawing, transparency, colouring, or expression. There were, however, scattered amongst those paintings, a few diamonds in the necklace of false stones, the works of a very limited number of artists, some of whom had studied in Italy; they prevented the rooms from being deserted…

---

93 Desenfans 1799, 7.
Also, there is the matter of his implicit criticisms of the very political and social communities he was so keen to enter: in pointing out the lack of facilities for such galleries as he proposes in his plan, he was also pointing out their seeming lack of foresight and, ultimately, their failures. Desenfans’s criticisms were as pointed and deliberate as the carefully-aimed barbs against George III in John Wilkes’s proposal of 1777, and they may have been just as damaging to his overall proposition.

In making his case, Desenfans roundly insulted, both explicitly and implicitly, many of those who might have been in a position to help him pursue the aims of his Plan. Any redeeming aspects of his proposal, which might have been addressed and adopted by the large portion of members of the Royal Academy whose sympathies regarding the necessity for a public collection of pictures were largely in line with his own, were likely buried by the offence caused. However, while he failed in negotiating the realization of the plan, Desenfans was able to use it to participate in and contribute to the developing impulse towards establishing a national collection of Old Master Pictures for Britain.

Major cultural events like the dissolution of Charles I’s collection, and the sale of the Walpole Collection were enabled by accident and design to retain a foothold in public memory, and the losses represented by each registered on different levels and in different quarters. Individuals and institutions with different but potentially overlapping interests could work towards addressing the lack of a publicly-accessible collections for the nation—some were able to capitalize on existing projects and partially fill the cultural lacunae, while others such continued to problem solve and plan on more ambitious but no less self serving, levels. Just as Boydell’s Houghton Gallery contributed to creating the memorial to what might have been a national collection in the form of his Houghton
to his own commercial benefit, Desenfans manufactured opportunities and projects which were designed to conform with growing public sentiment in an effort to advance himself professionally and socially. This did not cease with the failure of his plan. Desenfans would continue not only to publicly negotiate his ideas about such things as a collection of pictures for the nation, but also to begin negotiating his ownership of the collection of the Polish King.
Chapter Four:

Continuing Strategies of Negotiation

Noel Desefans’s plan to create a national, public gallery of art was developed in the midst of a discernable growing interest in establishing a national, public repository for paintings. Contemporary discussion about perceived lost opportunities, such as the recent sale of the Walpole Collection, contributed to growing acknowledgment of the necessity of such a public collection, though ideas about the ways in which its creation might be achieved could not be agreed upon. Desefans’s plan represents a personal attempt to formulate a solution to the issue, by attempting to appeal to as wide a range of influential people as possible—patriots, collectors, and artists alike. More specifically, though, Desefans’s plan was undoubtedly also a response to the changing circumstance of the arrangement he had struck with the King of Poland. He was forced to entertain the reality of his custody of a large, putative, royal collection, the future of which was becoming increasingly uncertain.

Where the previous chapter addresses Desefans’s plan for a national gallery and the reception of this by men who operated within the particular milieu that might have been able to help him realize it, the present chapter deals with subsequent arrangements Desefans engineered in the wake of its rejection. These arrangements culminated in a public sale, and the process of preparing for it provided Desefans not only with a way to physically manage a large collection of pictures he struggled to house, but also provided the means by which he could further express his opinions. Chapter Four demonstrates Desefans’s response to the change in course of the collection he assembled in the wake
of the failure of his plan, his use of sales catalogues to register opinions on the state of the picture market, and the dialogue this engaged him in with those who felt threatened by the public expressing of his ideas.

**Addressing the Problem of the Polish Collection**

As discussed in Chapter Three, Desenfans’s arrangement with the Polish King, Stanislaw began to go astray in 1795 at the time of the King’s abdication.\(^1\) Desenfans nursed the hope that, when the former King of Poland settled into exile, someone affiliated with the Polish Royal family would honour the arrangement, repay the outstanding balance owed, and take possession of the pictures. That solution never materialized, and he was forced to set his sights elsewhere.

Desenfans waited three years, until Stanislaw’s death in 1798, before sending his first enquiries, in his capacity as former Consul-General to Poland, to the Russian Tsar, Paul I. The primary purpose of establishing contact with the Tsar was to remind him of Stanislaw’s outstanding debts: as Russia assumed rule of Poland, Desenfans felt there was a strong case to be made for the new Tsar to also assume Stanislaw’s commitments.\(^2\) Desenfans’s appeal to the Tsar seemed doubly appropriate: his mother and predecessor, Catherine the Great, had greatly enriched the Imperial picture collection through large purchases of collections much like the one Desenfans was proposing, including that of Robert Walpole twenty years earlier.

---

\(^1\) See Chapter Three, p. 115.

\(^2\) Desenfans to Paul I, 6 May 1798, item 2a MS XVI f40r & f40v, Archives, Dulwich College, London. See also Warner, 220.
This first appeal was unsuccessful, and in 1801, Desenfans attempted once again to establish contact with the Tsar. In this lengthier missive, Desenfans took the opportunity to claim that he had “given up commerce” in order to take up the duties with which he had be charged by the former King of Poland. The truth of this is difficult to gauge, but clearly Desenfans was hoping to impress upon the Tsar that the time, effort and financial commitment he had devoted to the project was considerable, and the necessity of his being compensated for it was undoubted. A more detailed account of the expenses incurred by Desenfans was provided for the Tsar, as were several propositions for the repayment—to compensate Desenfans for his years of lost commerce while fulfilling his obligations, or to pay a larger sum and take possession of the entire collection which, by 1801, had been augmented and increased to reflect broader tastes than those of Stanislaw.

Desenfans was sufficiently optimistic about the prospect that he told Joseph Farington in April 1801 that the collection would soon be en route to Warsaw, but ultimately he was also unsuccessful in his second attempt. No offers from the Tsar were forthcoming, and the English Ambassador to Russia at St. Petersburg eventually informed Desenfans that the likelihood of his ever being reimbursed for his efforts or of

---

3 Desenfans to Paul I, 22 June 1801, items 2b MS XVI f42r - f45v and MS XVI f41r & f41v, Archives, Dulwich College, London. See also Warner, 220-1.
4 Ibid; see also Washington, Collection for a King, 14.
5 Desenfans does not seem to have mounted any public sales between the time of his undertaking Stanislaw’s commission and the time of Tsar’s refusal to deal with the situation, either in his own name, or through the auction houses he dealt with (Christie’s or Skinner and Dyke). The only extant sales catalogue from this period dates to 28 February 1795. See Chapter Three, page 111, note 6. He continued to acquire and sell pictures privately, and through friends. See Farington 1978, 4:1511.
6 Farington, 4:1538.
transferring ownership of the collection were slim: all documents pertaining to his purchases for Poland had been destroyed in a fire.\textsuperscript{7}

Through a series of personal circumstances and external events that were in large part beyond his control, Desenfans embarked on an ambitious course that was both self-serving and visionary as a means of negotiating for himself credibility and social stature. On the heels of the failure of his plan, he made the decision to catalogue the pictures and put them up for public sale in London, exhibiting them at the premises of Skinner and Dyke, the Great Room, number 3 Berners Street, early in 1802.\textsuperscript{8}

A number of factors additional to the lag in response to Desenfans’s inquiries at the Russian court may have contributed to the time lapse between the changed nature of his commission for Stanislaw and the final date of the sale. For a time, Desensfans might have felt it would bring sufficient distinction to have his duties fulfilled, and been content to have had assembled a royal collection of national (if foreign) significance associated with his name. The market in London was flooded; conservative estimates suggest some 1015 sales occurred in London in 1801 alone. If the timing was poor, it may just have

\textsuperscript{7} Whitworth to Desenfans, letters of 22 and 24 June 1801, items 3b MS XVI f46v (top of page) and 3c MS XVI f47r (bottom of page), Archives, Dulwich College, London. Whitworth explains that the paperwork had not been seen since 1799, and was probably destroyed by a fire which consumed all of the archival holdings after his departure from St. Petersburg. See Warner, 222-3.

\textsuperscript{8} Noel Desenfans, \textit{A Descriptive Catalogue with Remarks and Anecdotes never before Published in English of Some Pictures, of Different Schools, Purchased for His Majesty the Late King of Poland}, 3\textsuperscript{rd} ed. (London: 1802). In the absence of firm contemporary evidence, the sale was long assumed to have been a failure. However, in the years between the sale and Desenfans’s bequest of the collection to Bourgeois, many of the pictures seem to have been distributed through private sale or trade: only 56 of the 187 pictures offered for sale are accounted for in Bourgeois’s larger bequest to Dulwich College.
been good business practice to retain the pictures rather than face the humiliation and economic risk of losing money at sale.

The task of assembling the collection for Stanislaw was, even in its earliest stages, seen by Desenfans to increase his manoeuvrability both socially and professionally. He basked in the honour he thought the commission afforded him: he clearly felt he had the knowledge, taste, contacts and access to be deserving of the commission and to make a success of it, and the royal endorsement added lustre to the undertaking. 9

As the timeframe in which to build and cultivate the collection was extended by changing circumstances, Desenfans continued attempts to maximize the benefits he perceived an extended association could afford. The delay enabled him to bask in the glow of his royal commission, while allowing him to take credit for assembling and displaying the tastefully chosen significant objects of that affiliation. With ample material proof of his success as a collector physically in his possession, the delay seems also to have enabled the opportunity to muse about the new public collection of Old Master pictures so central to his plan, and the possible place of the already-formed, would-be Polish collection in relation to it.

Many nineteenth- and twentieth-century sources making reference to Desenfans’s life and career make the assumption that, when changed circumstances saw Desenfans saddled with nearly 200 Old Master pictures he and Bourgeois had assembled for the King of Poland, his immediate goal was to dispatch them and recoup his losses. In a sense, this assumption seems perfectly in keeping with a superficial reading of

9 In the case of Bourgeois, his flaunting of the essentially meaningless knighthood granted him by Stanislaw (particularly after the King’s deposition and death and the partition of Poland), led to ridicule. Desenfans’s trumpeting of his own office generated similar responses. See Waterfield 1989, 38.
Desenfans’s approach to his profession as a picture dealer. It denies, however, Desenfans’s lengthy, pronounced interaction with the collection and disallows the opportunities even temporary ownership of it presented him.

This chapter addresses some of Desenfans’s choices as salesman and aspiring gentleman, and re-examines how the sale of the once-intended Polish Royal collection may be interpreted, by focusing on some events in Desenfans’s career that have been underplayed, elided or written out of the literature. It is not my aim to assert that Desenfans seriously intended to keep the collection long term (or to suggest the opposite, for that matter), but rather to explore what the collection provided him, in terms of a platform for negotiating his two roles of gentleman and dealer, and to suggest that ‘ownership’ could be more fluid than is sometimes acknowledged. This constitutes a facet of Desenfans’s personal response to his participation in the growing discussion about public collections for the nation. Continuing from Chapter Three, this chapter shows how Desenfans continued to negotiate his place between these roles, and explores how these negotiations were received.

**Staking Claim: Desenfans and Bourgeois Assume Ownership**

In November 1795, a mere eight months after Stanislaw’s abdication had been announced in the London newspapers, stirrings of Desenfans’s attempts to revise how the collection and his association with it might be perceived were registered.10 Francis Bourgeois expressed to Joseph Farington that Desenfans would “soon have a finer collection of

---

10 The *Observer*, 22 March 1795, No. 173.
pictures than any he ever possessed”. Farington’s representation of the exchange of course cannot completely convey the spirit in which the remark was made, it is clear that Bourgeois, in the wake of Stanislaw’s recent abdication, was observing opportunities for Desenfans and, by extension, himself. In the course of social exchange, Bourgeois was envisioning the potential prestige that assuming full control of these works might bring to them both.

In March 1796, while visiting Bourgeois at his shared accommodations with Desenfans on Charlotte Street to preview the artist’s contribution to the upcoming annual exhibition at the Royal Academy, Farington had the opportunity to examine Desenfans’s collection as it was arranged in his house at that time. He records,

I sat a little time with Mr. Desenfans who is much afflicted by nervous complaints, and has been 7 or 8 years past. His collection of pictures is now completely arranged in his house; is very fine. Sir Francis told me that it was intended for the King of Poland; but that He, Mr. D. has now resolved never to part with one of them.

Farington’s choice of words suggests that any boundaries that might have existed around the Polish Collection were now merging fluidly with Desenfans’s own—not only to Desenfans and his friend Bourgeois, but also to visitors. As the primary purchaser of the pictures on behalf of his patron Stanislaw, Desenfans’s parameters were already arguably indistinct. As time passed, and Desenfans’s opportunities to house and display the pictures enabled him to participate in a growing trend among collectors to establish notable collections in London’s town houses, the distinction seems only have become more blurred.

11 Farington, 2: 399.
12 Ibid., 2: 512.
13 See Dulwich, Palaces of Art, 67-82.
A negotiated ownership was constantly occurring, from the time of the commission in 1795 to the point of sale in 1802, though the evidence might seem so obvious that it is almost uniformly overlooked. Regardless of whether Desenfans was truly as ‘resolved’ as Bourgeois intimated to Farington, the temporary effect was the same as if he had been. The changed (and changing) circumstances presented possibilities, which both Desenfans and Bourgeois recognized might be turned to their social and professional advantage. Desenfans had arranged works from the Polish collection to their best and most prominent advantage in the home on Charlotte Street, in the manner of a gentleman collector displaying his collection for well-heeled visitors. While the intention might never have been to keep them permanently, Desenfans was, in that instance, actively negotiating his possession of them to his immediate benefit.

As time passed, though, it must have become apparent, or financially imperative, that the opportunity for a public sale of the collection might ultimately outweigh the advantages of keeping it: a sale would facilitate the display of his wares while showcasing the objects of his taste, and flaunt in a last instance his associations with royalty. Not only would it provide the possibility of recouping what had been spent on assembling the collection itself (and perhaps allow him to turn a profit), but it also appeared to provide an auspicious next step: the event of a sale could potentially be crafted into an momentous occasion that might serve to launch Desenfans from his ultimately frustrated associations with a deceased former monarch on to bigger and better opportunities.

Additionally, it provided the opportunity to revive and renew the dialogue Desenfans attempted to establish in the catalogue for his sale of 1786: where in that
catalogue, he vacillated back and forth between the role of gentleman collector and salesman, in the case of the 1802 sale, the putative greater distinction of the noble collection had the potential to greatly change the dynamics.

As the situation with the collection and its intended owner developed and then dissolved, other forces were at work in the social and artistic milieu in which Desenfans participated. While the failed negotiation with the Tsar might have constituted the final tipping point, Desenfans’s own understanding of the potential significance of collectors for the public good, as expressed most forcefully in his plan of 1799, was also continuing to develop.

By 1802, any thoughts he may have entertained about placing his pictures centrally in that scheme had been grounded. A sale provided the perfect opportunity to show at length the collection he had assembled with taste and erudition. When displayed by turns in the confines of his home to the range of visitors who were invited, the collection enabled Desenfans to participate in a particular kind of growing interest in town-house galleries.\textsuperscript{14} The potential benefits, cultural and social, of access to these kinds of collections were well established by the end of the eighteenth century—limited access to artists and members of the Royal Academy, and fellow collectors, and in some cases, members of the public.\textsuperscript{15} But a public sale could change the context of the pictures

\textsuperscript{14} Desenfans notes in the Preface to his catalogue of the 1802 sale that all of Polish pictures could not be displayed in his home at once “for want of room”. Desenfans, \textit{A Descriptive Catalogue}, 3.

\textsuperscript{15} See Giles Waterfield’s useful study of the accumulation and display of paintings in London homes. He identifies several different types of private galleries which were developing at through the mid-eighteenth century into the early nineteenth century. In the 1750’s and 1760’s, he identifies the particular awareness and acknowledgement that access to collections was of great benefit to artists and students. Waterfield, “The Town House…”, 47-8, 54.
greatly, presuming a level of confidence in the quality of the works and in the overall right of a theoretical public to benefit from viewing them.

The sale furnished the opportunity for Desenfans to engage in something his previous publications showed him to have particular interest in—writing and commenting on art and artists. In preparation for the sale, Desenfans penned an extensive, two-volume catalogue, which constitutes the best proof of his negotiated ownership of the pictures that had been assembled for the Polish King. When examined in conjunction with the references from Farington’s diary, this negotiation is revealed to be a dynamic process.

“None but Pure Pictures”: Challenging the Standards in Saleroom and Catalogue

Desenfans’ exhibition and sale catalogue did not reflect the same standard of those most common to the London sales, in terms of the ambitious content. The introductory page to the catalogue not only gives the first indication of those elements Desenfans hoped would attract attention to the sale and bring in prestigious customers and connoisseurs and artists alike, but also speaks to his own pride in the collection and his formerly royal connection. He stresses that the pictures were purchased “for his Majesty, the Late King of Poland”, by Noel Desenfans, Esq., “Late Consul-General of Poland” on the title page of the catalogue, and throughout the Preface, works to establish that decisions on pictures were guided by a royal patron.

This may be read as proof of the fluidity of ownership and the ways it could be shifted depending on the perceived value of doing so, when read against the comments

---

16 The examples are very close to those produced by Desenfans’ friend and correspondent, the French dealer, J.P. Le Brun. Washington, Collection for a King, 23.
made by Bourgeois to Farington cited above. The collection is treated as if it belonged to Desenfans in more casual instances such as the exchanges recounted by Farington: in the much more public sphere of the sale and its catalogue, Desenfans relies on the firm association with the (once) royal patron for whom the collection had been assembled.

Desenfans likely felt these circumstances would carry the day. It was possible that, since the pictures had been assembled for a nearly royal collection, and thus, were part of an important historical moment, they may have had greater appeal for potential purchasers. Similar interest such as that which surrounded the Orléans collection may have made this a reasonable assumption on Desenfans’ part [See Appendix E].

Though the strategy did not always work, as evidenced by some of the sales of the Duke of Hamilton’s collections, furnishing the sale with the prestigious flourish of royal affiliation may have seemed worth the risk.

Desenfans, in his usual fashion, extended the scope of the preface far beyond the usual bounds, in order to construct a particular image of himself and his duties in assembling the pictures for the collection, as well as the circumstances that led to the public sale. He recounts the history of his professional association with Stanislaw, and

---

This aspect of collecting was a frequent subject for discussion in the papers around the time of Orléans Collection show and sale in London. One author challenged those visitors to the collection who criticised the exhibition harshly and spoke publicly of the poor quality of the pictures which had been left for the public sale after that the best had already been culled by the organizers, by stating that many buyers would clearly be content to have a picture from such a famous collection regardless of its quality. National Art Library, *Press Cuttings*, 3:548.

In spite of the very high quality pictures he owned, the results of Hamilton’s picture sales were often lacklustre. It is important to note that a number of factors both personal and economic likely contributed to this: the scandalous activities of his second wife, Emma Hamilton, and the glut on pictures on the market. See Kim Sloan “‘Picture-mad in Virtu-land’: Sir William Hamilton’s Collections of Paintings” in *Vases and Volcanoes*, ed. Ian Jenkins and Kim Sloan (London: British Museum Press, 1996), 75-92.
presents himself as a loyal executor of his royal patron’s enlightened wishes to beautify his country and educate its artists, fulfilling his capacity as Consul-General to the best of his abilities. The continued absence of a public collection in England was still on Desenfans’s mind, and he could count on it being topical for many of his readers, and it is alluded to periodically throughout the catalogue.\(^\text{19}\)

From the outset, the reader is assured that Desenfans was cautioned by the King of Poland to pursue “none but Originals and fine Pictures of the different Schools”, and to forgo any cleaning of the pictures when assembling the collection—he was to have “none but pure pictures”, so that their quality could be easily ascertained.\(^\text{20}\) Desenfans also explains that, “owing to the caution against copies”, comparatively few Italian pictures were acquired, because “it is much easier to be imposed upon with an Italian copy, than with a Dutch or Flemish one, as every one of us is more conversant in, and better acquainted with those two schools”.\(^\text{21}\) This underscores to some extent the two roles Desenfans was trying to occupy, and a definite tension remains: In the preface he asserts that instructions were received from Stanislaw. Ultimately, though, he claims for himself the judgment by which the individual pictures included in the collection were assembled.

\(^\text{19}\) For instance in the context of a discussion of Sébastien Bourdon’s painting *The Burying of the Dead*, he notes that “the French who now posses the principle *chefs d’oeuvres* of painting, and who are daily improving their knowledge of the art, have placed in their National Museum, all of the works that they have been able to obtain.” See Desenfans 1801, French School, entry number 59, 1:149. While this serves to illustrate that the calibre of the pictures in his sale are ‘museum quality’, it also necessarily points out the absence of such an organized thing as a national museum for pictures in London.

\(^\text{20}\) Desenfans 1801, 1:2. Evidence on some of the works suggests Bourgeois did ‘clean’ some of the paintings, extend their borders, and even added signatures. This was not unusual for the time, but neither is it entirely in keeping with what Desenfans suggests in the Preface. See also Beresford, 16.

\(^\text{21}\) Desenfans 1801, 1: 6.
Desenfans explains that the appearance and physical qualities of each picture will be addressed in detail and, wherever possible, the background narratives to specific paintings will be provided. The purpose of these detailed entries for almost every painting included in the sale was to “render the catalogue more useful” to the prospective visitor and buyer, by providing information that would allow the viewer/reader to better determine in advance of the sale which pictures might appeal to him. As Desenfans states “…[The Collector] for want of that information…is sometimes led to a sale where he finds himself disappointed, and the fear of another disappointment, prevents his attending a few days after, the sale in which are the very objects he is in search of.”

In explaining why his own catalogue is so useful to prospective attendees of the sale, Desenfans necessarily finds fault with the way most other contemporary sales were managed, as being inconvenient to potential buyers. The comments are informed, and necessarily complicated, by Desenfans’s dual roles: in the case of this catalogue, he straddles the line between being the promoter of the sale, and self-styled gentleman-connoisseur who selected the works in the first place. He had a great deal invested both in the reception of the sale, and in the outcome.

The catalogue was liberally sprinkled with a wide variety of anecdotal information about artists in addition to the unusually descriptive, narrative information about the individual pictures to aid prospective attendees. Desenfans justifies these anecdotal forays on the basis that the works in the sale were of such superior quality, he (perhaps with input from Bourgeois) could not hold himself to the usual constraints of a typical catalogue:

---

22 Desenfans 1801, 1: 8.
As the pictures will speak for themselves, we intended to avoid all kind of encomiums, and merely to describe their subjects for the information of our readers; but we had scarce begun the work, when we found it as impossible to describe a meritorious performance without mentioning its merits, as it would be for an artist to paint a beautiful woman without beauty, or a monster without deformities; but our eulogiums contain no sort of exaggeration whatever, and those who will compare the pictures with the catalogue, will judge whether we have not been scrupulously faithful in our descriptions, although that very caution may perhaps render it tedious now and then, by too frequent repetition of the same terms.  

In attempting to mitigate the ‘tedium’ of repetitious format or entries, Desenfans chooses to entertain and showcase his own penchant for story-telling:

In order to alleviate that defect, as well as to soften the natural dryness of so insipid a book as a mere catalogue, we have intermixed this, with a few Anecdotes never before published in English, and which are relative either to the pictures themselves or their authors; they come from the common source of all anecdotes, books and hearsays, and many of them from Descamps, Houbraken, Le Compte, abrige de la Vie des Peintres, De Piles and Felibién; but such as we have not taken from them we have no authority to warrant, as they only come from common report.

In specifying that many of the anecdotes come from ‘common report’, Desenfans obviates any responsibility for their veracity. He has chosen to compile and present the anecdotes for the reader, but he eschews responsibility for their content, and even asserts that he may not always be able to identify sources of the information, claiming license to include any information he chooses. It was a clever decision that undoubtedly drove up interest in the catalogue, and was intended to do the same for the subsequent sale at the Great Room in Berners Street. Desenfans anticipates that many of these additions to the catalogue might be deemed superfluous or frivolous “since some men are never satisfied

---

23 Desenfans 1801, 1: 7-8.
unless they disapprove”, but determines to include them nonetheless on the grounds that their sheer informative value would outweigh any possible criticism levied against them.\(^{25}\) If the value of such untraceable anecdotes also happened to entertain or titillate, this could only attract attention to the sale.

Desenfans makes a point of preparing his prospective viewers for what seems to have been the haphazard, disorganized arrangement of pictures (many of which he had taken great care to arrange so carefully in his home). Some pictures seem to have been out of their frames entirely, while others were

...still in the very cases made for them [ostensibly for shipment to Poland], to guard against accidents. The brilliant show which is generally displayed in exhibitions, must not be expected in this; but we flatter ourselves that although many of the pictures will be seen in their deshabille, the true judges of the art will be of the art will be compensated by their quality.\(^{26}\)

These elements and the particular perspective that inspired them all contribute to distinguishing this catalogue from more typical examples. Desenfans’s catalogue provides more than a checklist of attributions to titles and artists, and in fact assumes proportions that are more consistent with catalogues for a permanent private collection than for a sale, however grand.

The catalogue allowed for the creation of a kind of space for viewing, relating to but also extending the parameters of the sale and exhibition of the pictures. Through its descriptions, the catalogue functions in two ways: as a space where prospective visitors could imagine and envision the works for sale and, in theory, educate themselves about them before viewing to see the collection.

\(^{25}\) Desenfans 1801, 1: 9.  
\(^{26}\) Ibid., 6.
Evidence of Desenfans’s own choices and preferences for specific schools of paintings and artists are everywhere in evidence in the catalogue. In asserting his opinions, though, and in choosing to provide spirited accounts of paintings and collectors, and of artists and patrons, he treads into territory he accurately suspected would be criticized. Desenfans relayed anecdotes of the artists’ lives, which in many cases were not clearly related to the specific pictures offered for sale. He attempted wherever possible to flesh out relationships of painters to each other, and sometimes to their patrons; gave background histories on places they had traveled to in order to practice their trades, and discussed their habits and the more sensational events in their lives. It is this insistence on furnishing the catalogue with sensational details that drew the greatest attention to Desenfans’s catalogue, and to Desenfans himself.

A theme that surfaces continually through the various anecdotes is that of artists’ competitive natures and professional jealousies. Desenfans’s entry on a painting of a mastiff attributed to Diego Velasquez provides but one example of such anecdotes reported by Desenfans throughout both volumes of the catalogue:

How is it that the faculties of the mind, attain superior excellence, without the heart improving in like proportion? We, on the contrary, see this frequently corrupt and degenerate, whilst the others soar to perfection; and the annals of the fine arts, too often present us with impressive examples of this fatal truth.

In the army, navy, and many other professions, emulation is excited by a laudable ambition, and it may be now and then, the case in the career of arts; for some painters have been, and some are, at this day, actuated by are, at this day, actuated by the same principle; yet one must in justice say, that by a singular fatality, instead of that notable emulation, the painter is often susceptible of a governning envy and a degrading jealousy, which (strange as it may appear) not only augment as he acquires perfection in the art, but also arm his cruel tongue against the meritorious works of his brother artists, as they did the cruel hand of Cain, against his Brother.
Before even discussing the painting in question, Desenfans elaborates how this jealousy manifested itself in the life of Velasquez, and his treatment of his servant and pigment grinder, Pareja; and the supposed interest of Velasquez’s great patron, the King of Spain, in a work of his own Pareja had slyly submitted for the King’s approval. The picture itself is given the barest of descriptions at the end of an entry that is five pages in length.

In discussing the Italianate landscape by the artist Dutch artist Karel du Jardin, Desenfans does not begin with a discussion of the specific painting included in the sale. Instead, he fleshes out for the reader something of the more piquant details of Du Jardin’s personal life:

It is well known that such was the prodigality of this artist in his youth, that on his return from Italy (as the only means of paying his debts) he married his landlady, who, though very old, was very rich; he introduced her to his family at Amsterdam, where he though of settling, but the mortifications he suffered in consequence of his ill-judged marriage, the melancholy it gave rise to, and the peevish jealousy of his wife, cramped his abilities, and his works no longer possessed their wonted merit.

He at length withdrew himself and returned to Italy, where he soon regained his usual gaiety, and his works more finely executed than ever, were some of them, sent to Amsterdam, and greedily purchased by the amateurs. His family then wrote him word that since he had recovered his spirits in Italy, and the art of painting so well, he should come to paint near his wife at Amsterdam. “No,” returned Karel du Jardin, “we are best as we are, for that I may paint well at Amsterdam, my wife must absolutely be in Italy.”

---

27 Desenfans 1801, 1: 94-95.
Before any mention is made of the painting, the reader is aware of some of the unsavoury elements of the artist’s life: that he was prone to debt, married for money, and abandoned his wife.

In the case of the Flemish artist Jacob Jordaens, Desenfans uses the entry on the artist’s *Bowl of Grapes* to provide commentary that Rubens was jealous of the younger artist’s skill as a colourist, and that he tried to influence the kinds of commissions the younger Jordaens received:

They tell us also that Rubens was too great a man to be jealous, but they forget that the greatest men are, as others, subject to great weaknesses; and Rubens became jealous of Jordaens, on account of his colouring, that in expectation of making him lose his taste of painting in oil, he secretly contrived to have him employed in painting cartoons for a tapestry for the King of Spain.\(^{29}\)

In another entry, dealing with a landscape picture by the Flemish artist Herman Swanevelde, Desenfans yet again offers more on the subject of artistic jealousies, before embarking on the “unpleasant task of remarking the same weakness in Claude with regard to Swanefeld”.

How sweet a task it is to praise!—then how unceasingly painful must be the office of the slanderer, a description of men who breathe only defamation on the living and the dead!—but like the policy which condemns the criminal to a public execution, that it may serve as a warning lesson to others, the faults of our predecessors are held out in the most glaring deformity, that it may caution our contemporaries to avoid them.

Great men, as has already been remarked, are subject to great weaknesses, and we have before observed that Lanfranc [sic] was jealous of Dominichino, Velasquez was jealous of his slave, and Rubens, although a warm patron of the merits of Brower, Teniers, Poelemburg, and other artists who

\(^{29}\) Desenfans 1801, 2: 64. Matters were not helped by factual inaccuracies that many of Desenfans’ readers were aware of—even in cases where Desenfans himself doubted accuracy (for instance, that Rubens and Jordaens studied contemporaneously with the Flemish artist Adam van Noort, a chronological impossibility), he nonetheless opted to include the anecdotes.
were not in his own line of painting, was however jealous of Vandyck and Jordaens. Nay indeed some artists have carried their jealousy to so monstrous an excess, that in a fit of that passion, Andrew del Castagno murdered his rival Vetiano.  

Though perhaps ostensibly designed to show that even the greatest artists were subject to normal, basic human emotions, the regular inclusion of such anecdotes and the ends to which they were focused may have had a very different effect—to suggest that all men who belong to the profession were governed by similar pettiness, and by extension, might be counted upon to act against each others’ interests in support of their own.

Desenfans’s determination to make the most of the space he crafted in which to share all these anecdotes generated tremendous response and sparked an active dialogue. Desenfans’s statements and claims both in his Preface and in the catalogue itself caused offense to some of London’s contemporary painters. It attracted so much interest that his catalogue was published in three separate editions over the course of three short weeks, in part to allow Desenfans to make the opportunity to address those who found fault with the catalogue’s content. While it has never been seriously examined in the literature to date, the catalogue provides a useful window into several aspects of the contemporary cultural debates of the day.

The Challenger Challenged: Desenfans versus the Anonymous Painter

In mid-February of 1802, a letter to Desenfans from an anonymous painter was published and distributed in a number of locations in London, ostensibly to address the concerns of painters about the questionable anecdotal content of Desenfans catalogue [See Appendix 

30 Desenfans 1801, 2: 79-82.
31 Desenfans, A Descriptive Catalogue, addendum to the third edition, 2: 221.
In examining this letter, it becomes clear that the offense caused by the catalogue was not actually due to general feeling that the profession or reputation of any artist had been smeared by the catalogue. Rather, the anonymous author challenges the content of the catalogue and questions the qualifications of Desenfans to publish such a document, as well as his right to comment on the professional conduct and comportment of painters. This is made clear from the outset, when the anonymous author embarks on his systematic stripping-down of the presumptuous Desenfans.

The author ridicules Desenfans’s invocation of the titles and posts granted him by the deceased King of Poland, titles which, in light of Poland’s situation, were felt by many to be essentially meaningless, and Desenfans’s use of them pretentious. Desenfans is repeatedly referred to in the letter as the ‘consul-general of criticism’—his criticism and any judgment expressed in the catalogue are equally meaningless and dubious.

Desenfans’s expansion of the typical scope of sales catalogues is treated as evidence of his transgressions beyond the boundaries of what the anonymous writer seems keen to remind him might have been considered more appropriate for a man of his profession. The anonymous author also makes pointed reference to Desenfans’s attempts to be recognized as a gentleman:

Not content...like picture-dealers of a humbler rank, to solicit attention to the works of those great masters which the collection in question contains; the celebrated author of the catalogue thought he could not do better than avail himself of the opportunity which it afforded, of enlightening the public mind of some points hitherto much misunderstood. Thus, which he instructs the connoisseur by elegant criticism, and appropriate praise, to

[32] [Shee, Martin Archer?], A Letter to Noel Desenfans, ESQ. Late Consul-General of Poland in Great Britain, occasioned by the second edition of his catalogue, and his answer to what he terms “The Complaints of Painters,” (London: 1802).
admire the productions of taste and genius, he also liberally proves, by well-chosen anecdote, and philosophical disquisition, that their authors are to held in contempt; that in proportion as the head improves the heart degenerates, and the (horresco referens) amongst the various professions, which the avocations of society produce, the votaries of the fine arts are the most envious, cruel and malignant of men.  

Not only did the anecdotes provided in the catalogue seem spurious and inflammatory, the remarks on the jealous nature of painters towards each other were particularly objectionable—they suggested the incapability of painters to support each other, even in their successes. Even Desenfans’s references to artists’ academies seemed designed to illustrate their attempts to train themselves away from their tendencies:

...The well-meaning institutors of academies have thought; in uniting the artists...we will root out those little jealousies that dishonour them, for as every one will contribute to the success of the whole, each artist will feel interested in the success of the other, since the particular good of one, will be felt by all, as if affecting every individual.—Divided, they can effect only their single efforts, but united they will materially assist each other, by their advice and abilities; and instead of envy, hatred, quarrels, and dissentions, we shall see merit, peace, fraternity, concord and happiness, go hand in hand, in the sanctuary of the fine arts.

This commentary by Desenfans appeared in an account of the Dutch artist, identified as Andreis Both, whose father encouraged the painter and his brother Jan to pursue their different artistic strengths in order to avoid discord and prevent them from being rivals. Desenfans pointedly concluded this section of the entry, before his discussion of Both’s Landscape with Cattle and Figures, by stating, “The views of Henry Both, were happily realized.—We hope those of the benevolent institutors of

33 [Shee?] 1802, v-vi.
34 Desenfans, A Descriptive Catalogue, 2: 99-100.
academies have been equally so.”\textsuperscript{35} A remark so gratuitous and inflammatory could only offend.

In challenging Desenfans on this perceived impertinence, the anonymous writer inevitably gives the document more public attention that it might otherwise have garnered. He acknowledges that in doing so, he undermines his own assertions that the catalogue and its author lack the authority to have any meaningful impact. He states,

The author is aware that it will be objected to him, that to notice such an attack from such a quarter, is to give it consequence which it could never obtain by any other means. He acknowledges the justice of the remark, and has only to observe that the ludicrous arrogance with which the second edition, and its additions, were ushered into the world, struck him in so forcible a light, that he could not resist the impulse to lay down his palette and pencils for a moment and sport a fly-slapper on the occasion for Mr. D.---’s particular use.\textsuperscript{36}

The very fact of a second edition of Desenfans’s catalogue attracted sufficient attention to invite scrutiny not only into Desenfans’s professional endeavours, but also into his qualifications and status:

…Beware, Sir, how you excite an examination into your pretentions to the character you would assume; how you put us on inquiring by what strange process of transformation you have been metamorphosed into a formid-able critic and connoisseur; the self-appointed reformer of the public taste; the arbiter elegantiarum of the day.\textsuperscript{37}

For all the effort spent crafting his response to Desenfans, the author wastes no time in asserting that Desenfans’s profession should immediately preclude him from being taken seriously: “It is not in the puffing prelude of a picture dealer that the arts of this country can receive a wound. It is not in the interested effusions of clumsy quackery,
labouring in its vocation, that we can fear malignity, however we may expect it, or feel impertinence, however we may observe and contemn [sic] it.”

Every opportunity is taken to remind the reader (and Desenfans) of the virtual meaninglessness of the titles Desenfans insisted on invoking, and his status as a humble tutor-cum-picture dealer is made all the more questionable by his obvious attempts to present himself as something his English contacts perceived he was not. All this comes together to suggest that the opinions Desenfans asserted so strongly in the catalogue were entirely uninformed.

The pointed turns of phrase might at first be assumed to be simply the witty prosaic conventions of the age, but the author draws particular and continual attention to Desenfans’s former post as a language tutor. Indeed, the author makes it seem as though his critical response is only occasioned by the inappropriate way Desenfans employed the format of the sales catalogue to address the many other aspects of his interests and ambitions:

Had you, Sir…not stepped out of your road, and thought fit to use your _high rank_ and _estimation_ in society as the pledge and passport of that foul _assault_ on my profession, which your late _little_ work (as you with admirable candour call it) contains, I would have been the last to insinuate the _variations_ of your course, or that you were not _always_ gifted with those _great powers_, which constitute you at this moment the _mirror of accomplished connoisseurship_, and the terror of the graphic tribe. …_[H]abit_ is powerful, and…_teachers_ of every description are apt to retain their didactic propensities, under circumstances very different from those in which they were with _propriety_ exercised. …To this influence of custom, Sir, I am induced to attribute your present unlucky ambition, which, as you have ceased to communicate to your pupils your instructions in grammar, prompts you kindly to favour us with a few lessons on taste.39

38 [Shee?] 1802, 5
39 [Shee?] 1802, 6-7
The anonymous writer seems struck by what he understood to be the presumptuous transfer of skills Desenfans acquired through his previous professions, which he then pressed into service most inappropriately for the purposes of drawing up the catalogue.

Your terms are indeed *moderate* for the *first course*; but I fear, Sir, your qualifications for the office you have chosen are *more* than *suspected*; we cannot readily trace the connexion [sic] between the rudiments of language and the refinements of art, nor see, how professing the one, gives good reason to suppose a proficiency in the other…neither can we be convinced how the *multifarious* concerns of that *important post* you have so long enjoyed as *consul-general* of that *great commercial* country, Poland, could have allowed you to cultivate and establish that superiority of critical skill which should authorize you, even in *your own* opinion, to talk with presumption on subjects beyond your ability, and dictate with arrogance where you ought to *hear* with submission…A teacher is always a reputable character while he adheres to his *proper* province, and presumes not to instruct where he is *himself untaught*. Had you followed this rule, Sir, your *talents* might have been less conspicuous, but they would have been more respected.40

By virtue of his own profession as a painter, the anonymous writer—while introducing his letter, before he even delves into the specific criticisms—asserts his own right to censure Desenfans on the pretension from a profession to a class, society and mode of behaviour the rules and polite maneuverings of which he did not have an appropriate grasp.

To re-enforce this assertion, the author exposes the degree to which Desenfans had moved outside the usual realm of the picture dealer and salesman:

All *superior* minds pursue their objects by *extraordinary* ways. And the most obvious is seldom the *real* aim they have in view. I doubt not, therefore that I have mistaken that for your *end*, which is only your *means*: and some perhaps may wonder at my dullness, who have pretended your objects to be *palpable* to the most *shallow* penetration. Even I now begin to *suspect* that your design, notwithstanding your liberality of anecdote

40 [Shee?] 1802, 7-8
and criticism, biography and abuse, was not so disinterestedly directed as to improve the public taste, as to puff into notice, and importance, that long celebrated collection, the loss of which the poor King of Poland would doubtless have lamented even more than his crown and dignity.\footnote{[Shee?] 1802, 10-11}

Desenfans’s choice to include and comment on anecdotal information in the catalogue obviously had the potential to be insulting in its frequently sensationalist leanings. Using the artful conceits of the day, the author of the letter suggests that what Desenfans was trying to construct was so obvious that no one should be fooled into thinking it was anything else than blatant attention-seeking and self-promotion, and hardly the useful educational tool Desenfans claimed it was to be in the preface to his Catalogue.

It was reserved for you, Sir, in the boldness of your biographical presumption to pique yourself on reviving the forgotten libels of great characters; on retailing an hodge podge of contemptible anecdotes, which, if doubtful, common justice would consign to oblivion; and if true, generosity would grieve to relate.\footnote{Ibid., 15.}

The letter is clearly designed to firmly remind Desenfans of his place, and this appears to have been as much about profession and social standing, as it emphasizes the ungracious, undignified way Desenfans delivered his opinions, and the unseemly practice of dredging up “libelous gossip” for the entertainment of his readers. These elements came together to serve as fuel for a fire that was not, in the opinion of the author of the letter, Desenfans’ to stoke in the first place.

You have taken upon you, Sir, to slander, as far as in you lies, a body of men, of whom it may justly be said that they are never slighted but by ignorance, nor insulted but by brutality. You have arraigned them at the bar of the public, as guilty of the most degrading, the most contemptible delinquency…\footnote{[Shee?] 1802, 34.}
In his catalogue, Desenfans had also warned his readers against incompetent connoisseurs, an irony which the author of the letter takes particular joy in pointing out, effectively undermining Desenfans’s right to weigh in on anything. Desenfans was neither a trained artist, nor a gentleman connoisseur: he was a picture dealer, and to presume that this role entitled him to pass judgment on either artists or collectors was untenable.

The anonymous writer did not have the last word, however, at least not publicly. In the third and final edition of the Desenfans’s catalogue, he included an addendum that addressed the concerns of ‘the painters’, and specifically the issues and instances raised in the letter. He rises to the occasion of the its challenge, writing again from his assumed perspective of a gentleman collector, and continues to assert himself very capable of meeting the charges issued by the anonymous painter effortlessly.

Desenfans maintains that, while researching the individual pictures to be included in the sale, he and Bourgeois were simply struck by the number of instances in which jealousy and unpleasantness raised their ugly heads and caused harm. The inclusion of the anecdotes, then, was to warn painters of their acquaintance against the unharmonious and unflattering pitfalls of the past.44 As sharp as the criticisms of the anonymous painter were, Desenfans crafts his own sarcastic retorts:

44 Desenfans was undoubtedly alluding to various disputes with the Royal Academy between different factions of artists regarding elections and appointments to various positions, as well as to the particular and specific insults directed towards Bourgeois in the newspapers of the time. See Waterfield 1989, 38. For scholarly treatment of various debates occurring within the Royal Academy, see Holger Hoock, 2003. See also Farington, 4: 1335; 5: 1769; 6: 2160.
Far from intending to injure any one, we have avoided mentioning, or pointedly attacking any individual; but in contributing our endeavours to root out an evil, which has been of considerable injury to those meritorious painters, and particularly to young students, who stand in need of every assistance and advice, we have, on the authority of those authors mentioned in our preface, taxed Lanfranc, Claude, Rubens, and Velasquez, with jealousy and envy.—We however do solemnly declare we had no intention of alluding to those artists, who had written to us on the subject; on the contrary, we feel free to confess we are not aware of any resemblance that they might bear in any respect whatever to those masters.

We intreat they will review the catalogue impartially, and they will observe that we have adopted great caution in mentioning the jealousy that exists among painters, and made very considerable exceptions to its being general. We trust it will appear evident we have attacked only the guilty.  

Desenfans claims for himself the right to put certain artists back in their places, as well; those who may have reached beyond their abilities and aligned themselves with Old Masters simply by virtue of a shared profession. He essentially accuses the anonymous painter who issued the challenge, and any who might side with him, of being hampered by oversensitivity, and thus of being wholly unable to judge the merits of the catalogue.

Desenfans also took the opportunity to publish a response in the form of his own letter, addressed to Benjamin West, then President of the Royal Academy, dated 26 February 1802 [See Appendix G]. At the time of publication in February 1802, Desenfans was not aware of the identity of the anonymous painter. Two weeks later, on 12 March, the Royal Academician Martin Archer Shee revealed to Farington that it was he who had written the letter. By publishing the letter, and addressing it to West, Desenfans was attempting not only to broaden discussion of the issues on which he had been challenged, but also to defend himself in a wider arena. Desenfans asserts to West  

---

46 Farington, 5: 1757. A sometimes contentious defender of the rights of the Academy, Shee went on to become its President in 1830.
his intentions in the bringing together of biographical details in the catalogue. They should serve, Desenfans explains, as an encouragement to the artists of England, so that they might not make the mistakes that have long been observed of artists by other respected writers on art and artists including André Félibien and Roger De Piles.  

In the letter to West, Desenfans vacillates back and forth between the personas of an indignant gentleman whose integrity has been impugned, and a humble businessman and picture dealer whose chance to recoup his losses was ruined by a singularly ungenerous and ill-mannered anonymous coward. He lays responsibility for this squarely at the feet of West.

Desenfans’s longstanding close association with the painter Francis Bourgeois functioned very specifically to provide him access to the debates and intrigues of Royal Academy, particularly after Bourgeois was elected to full member in 1793 from the Associate status he had had since 1787. By virtue of his close proximity to Bourgeois and his colleagues, he made every opportunity to impose his own ideas and indeed to pursue them through means both obvious and underhanded. While his ends often went unrealized, the interference sufficiently aggravated Benjamin West to the point that he was twice driven to complain to King George III that Desenfans was “a Spider who had his web fixed everywhere” and that “Bourgeois scouted information for him”. As West reported back to Farington, the King himself agreed that Desenfans was “an intriguing Frenchman”, and that “they are all so; there is no depending on them.”

---

48 Farington 1978, 6: 2167.  
49 Ibid., 6: 2212-14.
Desenfans points out to West in his own defense that it would not have made sense to deliberately offend the painters, and that his intentions were entirely innocent, and related to promoting the sale of Stanislaw’s pictures for the purposes of the sale:

In the first place, Sir, you probably recollect, that in the course of my Catalogue, I have stated, that the multitude being generally ignorant of the true beauties of pictures, it is the artists and the connoisseurs, who being the competent judges of their merit, direct the purchase of those collectors who are diffident of their own judgment—thus the supposition that I believed the pictures I was describing, and shortly intended to expose to sale, to be all of the first merit, I could not but have been sensible, that I in a great measure, depended upon the painters; and it is not customary, I think, to court people by insulting them.

It is clear, that a view to my interest ought to have made me cautious; and it is hardly possible to believe that I could so widely misdirect my judgment as endeavour to obtain that the artists should be favourably disposed for me, through the medium of premeditated injury; this circumstance will alone evince that such an intention could never for a moment have occurred to me.  

Desenfans claims he enjoyed “the strictest habits of friendship” with Joshua Reynolds, with Thomas Gainsborough, and with Richard Wilson, and reminds West of the proposal for national galleries he issued in 1799, citing it as proof of his standing interest in the promotion of the arts in England, both for collectors and patrons and for the artists. In support of his claim, he states,

The painters of every country, complain of a want of employ; can we be

---

51 Certainly, in the case of Reynolds, Desenfans had several potential points of contact: prior to her marriage to Desenfans, Margaret had sat to Reynolds on at least one occasion (a copy of the portrait of Margaret Morris c. 1757 by Moussa Ayoub is in the collection at Dulwich; see DPG627), and his brother in law was a patron of the artist. Additionally, Reynolds was a sometime supporter and patron of Desenfans’s associate, Bourgeois. While he had occasion to meet with all of these artists, it is not entirely certain that any of them would have described a relationships with him the same friendly way. All were dead by the time of this letter to West, and conveniently could not, therefore, offer their own opinions.
surprised at it, when men of talents have the weakness to depreciate each other? For who will employ Peter, when his estimation in the public mind is lost through the insinuations of Paul, whose works suffer equally through the retorts of the other? I thought myself at liberty to state it as a misfortune, that there did not generally reign through the painters, that noble emulation which prevails in other liberal professions….Yes, Sir, in my zeal for painting, I have had the candour to tell its professors the truth, but with equal circumspection and firmness. I refute the accusation of having unearthed the vices of the dead for the cruel pleasure of exposing them to the glare of the day, because, among other reasons, I think they are best when concealed, for it shades the grossness of their deformity—but if I have unveiled them on this occasion, it has been with a view of benefiting the artists of our time.  

After defending his motives, Desenfans specifically address the “anonymous assassin” who first challenged him. He undertakes to expose the roots of this challenge as petty, and of no great significance, seemingly solely related to Desenfans having been “engaged in commerce”, having been a “a grammarian”, and “finished being no more than the consul of poor Poland”, and whose desired result, Desenfans alleged, could only have been to sabotage and “crush the approaching sale of pictures.” In bringing this to West’s attention, he accuses the anonymous painter of making it virtually impossible to continue in that purpose with any hope of recovering what he clearly felt was due him through the only course of action remaining to him after the collapse of his arrangement with the King of Poland:

You know, Sir, I had great reason to expect the reimbursement of my money, through the protection of our government, but I was compelled to abandon its intercession through the misfortune of having my vouchers and other papers burnt, with those of the Embassy, at the departure of Lord Whitworth from St. Petersburgh; I have at length adopted, as the only remaining mode, a sale of those pictures, by public auction, which some irritated painters are endeavouring to injure.

53 Desenfans, Letter to Benjamin West, 8-10.
54 Ibid., 13-14.
Compelled, however, by my engagements with the public, in consequence of the publication of my catalogue, to a sale which is no longer an option, I have, notwithstanding the apparent loss attending it, entered into the necessary engagements with Messrs. Skinner and Dyke, and to secure a genuine sale, have bound myself not to buy in, by direct or indirect means, a single object. 55

As he brings the letter to a close, though, it seems clear that Desenfans’s greatest defense is simply that the biographies and anecdotes he had provided in his catalogue presented a truth that painters perhaps preferred not to see. He takes as his primary proof the writer’s cowardly anonymity, the better to “…conceal himself to strike in safety”, and “descending to the vilest injustice, endeavours by an atrocious calumny, to stigmatize me as a calumnator.” 56

Desenfans concludes by quoting a source he can only have hoped would be the best defense of his assertions: the remarks of Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), taken from an essay in The Rambler. Desenfans reproduces the text as follows:

> It was once ingeniously confessed to me, by a painter, that no professor of his art ever loved another. This declaration is so far justified by the knowledge of life, as to damp the hopes of warm and constant friendship between men whom their studies have made competitors, and whom every favourer and every censurer are hourly inciting against each other. 57

As a topic of discussion in Johnson’s essays, and rumoured to have Joshua Reynolds as its source, Desenfans felt that the subject was a fair one that was particularly relevant, or at least that, in Johnson, he had an impeccable reference from which to base his defense. 58 He writes

---

55 Ibid., 14-16.
56 Ibid., 20-21.
57 Samuel Johnson, The Rambler II, no. 64 (27 October 1750), 63. See also Desenfans, Letter to Benjamin West, 29.
58 The attribution to Reynolds was still widely held when Anna Jameson published her discussion of the Dulwich Picture Gallery. Jameson even provided more of the quotation
I have guarded my assertions with exceptions, and Dr. Johnson did not. However, he published his sentiments with impunity, and no one raised his hand or voice against him.—But Dr. Johnson had not, like myself, a collection of pictures on the eve of selling, so that interest and cabal did not create him enemies.

I trust I have fully proved in this letter, Sir, that I have not only never intended to vilify or insult the body of painters, but that I have not in fact done so, since I have only asserted what Dr. Johnson has done before me; who, like myself, had no such design in view; but stated it as a misfortune particularly attached to the profession.\textsuperscript{59}

The invocation of Samuel Johnson’s remarks would clearly have seemed entirely different coming from Desenfans, supported as they were in his text by so many carefully selected and contrived biographies and anecdotes. Context was important. Johnson’s discussion of the issue, in the context of his periodical, \textit{The Rambler}, was largely moralistic and didactic, and focused the commentary within the political and social issues of the day. The recurring theme in Desenfans catalogue of artists and their jealous tendencies became so much the focus of his catalogue, that even Desenfans’s explanations after the fact cannot have assuaged all the suspicion and mistrust about his real motives.

Most critical, though, was the simple fact that Johnson was an Englishman, and that Desenfans, despite his proclamations to his adopted English countrymen, was not. His attempts to assert himself and manoeuvre socially and professionally amongst English artists, their patrons, and arbiters of taste was tolerated, but the means by which he attempted to achieve his goals were those of a foreign picture dealer operating in

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{59} Desenfans, \textit{Letter to Benjamin West}, 30.}
England, and his machinations—informed by a different set of social and professional contacts and practices—continued to set him apart in the milieu he constantly sought to situate himself within.

Desenfans ultimately maintained that he was simply sharing his observations, and that his only possible motivation can have been to caution the painters against behaviour that might continue to damage the profession as a whole:

For my own part, I should have omitted mentioning it, had I not flattered myself with stopping, in some degree, the progress of the evil, and preventing for the future, the fine modern productions of the art, from suffering the same depreciation in the eyes of the public, that they have hitherto done, by warning detracting artists, that their envy and manoeuvres were observed; but my zeal has been misinterpreted, and candour, I see, will not be able to find a foot-path, where flattery may ride with ease.  

Desenfans remarks in the letter to West suggest that the greatest issue with the catalogue was not related in any way to its content, but was rather the heightened sensitivity of painters to valid criticisms and observations, which he should not have had to anticipate on the basis of their unreasonable nature. It is nonetheless apparent throughout the letter that, in spite of the counter points he made on this basis to each one of the anonymous painter’s challenges, Desenfans was acutely aware of the damage such criticisms might do, in terms of the forthcoming sale, and in terms of his reputation in general:

However, Sir, victim of a displeasure I have not merited, I understand the press teams with invective and abuse against me; and that while some are prepossessing the collectors against the pictures I submit to the hammer, other assassins, concealed by an anonymous garb, are sacrificing and selling for a few pence, a good, I value more than life, that unsullied reputation I have endeavoured to acquire during the thirty-two years that I have lived in this country, honoured, I trust, with the public esteem, as well as with the private confidence and friendship of some of the most

---

respectable characters, who not infrequently have condescended to make the first advances.\(^{61}\)

Desenfans’s renewed determination to present himself as a gentlemanly character, and a worthy one whose motives were above question, is paramount, as he invokes vague friendships with upstanding men who, he suggests, even sought him out on the basis of his good reputation.

Both Desenfans’s plan of 1799, and later, his sale of 1802, represent his attempts to participate, negotiate and respond to the absence of a suitable public repository for pictures in London, determined by the specific circumstances of Desenfans’s personal experiences and his career.

By his own contrivance, Desenfans constantly inserted himself into the realm of the gentleman collector that he aspired to be part of, though he clearly could not control how these contrivances would be received. For better or for worse, the name he made for himself was one that was recognized—sometimes as a successful collector and associate of great men, sometimes as a man who had been deceived by his own determination and ambition to succeed in his chosen profession, and, when he was being particularly meddlesome, sometimes as an interfering foreigner. Through the case of Desenfans, it is possible to access the ongoing and unresolved debates of the period about who was entitled to comment on, steward or otherwise influence matters of art and culture.

What was expressed in the *Letter from the Anonymous Painter* was the inherent elitism between professions, between classes, and between nationalities, and its legacy in the body of literature that addresses Desenfans has continued to plague him: tutors might

\(^{61}\) Ibid.
become picture dealers but not critics, connoisseurs or judges. Frenchmen could not
become English, no matter how hard they protested to the contrary.

Though contemporary evidence of Desenfans’s sale of 1802 is scant, the
interpretation of the catalogue and of Desenfans provided by the anonymous writer and
his judgments on Desenfans had a lasting effect. Anna Jameson concluded that the sale
had been a uniform failure, based less on the actual pictures and more on public
perception of Desenfans as the conventional authority in the person of the anonymous
painter who challenged him established it. In producing his extensive catalogue,
Desenfans committed clumsy “inadvertencies and impertinences.”⁶² Some forty years
later, George Redford followed Jameson in this assessment. While neither Jameson or
Redford explicitly state as much, the surviving criticism of the catalogue for the sale of
1802 suggest that these perceived impertinences were directly related to the role he
presumed to cultivate for himself as a great collector and connoisseur.

While this might be true of the sale, however, it is not where Desenfans’s story
stops. The auspicious commercial occasion Desenfans hoped to create was not realized,
but most of the 187 pictures included in the sale clearly moved out of the collection
through private arrangements in the following years—he continued to craft himself as a
gentleman collector, to participate in the ongoing debates, and to acquire and trade
pictures.⁶³ Failures here and there, public though they may have been, did not prevent

⁶² See Jameson, 2: 437; Redford, 1:44.
⁶³ Vague descriptive titles such as Landscape with Figures and Cattle or Head of a Man,
coupled with equally vague and fluid attributions to artists and schools, complicate record
keeping of sales and collections in this period to a significant extent: that said, it appears
that only fifty-six pictures in the collection of the Dulwich Picture Gallery can be firmly
identified as having been among the 187 listed in the catalogue of 1802. This suggests
that the bulk of them moved out of the ownership of Desenfans and (after Desenfans’s
Desenfans’s continued participation within an environment which was coming to perceive as necessity a public collection of pictures for the nation.

death in 1807) Bourgeois between 1802 and the death of the latter in 1811. Some 40-odd other paintings in the bequest may also have been in Desenfans’s collection—identifiable in the inventory he drew up for insurance purposes in 1804. The Bourgeois bequest ultimately consisted of 371 pictures in total. See Desenfans’s inventory of 6 June 1804, item 4 MS XVI f49r-f51r, Archives, Dulwich College, London. See also Murray, 19.
Chapter Five:

The Old Servant’s Old Masters: the Collection of Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792)

The collection of Joshua Reynolds, first president of the Royal Academy of Arts, serves as an intriguing counter study to the examples posed by those of Robert Walpole and Noel Desenfans. Particularly in contrast to Desenfans, whose professional and national status made him an outsider, Reynolds’s position as an English artist and head of the Royal Academy should have placed him ideally to dictate the fate of his extensive personal holding of Old Master pictures. Reynolds was, in many ways, the ultimate insider on artistic matters. Though to a large extent, he represented conventional of authority regarding artistic instruction and production for Britain’s national school of painters, he was unable to realize his plans for his own art collection. Reynolds’s reaction to the rejection of his plan to cede his collection to the Royal Academy is a third but by no means final example of a personal attempt to conceptualize a response to the growing impulse towards establishing a public, national collection of pictures in England in the closing years of the eighteenth century.

For the purposes of this study, the example of Reynolds and his collection serves as an epilogue of sorts. In same span of years that saw John Boydell and his printmakers creating a public monument to a private collection, and Noel Desenfans seeking a national repository in part for a collection formed for a foreign head of state, Reynolds, too, noted the absence of a national collection of pictures for England and attempted to respond to it. In fact, for some of the very reasons Desenfans was unattractive as the originator of such an idea, one might have expected Reynolds should have been
successful—he was a native born Englishman, he was the President of the Royal Academy, and he was an advocate of the use of Old Master pictures in the instruction of Britain’s painters.

**Conceptualizing a National Collection**

When Reynolds delivered his inaugural lecture as President of Royal Academy in 1769, he voiced the opinion that the “principal advantage” of the newly formed Academy would be the provision of “a repository for the great examples of the Art”.¹ It is not clear the extent to which Reynolds had participated in the early discussion amongst London’s painters regarding the establishment of an Academy, but his remarks represent to some degree the shared sentiment of many of his colleagues to whom he delivered that lecture.² An accessible collection of Old Master and foreign pictures was identified as one of the two primary purposes of establishing such an Academy for artists: the institution would not only provide instruction for students, but the instructive elements would be nurtured by the presence of exemplars past and present. The opportunity for students to work from such models to perfect their own talents would ostensibly enable the artists of the Royal Academy to benefit from that which had so long been denied them: the means to create a noble British School which could capably rival and even surpass other national schools.³

At the time of Reynolds’s death in 1792, the primary goal he had outlined for the Academy over twenty years earlier had not been realized. Throughout his career, he had

¹ Reynolds 1975, 15.
³ Reynolds 1975, 16-17.
avidly collected Old Master pictures, and regularly opened his home to students and other artists so they might view and study them, occasionally lending individual pieces out for prolonged study.\textsuperscript{4} Details are scant, but sometime between 1789 and 1790, he offered his collection to the Royal Academy for what was said to be a nominal price,\textsuperscript{5} for the purposes of setting up a permanent repository and exhibition room for Old Master paintings and sculptures.\textsuperscript{6} His offer was summarily rejected, and his response to this rejection constitutes a fascinating foray into personal responses to the developing impulse towards the establishment of a public collection of pictures.

Manuscript papers bequeathed by Professor Frederick Hilles to the Yale Center for British Art indicate Reynolds’s emotional response to the situation.\textsuperscript{7} In hasty scrawl, Reynolds noted that the project “was not receiv’d with that warmth as I thought I had reason[to] expect”, and that “in short [the offer] was rejected [,] the great expense of the Room servants was made indeed the principal objection.”\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{5} The earliest source for this information remains the Northcote’s biography of Reynolds, which went through several printings between its first publication in 1813 and the second, revised and augmented edition of 1819. Northcote does not specify the price Reynolds asked, nor did he record the reasons for the Academy’s refusal of the terms. James Northcote, \textit{The Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds} (1819; repr. London: Cornmarket Press, 1971), 278.
\textsuperscript{6} Frederick W. Hilles, \textit{The Literary Career of Sir Joshua Reynolds} (Cambridge: The University Press, 1936), 184-5.
\textsuperscript{7} In 1973, Professor Fredrick W. Hilles bequeathed a collection of archival material to the Yale Centre for British Art, now housed in their Rare Books and Manuscripts Department. Portions of it referred to in this chapter have been cited from transcriptions of the material included in F.J.P. Broun, 1986. Hereafter referred to as Reynolds, as transcribed and cited in Broun.
\textsuperscript{8} Reynolds, as transcribed and cited in Broun, 1:67.
While the latter remark suggests the primary reasons for the refusal were financial, James Northcote’s cryptic remarks several years later suggests that funds may only have been part of the problem, though he does not go into detail about other possibilities.\(^9\) Regardless of the reasons, his ambitions having been thwarted, Reynolds leased space at 28 Haymarket, and mounted a select exhibition of 181 items for show and for sale. In April 1791, Reynolds opened ‘Ralph’s Exhibition’, so called because the entrance fee of one shilling was to go to his old servant, Ralph Kirkley.

Disappointment and spite proved a powerful combination. Reynolds noted that “if the expense was thought to much for a Royal Academy it may well be thought too great for an individual to bear, It becomes therefore necessary that the public or that part [that] take a pleasure in Picture[s] pay the expense….”\(^10\)

The course of action and the circumstance were clearly unusual, and were ridiculed at length in the London papers [See Appendix H]. While it is unlikely that anyone seriously accused him of contriving to reap monetary benefits from such an exhibition, Reynolds was teased mercilessly about what might have appeared to be an attempt to disguise his involvement in the scheme, for the purpose of profit. But Reynolds was determined to make a point as demonstrably as possible, in the face of the Royal Academy’s own annual exhibition: he staged Ralph’s Exhibition most deliberately to run concurrently with that of the Academy.\(^11\)

Reynolds’s roughly scribbled drafts for the newspaper advertisements and for the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition reveal that the whole circumstance to have

---

\(^9\) Northcote states that Reynolds’s “generous offer was for some reasons declined.” Northcote 1819, 278.
\(^10\) Reynolds, as transcribed and cited by Broun, 1:67-68.
\(^11\) Newspaper advertisements and promotions for both ran side-by-side in April 1791.
been one of enormous frustration. Even the drafts of notices which never made it to newspapers in their earliest forms clearly provided the promise of a public outlet where he could air not only his disappointment at the specific rejection of the Academy, but also for the broader state of affairs regarding access to the arts in England. Specifically, he uses the occasion of Ralph’s Exhibition to criticize the lack of private galleries open to the public. He notes,

The Palaces of Rome that have Collections of Pictures or Statues are always open always to be seen at the fixed price for the Servant of three Pauls which is little more than a shilling English. It is the Same at Florence & Bolognia [“& Venice” deleted] and [on] a very slender recommendation any student/Person has leave to copy what he pleases the want of this advantage in England is much to be regretted. This project is therefore undertaken in order in some measure to supply this deficiency.12

The relative inability of students to access Old Master pictures and have the opportunity to gain from their example was a recurring theme in Reynolds’s life and his career, and that focus seems to have been softened and expanded towards the end of his life to include a more general understanding of the benefits of exposure to Old Masters to the public as well. The purpose of the Academy for Reynolds, as expressed through his Discourses, was to reposition English art more competitively against that of the rest of Europe.13 Reynolds understood the standards of Western art to be absolute, and if English artists were to throw off the primitive, naïve reputation of their native school, they must be trained with the aid of proper examples on which those standards were based. So, too, should their public be trained to appreciate the highest standards of the European artistic tradition.

12 Reynolds, as transcribed and cited by Broun, 1:69.
Reynolds’s early advice to students, presented in the context of his second Discourse, clearly conveyed the idea that access to examples of the work of other artists was essential:

It is indisputably evident that a great part of every man’s life must be employed in collecting materials for the exercise of genius. Invention, strictly speaking, is little more than a new combination of those images which have been previously gathered and deposited in the memory: nothing can come of nothing; he who has laid up no materials, can produce no combinations.

A Student unacquainted with the attempts of former adventurers, is always apt to over-rate his own abilities; to mistake the most trifling excursions for discoveries of moment, and ever coast new to him, for a new-found country. If by chance he passes beyond his usual limits, he congratulates his own arrival at those regions which they who have steered a better course have long left behind them.\(^\text{14}\)

When the time came years later to announce the exhibition of his own collection of Old Masters, it was clear to Reynolds that the public might be seen to benefit, too.\(^\text{15}\)

The context of the advertisements is of course different from the instructional lecture—in the course of the exhibition, Reynolds was also hoping to sell the pictures and was clearly counting on the circumstances to increase attendance and spark interest among buyers; while the lecture was drafted for the edification of the students of Royal Academy. Nonetheless, the suggestion that Old Master pictures be made accessible held potential to benefit professional and public audiences is consistent.

\[^{14}\text{Reynolds 1975, 27.}\]
\[^{15}\text{Specified by an advertisement in the } St. James’s Chronicle, 27 July 1789.}\]
Personal Investment for Public Ends: Collecting Pictures, and the “Business” of Reynolds’s Life

In drawing up the promotional material for Ralph’s Exhibition and planning what it might best accomplish, Reynolds had come to an expanded understanding of the value and use of Old Master pictures. Not only did the exhibition provide the opportunity to show up the Royal Academy and make quite plain the opportunity that had been missed by it to acquire his collection, but also through the material he drafted, he was able to turn things over in his mind, and to revise his thinking in light of his own disappointment.

Frederick Hilles located a draft of the Preface for the catalogue of Ralph’s Exhibition, and it reads as follows:

Tho I have given the pamphlet [the] Title of Catalogue resonee [sic] the [spectator] will not find what by custom that little [title?] promises—an [enconium] applying all the epithets of praises upon every Picture which language affords on the con[trary] as this is intended for the…[students] of the Royal [Academy] as much care will be tak[en to] mention the defects of ever[y] Picture as pointing out the beauties,—Every Picture in this Room does possess some part of the Art worthy the attention of the Artist and it may [be] as just [to say] that every Picture has some defect what Pictures in the wor[l]d unites in itself all excellencies The Art of Criticism—each criticism is to point those out in [the] surest way…As for the authority of my opinion, I shall effect no modesty it may be said [that it] has been the business of my life, and I have had great opportunities, and hope it will not be concluded because I cannot Paint my[self] in such a manner as to add authority….  

Ralph’s Exhibition, by virtue of its public nature, forced Reynolds not only to crystallize his thinking on the benefit of pictures to students but also to focus on what the English population had suffered due to the lack of access to Old Master Paintings. It affected, to Reynolds’s mind, the ability of the English to tell good pictures from bad, to

---

16 As transcribed by Hilles from a document lent by Rupert Columb, Esq., to the Royal Academy. Hilles, 185.
the detriment of all. One of the least legible passages from Reynolds’s manuscript notebook pages seems to reveal the extent of the problem as he saw it:

I do not expect many, tho the Exhibition is crowded people's curiosity are excited to see of the state of the Arts and judge themselves of the emulation of living Artist[s] and care but little for the works of the dead of which they would have neither taste or judgment, none but real lovers will desire to [see] it & those do not make the bulk of the people.  

Ultimately, the sale associated with the exhibition was a failure. Reynolds died a mere eight months after Ralph’s Exhibition and, with the exception of some minimal bequests to his three executors, left the bulk of his large collection to his niece.  

Picture collecting had occupied Reynolds for a considerable part of his life and career: in the gallery of his fashionable home in Leicester Square, Reynolds took particular pride in arranging the Old Master works for the perusal of clients, colleagues and students, and in placing his own works amongst them.  

The collection, which had been to central to Reynolds’s life over the forty-odd years it took to assemble, came to what he would have considered an ignoble end. In the years following his death, his niece and her husband

---

17 Reynolds, as transcribed and cited by Broun, 1:69. Reynolds is speaking here of the public able to attend the exhibition and sale—those who could afford the gate fee of one shilling. In another instance in the manuscript pages, he refers to the fee being implemented not for profit or undue gain, but rather to “keep the masses out”, similar to the door fee at the Royal Academy annual shows. In the context of the period, these remarks are not contradictory: the public who could pay was not the same as the masses who could not. Given that the fees were to go to his servant, Ralph, and were not for his own personal gain, Reynolds identified no contradiction.  

18 Each of the three executors was left a specific painting, or one of his choosing. Sir George Beaumont was left Bourdon’s Return of the Ark and Sir Abraham Hume was given “the choice of his Claude Lorraines”. See the London Chronicle, 8-10 March 1792, vol. 71, no. 5548 and 24-27 March 1792, vol. 71, no. 5556.  

19 Northcote 1813, 2: 241-42.
systematically sold off his vast collection of Old Master pictures in a range of ill-fated sales.\textsuperscript{20}

Two curious questions emerge from the scant information available. Were there other reasons the Royal Academy did not take Reynolds up on his offer (as Northcote suggests)? And, if the lack of publicly available collections of pictures was truly a concern to Reynolds, why did he not arrange of his own accord to have the collection set up as a publicly accessible one?

On the face of it, it seems ridiculous that the Academy did not do everything in its power to enable the transfer of Reynolds’ collection to its own institution. Reynolds was the much-revered first president of the Royal Academy, who devoted his professional efforts to raising the status of artists, advising study and recommending access to Old Master pictures. He had an active career both buying and selling pictures, acting as both agent and advisor to a number of other English collectors.\textsuperscript{21} Closer investigation, however, reveals that the situation was not at all straightforward.

Reynolds’s relationship to Old Master pictures—truly ‘the business of his life’—was a complicated one. He took the business of the Academy and his important role there very seriously, and valued as much as study from nature, the benefits which could be yielded from studying the merits and faults of Old Master pictures, culling the best

\textsuperscript{20} Almost immediately after Reynolds’s death in 1792, his niece Mary Palmer made motions to sell the collection. A team of advisors including Joseph Farington seems to have cautioned against it, primarily on the basis of the uncertainty of buyers made shy in a flooded market, and because the Dutch and Flemish portions of the Orléans Collection were rumoured to be arriving and would pose stiff competition. Two sales between 1792 and 1793 were cancelled for these reasons. At least five known sales took place between 1795 and 1821, and several others seem to have been attempted under assumed or anonymous names. Broun corrects and catalogues the error-riddled literature and presents a comprehensive summary of the sales. See Broun, 1:60-81.

\textsuperscript{21} Broun, 1:60-81.
aspects of exemplars and turning them to new and inspired purposes. Reynolds’s aim was to help the Academy’s students compete with artists from other academies who adhered to a rigid academic hierarchy—to participate in this realm, to succeed by its standards and ultimately surpass them. Attention to past examples and even emulation were the orders of the day.

Two things stand out as being particularly worthy of attention. In the first place, the degree of usefulness of this practice and the ways in which this might be implemented were not universally agreed upon. Shaped as it was throughout the course of Reynolds’s Discourses, and as it appeared evident in his own works and in the way many of the productions of Academy members were judged, though, emulation of Old Master painting was occasionally met with uncertainty and skepticism, if not resistance.

Secondly, by the last years of his life, Reynolds’s own practice in collecting Old Masters was known to be uneven: his collection did not always reflect the points and advice laid out in his Discourses, his choices of individual pictures were not always reliable, and in the course of his purchases (as with many collectors) he acquired fakes and copies which he sometimes undertook rather vigourously, to clean, correct and restore.

There is no doubt Reynolds’s edicts as expressed through the body of the Academy were powerful shaping determinants of what had previously been the largely more unfocused enterprise of painting in England. Part of the modus operandi was to inject and cultivate enlightened noble qualities, raising all artists firmly from the status of tradesmen and mechanics to genteel practitioners of the fine arts. Reynolds himself
cultivated a genteel and learned persona and lifestyle. He succeeded in this endeavour in large part, and this provided sufficient structure against which mavericks might react.

Reynolds’s insistence on the value provided by the examples of the Old Masters, and his own interpretation of there being central to artistic invention not only became a key part of occasional attacks on Reynolds’s work as a painter, but also evoked broader criticism of the practice. Where Reynolds saw invention based on understanding and appreciation of longstanding tradition, it was possible for others to identify and be critical of slavish devotion, pictorial thievery, and a rather pronounced lack of invention and imagination.

The oft-cited example of this criticism is the painting, *The Pictorial Conjurer*, or *The Conjurer* (1775, National Gallery of Ireland), by Irish artist Nathaniel Hone. Hone used the painting to make pointed jabs at Reynolds’ practice of borrowing figures and compositions from Old Master pictures: it constituted a public calling out of plagiarism, and produced such a strong reaction that the Royal Academy refused to exhibit it on the premises. The inclusion in the composition of prints and engravings after Old Master pictures by such artists as Anthony Van Dyck, Francesco Albano, Raphael, Pietro da Cortona and Michelangelo was clever commentary on works in Reynolds’s own

---


23 In protest, Hone mounted an independent studio exhibition of over one hundred of his own works, including *The Conjurer*. 202
The sophisticated criticism bound up in Hone’s picture may be read on several levels. To simply identify as primary the implication that the hoary-bearded Conjurer represents Reynolds demonstrating a singular lack of imagination by waving his wand or his brush and reconstituting the works of other artists is to not give Hone’s picture its due. A more nuanced reading suggests that it was the manner in which Reynolds employed the Old Masters that was the principal objection. It would have been one thing if the works Reynolds referenced in his own paintings could always be shown to have been chosen for reasons that contributed meaning and significance to his own ‘inventions’. But if the President of the Royal Academy produced willy-nilly cut-and-paste jobs, where the Old Master pictures referenced and cribbed offered nothing new in the way of depth or meaning, such a practice may have called into question the real value of employing Old Master pictures as aids for creation, invention and the instruction of the Royal Academy’s students.

As to the larger question of how the public and Royal Academy understood Reynolds’s relationship with Old Masters: while the effect of quoting Old Masters in contemporary paintings could be pleasing and ennobling, and undoubtedly raised the profile of English portraiture to a ‘Grand Style’, such public criticism and questioning of just how Old Master pictures might be used may have contributed to the unwillingness of the Academy as a body to endorse and maintain a collection such as Reynolds’s under its own roof.

---

24 Newman, 345-352.
Hone’s death in 1785 offered a second opportunity for an already high-profile painting to be on display and subject to public comment, when the contents of his studio was put up for sale.\textsuperscript{25} This took place only a few short years before Reynolds’s offer to the Royal Academy to take custody of his collection of Old Masters. In the context of Reynolds’s offer, to reference Old Masters in one’s art to varying degrees depending on the student’s level of study and proficiency was encouraged. But the very real issue of displaying Old Masters might have been construed as facilitating an artificial competition for popularity against the Academy’s own artists.

Even if the artists accepted the function of such a gallery as Reynolds had proposed at the Lyceum on the Strand, there was no guarantee that the public was prepared or equipped to do the same. Indeed, Reynolds’s own scribbled remarks about the attendees of Ralph’s Exhibition suggested a sad lack of confidence in the public, for reasons that were not within the means of that public to correct. While the prospect of a public gallery of Old Master pictures was not in itself objectionable, when faced with the immediate prospect, the ways by which it might best be implemented to the Academy’s best advantage had not been resolved or agreed upon.\textsuperscript{26} A mixed message that appeared to be officially endorsed was perhaps not a risk the Academicians were prepared to take.

\textsuperscript{25} Smith, 156. Joseph Smith noted in \textit{Nollokens and his Times} that at the sale, Reynolds himself seized the opportunity to study \textit{The Conjurer} in detail.

\textsuperscript{26} Nor were they, really, when Noel Desenfans’s plan was proposed in 1799, or, for example, when the collection of the connoisseur and fellow of the Royal Society and the Society for Antiquaries Robert Udny was offered to Royal Academy for the benefit of the students and the public at his death in 1802. Newspaper accounts specify that Udny wanted the collection, which had been developed largely on his travels to Italy, and funded by his mercantile interests in the West Indies, to remain intact, and that he wished it to go to the Academy. The offer of the collection was rejected by the Royal Academy, and was put up for sale in London in 1804. See \textit{The Annual Register} for the year 1802 (London: W. Otridge and Son, and etc.: 1803), 364.
As a second reason why the Royal Academy might not have more willing to take Reynolds’s collection, it must be noted that his own tastes deviated from what he advocated and prescribed for the greater benefit of the Academy’s students in his Discourses. He had taken great care throughout the Discourses to recommend for example those artists whose works best exemplified the Grand and Ornamental styles, as he characterized them, and particular aspects of colour, design, composition and perspective, in an effort to streamline and simplify the instruction provided to the students. The Discourses privileged Michelangelo and Raphael above all others as exemplary artists, with Salvator Rosa, Poussin and others receiving special mention for particular admired qualities.  

At the time of the sale of Reynolds’s collection in March of 1795, it was noted of the collection in the London newspaper the *Morning Chronicle* that

> Certain it is, that from all these Schools there are Pictures; but, though the President, in his Lectures, placed the three first mentioned [the Roman, Florentine and Bolognese] at the head of the Art, and the Venetian, Flemish and Dutch Schools in an inferior class, as departing from the great purposes of Painting, and catching at applause by inferior qualities, yet of these Pictures the principal numbers of his Paintings are made up.

The reviewer for the *Morning Chronicle* was struck by the high proportion of Venetian colourists represented in the sale, especially since Reynolds himself cautioned students against these types of pictures in his Discourses. Reynolds was also wary of recommending Rembrandt as a model to students. While clearly fascinated with Rembrandt, the qualities Reynolds personally most admired in that artist were not

---

27 In particular, the fourth and fifth Discourses. See Reynolds 1975.
28 The *Morning Chronicle*, 16 March 1795.
29 Ibid.
reducible to the grand model he provided to the students of the Academy. Records compiled by Broun show Reynolds owned thirteen pictures by the Dutch artist.\(^{30}\)

It is not surprising that Reynolds owned a wide range of works, many falling outside the Italian examples he cited as most appropriate for the instruction of students. His preliminary drafts for Ralph’s Exhibition encompass the idea that the pictures displayed would be described and judged as much on the basis of faults as merits, and Reynolds’s own engagement with a wide range of works was clearly central to his desire to nail down as firmly as possible useful tenets for the Discourses, which could instruct London’s artists for years to come. Examples that fell on both sides of the judgments he issued in the Discourses would clearly have been useful to this end.

Reynolds’s purchasing was subject to what was available on the market, and to his own whims about worth, and of course cost. His holdings in the areas he professed to admire most were weakest in terms of solid attributions.\(^{31}\) After Reynolds’s death, the connoisseur Richard Payne Knight noted viciously,

> We are aware indeed that even the best artists are not always the least fallible judges in their own art; of which Sir Joshua Reynolds was a remarkable instance. No unfledged peer or full-plumed loan jobber was more liable to be deceived, even in those branches of the art he professed most to admire; false Corregios, false Titians and false Michael Angelos swarmed his collection, which he certainly believed to be true.\(^{32}\)

---

\(^{30}\) Reynolds believed all thirteen to be firm attributions to Rembrandt. At the time of Broun’s assessment of Reynolds’s pictures, eight were still identified as authentic. \(^{31}\) See Broun for percentages of which pictures known to have been in Reynolds’ collection retain the attribution assigned to them in his lifetime. Broun 1987, 98-99. \(^{32}\) Richard Payne Knight 1810, 310-11. As cited by Broun, 1:98. Knight was not in a position to cast stones; as an expert in classical sculptures and relief, his own erroneous assessment of the Elgin Marbles would haunt him in later years. See Hoock 2003, 289. Even Reynolds old pupil, James Northcote, could not be kind on the subject, and noted Reynolds’s propensity for (accidentally) purchasing copies. See Stephen Gwynn,
It is an uncanny echo of what William Hogarth observed to Horace Walpole as early as 1761, when he used Reynolds as the exception to the rule that painters always understand painting, particularly when purchasing at sales.\(^{33}\)

Despite these failings, clearly known to his contemporaries, the sheer volume of the collection, and Reynolds’s generosity about sharing it with a vast array of interested parties, made it remarkable. The *Morning Chronicle*, on the event of the sale in March of 1795, noted that many of the attendees “expressed their astonishment at the number of pictures. The fact is that besides those which were shown to visitors at Leicester Fields there were many piled up in the garrets and many at his house at Richmond.”\(^{34}\)

In 1791, apparently after Ralph’s Exhibition had been mounted, regret was registered in the newspapers that the Royal Academy had not done more to retain the collection:

> Why should not the Royal Academy (instead of lending their immense and unaccounted for property to parishes, etc. at four percent interest) purchase this entire collection?—the benefits which would occur to the students would be an ample satisfaction, and by such means the purpose of the institution could be completely answered.\(^{35}\)

While the anonymous party seems to be suggesting that the work of the Royal Academy’s students could have benefited from prolonged study of such a collection, the advantages of such a collection being established for public purpose were also being registered, and the means by which to do so would perhaps have been within reach.

The question posed was entirely legitimate. In later years the blame placed on the

---

\(^{33}\) *Memorials of an Eighteenth Century Painter (James Northcote)*, (London; T. Fisher Unwin, 1898), 223.

\(^{34}\) See Chapter One, page 1-2, and Appendix A.

\(^{35}\) The *Morning Chronicle*, 16 March 1795.

\(^{35}\) Courtauld Institute Library, *Courtauld Newspaper Cuttings*, 1: 95, hand-dated in pen to 1791.
Royal Academy for its perceived oversight would shift to a more general regret that Reynolds himself had not ensured the future of his collection in a more satisfactory way. Though it is entirely speculative, one wonders why Reynolds did not pursue an independent course of action, acquire premises of his own accord, and arrange the pictures according to the purpose he most desired for them towards the end of his life. Reynolds was angry about the refusal of the Royal Academy to make good on his offer, and it almost appears as though he gave up the enterprise, and threw the collection to the wind.

But perhaps it was simply of the utmost importance for Reynolds to have his collection made truly public as something established under the authority of the Royal Academy, or not at all. Reynolds badly wanted for any such public collection to be associated with the Royal Academy and to help fulfill the initial mandate of the institution, where it could be managed and controlled ostensibly by his influence: to set up independently may not have been an avenue seriously pursued because it would not have the same context or imprimatur.

Reynolds approached his role in the Academy with the utmost care and attention, evidenced by his dramatic resignation from the presidency in 1790 over the failure to immediately appoint his chosen candidate, Joseph Bonomi, as Chair of Perspective. His departure can be read superficially as a petty response to not getting his own way, but ultimately it was governed by his unswerving desire to provide what he understood to be

---

36 Cotton, 191.
37 At great urging from the Academicians and the King, Reynolds was persuaded to return to the post. Further details may be had from Hoock 2003, 116-118. See also Richard Wendorf, Sir Joshua Reynolds: The Painter in Society (Harvard UP, 1996), 176-185.
the best for the Academy. Though the collection had been formed seemingly outside of
the rules he laid out in his own Discourses, Reynolds’s role in the Academy was central
to the way he formulated his public presence. In conceiving a public legacy so tied to the
principles of his art and the instruction of others, he might not have been willing to
contemplate the establishment of a permanent structure without the support and,
primarily, the distinction of it operating under the auspices of the Royal Academy.
Chapter Six:

Conclusion

In September 1857 a periodical called *Willis’s Current Notes* published an anecdote by William Cribb that had been passed down by his father, a picture framer in eighteenth-century London.¹

Cribb’s tale, on the subject of gentleman connoisseurs, was as humorous as it was cautionary. It examined the malleability of judgment under deliberate influence, and poked fun at supposed experts who could be seduced by their greed and deceived by their senses in matters concerning Old Master pictures. Cribb described how one man spied in the corner of a framer’s shop a landscape painting he recognized as having been in the home of another collector. After subtle inquiries and cautious negotiation over the course of a week, the man was able to purchase the picture for 200 pounds, a bargain price he was happy to pay for a *View near Castle Gondolfo* he felt sure was an original picture by Claude Lorrain.²

The man’s triumph was short-lived, however: the draft with which he purchased the item was returned to him the following week, accompanied by a brief note. Lighthearted in tone, it levied a heavy accusation: its author expressed mock wonder that a gentleman so well versed in pictures and so sure of the exclusive virtues and talents of Old Masters should be taken in by *a contemporary work*. The painting was not by Claude at all, but a copy produced by the studio assistant of a London painter.

---

² The original picture is Claude Lorrain (Claude Gellée), *Sunrise*, c. 1646/7, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, acc. number 47.12.
The man in the tale who was so deceived was the London-based picture dealer and collector, Noel Desenfans. The man who deceived him was the first President of the Royal Academy, Joshua Reynolds.

Various accounts of this story suggest Reynolds set out to deceive Desenfans from the outset—that, tired of Desenfans’s seemingly endless waxings on the superiority of Old Masters, Reynolds contrived to have the picture lying in wait, in the hopes of tempting Desenfans into committing an embarrassing and very public mistake.³ A single surviving letter of 1791 constitutes the contemporary proof of Cribb’s part in a deception that became deliberate, even if it did not start out that way [See Appendix I].⁴

Desenfans is revealed by the exchange to have been ever on the lookout for opportunities to best other collectors by cadging what appeared to be the already vetted and approved authentic picture. Reynolds, who himself so valued the Old Masters, is revealed to be critical of others who privileged Old Masters to the exclusion of works by contemporary painters. In neither case is the impression wholly accurate or definitive; neither is it entirely wrong. The exchange demonstrates that the boundaries were not fixed: as indicated by such a specific example of a personal exchange, there were shifts, tensions, ebbs and flow to personal reactions to Old Master pictures and the value placed on them in late eighteenth-century London.

The negotiation and navigation of private ambitions and interests surrounding picture collections in the midst of public ambitions was complicated in this period in large part because these public ambitions were not clearly defined. Indeed, the process of

articulating and shaping these ambitions with an eye towards national benefit was only beginning to be explored. In many ways, the conceptualization of such a repository was something disparate groups could rally around: even if they could not agree on how it might best be realized or achieved, it was a prospect that might be made to address the varied needs of personal legacies, the education of artists and the broader public, and the cultural reputation of the nation. In the envisioning of such a project as a national gallery, competing viewpoints on artistic matters were pitched against each other, and jockeyed for authority.

In the case of the Walpole Collection, several parties with different concerns, aims and interests, attempted to negotiate the collection’s fate. Horace Walpole aimed to record for posterity the objects of his father’s great fondness through the *Aedes Walpolianae* and the *Anecdotes of Painting in England*; John Wilkes saw a window through which to register publicly both the absence of a national collection of Old Masters, while at the same time airing his cultural grievances against King and government in his proposal to parliament in 1777 to save the Walpole Collection for the nation; and John Boydell seized an exciting opportunity to craft an innovative business venture with the protracted production of his *Houghton Gallery*. As circumstances changed the nature of the project, Boydell’s response to the changes conspired with the other elements to preserve an impression of Walpole’s Collection, intact.

This preservation was not a static culmination, however; it became something beyond. The Walpole Collection became a thing to be celebrated, commemorated, and mourned. It was conceptualized as a nearly-national collection through representation and translation into different media and contexts, and in many ways may be understood
to have functioned as successfully as a ‘real’ one by its curious appearances in situations and contexts the original collection of paintings could never have enjoyed. In this way, long after its removal to Russia, the Walpole Collection addressed a newly-perceived absence of a national, public collection of pictures, and became a site on which the impulse towards the establishment of such a collection could be nurtured in the absence of its realization, as a central part of a narrative of loss. In co-opting the collection through his representations of it, John Boydell claimed it for a broader public through his ever-adapting business ventures and pressed it into service towards nationalistic ends.

For Noel Desenfans and Francis Bourgeois, their story falls victim to its grand conclusion, in which parts of the collection became so instrumental to the establishment of the Dulwich Picture Gallery. The end of that story is celebrated at the expense of the details that led to it, and in so doing denies the myriad of private responses and negotiations on the part of Desenfans in particular.

As changing circumstances provided Desenfans with time and opportunities to negotiate the ownership of a fully-formed but undeliverable royal, national collection on a personal level to further his own social and professional ambitions, his responses to the situation in the form of his plan and his sales catalogues continue to show that private impulse towards the establishment of a public collection of Old Master pictures could being nurtured just as publicly. Though none of the interested factions of government or cultural institutions in a position to do so could agree on how such a collection might be realized, discussion around Desenfans’s plan indicates it was a lack that was felt. While Desenfans attempted to capitalize on that impulse, he was also pressing it into service: he was a party with vested interests, saddled with an entire ready-made princely collection
of pictures which was essentially going begging. In juggling the collection’s commercial value and its cultural worth through the process of negotiating ownership, Desenfans’s expression of his opinions and ideas in both his plan and his Sales Catalogue of 1802 reveal how the status and comportment of individuals could contribute to public discourse and reception. The response Desenfans received from Martin Archer Shee in the form of the Letter from the Anonymous Painter, and his own missive to Benjamin West not only demonstrated the very real challenges posed to more conventional authorities, but at same time legitimized these challenges and made it harder to dismiss them.

In the case of Reynolds, his collection of Old Master pictures, and the staging of Ralph’s Exhibition, his position as first president of the Royal Academy in large part determined his response to an observable interest in the establishment of a more publicly accessible collection of pictures which, as he understood it, would have benefited the whole nation. Indeed, through the lens of his stewardship of the Royal Academy, while the collection was personal, it was in the last instance of his ownership understood and defined in terms of the nation. His attempt at the end of his life to create such a collection under the auspices of the Royal Academy was frustrated, and it might be speculated that he could not envision the project permanently in any other context. Though in many ways Reynolds seemed ideally placed to dictate the conditions by which his collection would be left to posterity, ultimately, any goals had to come to fruition within the truncated, short-lived context of Ralph’s Exhibition.

None of these impulses expressed and acted upon by Boydell, Desenfans or Reynolds were without direction; rather they were complicated by external means that
prevented their realization in straightforward ways. In the case of all these examples, it is not only the impulse that can be observed. The idea that, while collections might for a time function as static immobile edifices, they are fluid, organic things that come together and are broken apart is also imparted. Will and determination alone, whether on the part of the collector or other interested parties—even among those who seem ideally positioned to realize their aims—can be diverted by circumstance.

It is hoped the preceding study has gone some way towards identifying and elucidating a developing impulse towards the establishment of a national, public collection Old Master pictures in late eighteenth-century England, and towards recovering and reframing individual and important responses to that impulse, constructed and conditioned by a myriad of specific contexts and circumstances. Each case study demonstrates the complicated issues of navigating and balancing private and public interest regarding not only the dispersal of private collections, but envisioning public, national ones. Conceptualizations of a national collection of Old Master pictures, and the negotiation of this concept in different contexts and for an ever-expanding audience both real and imagined, participate demonstrably in the developing notions of nationalism in this period.
Bibliography

Archival and Contemporary Printed Sources

**British Library, London**


Desenfans, Noel. *A Plan, preceded by a short Review of the Fine Arts, to preserve among us, and transmit to Posterity, the Portraits of the most distinguished Characters of England, Scotland, and Ireland, since his Majesty’s Accession to the Throne. Also, to give Encouragement to British Artists, and to enrich and adorn London with some Galleries or Pictures, Statues, Antiques, Medals, and other valuable curiosities, without any Expense to Government*. London: Sampson Low, 1799. [Transcribed in text as Appendix D].

______. *A Descriptive Catalogue (with Remarks and Anecdotes never before Published in English) of some Pictures of the Different Schools, purchased for His Majesty the Late King of Poland*, 2 vols. London: Cadell and Davies, 1801.

______. *A Descriptive Catalogue (with Remarks and Anecdotes never before Published in English) of Some Pictures, of Different Schools, Purchased for His Majesty the Late King of Poland*, revised 3rd ed. 2 vols. London: Cadell and Davies, 1802.


Green, Valentine. *A Review of the Polite Arts in France, at the time of their Establishment under Louis the XIVth, compared with their Present State in England: In Which Their National Importance, and Several other Pursuits, are Briefly stated and considered In a Letter to Sir Joshua Reynolds, President of the Royal Academy, and F.R.S*. London: 1782.
Johnson, Samuel. *The Rambler* II. no. 64 (27 October) 1750.


[Shee, Martin Archer?]. *A Letter to Noel Desenfans, ESQ. Late Consul-General of Poland in Great Britain, occasioned by the second edition of his catalogue, and his answer to what he terms “The Complaints of Painters.”* London, 1802. [Transcribed in text as Appendix F].

[Taylor, John?], *Memoirs of the Late Noel Desenfans, Esq. containing also, A Plan for Preserving the Portraits of Distinguished Characters; Poems, and Letters.* London, 1810.


Walpole, Horace, ed. *Abraham van der Doort’s Catalogue and Description of King Charles the First’s Capital Collection.* London: William Bathoe, 1758.


Burney Collection of Early English Newspapers.

London, Christie’s. *A Catalogue of the First Part of the Truly Superb Collection of...Pictures...of Monsieur Desenfans.* 11-14 May 1785.


London, Mr. Robert H. Evans. *A Catalogue of more than Five Thousand Copper Plates Engraved by the most Esteemed British Artists...* 1 June 1818.


London, Christie’s. *A Catalogue of that Capital Collection of High-Finished Drawings…from the Gallery of the Late Earl of Orford at Houghton, now it the possession of the Empress of Russia… 28, 30 April and 1 May 1792.*

**British Museum, London: Department of Prints and Drawings**

The Whitley Papers, vols. I-XIV, and two guard boxes, uncatalogued.

**Cambridge University Library, Cambridge**


**Christie’s Auction House, New York**

London, Mr. Robert H. Evans. *A Catalogue of more than Five Thousand Copper Plates Engraved by the most Esteemed British Artists… 1 June 1818.*

**Courtauld Institute Library, London**

*Courtauld Newspaper Cuttings*, 2 vols.

**Archives of Dulwich College, Dulwich**

Manuscript Collections 16.


**Sackler Library, Oxford University, Oxford**

Art Gallery of Ontario, Ontario


Victoria & Albert Museum, National Art Library, London


Press Cuttings from English Newspapers on Matters of Artistic Interest 1686-1835. 6 vols.


Primary Newspapers and Periodicals

The Annual Register, London.

The Daily Advertiser, London.


The European Magazine, London.


The London Evening Post, London.

The London Chronicle; or, Universal Evening Post, London.

The Morning Chronicle, London.

Morning Post and Daily Advertiser, London.

The St. James’s Chronicle, London.

Whitehall Evening Post, London.
General Bibliography


Brewer, John. “Cultural Production, Consumption, and the Place of the Artist in


Cotton, William. Sir Joshua Reynolds and his Works: Gleanings from his Diary, Unpublished Manuscripts, and from Other Sources. London and Plymouth, 1856.


Malone, Edmund. *The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds, Kn...containing his Discourses, Idlers, A Journey to Flanders and Holland, (now first published), and His Commentary on Du Fresnoy’s Art of Painting...to which is prefixed an account of the Life and Writings of the Author.* 2 vols. London, 1797.


**Exhibitions Catalogues**


Appendix A

Letter from Horace Walpole to George Montagu, Tuesday 5 May 1761

We have lost a young genius, Sir William Williams; an express from Belleisle, arrived this morning, brings nothing but his death. He was shot very unnecessarily, riding too near a battery. In sum, he is a sacrifice to his own rashness,—and to ours—for for what are we taking Belleisle? I rejoiced at the little loss we had on landing—for the glory, I leave it to the Common Council. I am very willing to leave London to them too, and do pass half the week at Strawberry, where my two passions, lilacs and nightingales are in full bloom. I spent Sunday as if it was Apollo’s birthday; Gray and Mason were with me, and we listened to the nightingales till one o’clock in the morning. Gray has translated to noble incantations from the Lord knows who, a Danish Gray, who lived the Lord knows when. They are to be enchased in a history of English Bards, which Mason and he are writing, but of which the former has not writ a word yet, and of which the latter, if he rides Pegasus at this usual foot-pace, will finish the first page two years hence—but the truly frantic oestrus resides at present with Mr. Hogarth: I went t’other morning to see a portrait he is painting of Mr. Fox—Hogarth told me he had promised, if Mr. Fox would sit as he liked, to make as good a picture as Vandyke or Rubens could. I was silent—‘Why now,’ said he, ‘You think this very vain, but why should not one speak the truth?’ this truth was uttered in the face of his own Sigismonda, which is exactly a maudlin whore tearing off the trinkets her keeper had given her, to fling at his head. She has her father’s picture in a bracelet on her arm, and her fingers are bloody with the heart, as if
she had just bought a sheep’s pluck in St. James’s market. As I was going, Hogarth put on a very grave face, and said, ‘Mr. Walpole, I want to speak to you’; I sat down, and said, I was ready to receive his commands. For shortness I will mark this wonderful dialogue by initial letters.

H. I am told you are going to entertain the town with something in our way. W. Not very soon, Mr. Hogarth. H. I wish you would let me have it, to correct; I should be sorry to have you expose yourself to censure. We painters must know more of those things than other people. W. Do you think nobody understands painting but painters? H. Oh! So far from it, there’s Reynolds, who certainly has genius; why but t’other day he offered £100 for a picture that I would not hang in my cellar; and indeed to say truth, I have generally found that persons who had studied painting least, were the best judges of it—but what I particularly wanted to say to you was about Sir James Thornhill (you know he married Sir James’s daughter) I would not have you say anything against him; there was a book published some years ago, abusing him, and it gave great offence—he was the first that attempted history in England, and I assure you some Germans have said he was a very great painter. W. My work will go no lower than the year 1700, and I really had not considered whether Sir J. Thornhill will come within my plan or not; if he does, I fear you and I shall not agree upon his merits. H. I wish you would let me correct it—besides, I am writing something of the same kind myself, I should be very sorry we should clash. W. I believe it is not much known what my work is; very few persons have seen it. H. Why, it is a critical history of paintings, is not it? W. No, it is an antiquarian history of it in England; I bought Mr. Vertue’s MSS, and I believe the work
will not give much offense. Besides, if it does, I cannot help it: when I publish anything, I give it to the world to think of as they please. **H.** Oh! If it is an antiquarian work, we shall not clash. Mine is a critical work; I don’t know whether I shall ever publish it—it is rather an apology for painters—I think it owing to the good sense of the English, that they haven’t painted better. **W.** my dear Hogarth, I must take leave of you, you now grow too wild—and I left him—if I had stayed, there remained nothing but for him to bite me. I give you my honour this conversation is literal, and perhaps, as long as you have known Englishmen and painters, you never met with anything so distracted. I had consecrated a line to his (I mean for with) in my preface; I shall not erase it, but I hope nobody will ask me if he was not mad. Adieu!

Yours ever

H.W.
The Speech of Mr. WILKES in the HOUSE of COMMONS last Monday, on the motion to refer to the Consideration of the Committee of Supply the Petition of the Trustees of the British Museum.

Mr. Speaker,

Before the petition of the trustees of the British Museum is referred to the committee of supply, I beg the indulgence of the house to submit a few general ideas on that subject entirely independent of party and politics. The encouragement of all the arts and sciences, appear to me, Sir, just objects of public regard, and highly deserving parliamentary attention, especially in this great commercial country. Among the many proofs of the improvement of our national taste, and the love of polite literature, the establishment of the British Museum claims the pre-eminence. It rose under the favourable auspices of this house, has been carefully watched over by us, and I hope will still continue to receive our friendly protection and support. Various branches of learning have already derived singular advantages from that rich repository, and I think it may be made yet more extensively useful to this kingdom. This, Sir, can only be done by this house, by parliamentary assistance. I shall at present confine myself to general ideas, and throw out some hints for a future day’s consideration.
It seems to me, Sir, highly expedient, that the Trustees of the British Museum should not only be enabled adequately to fulfill the objects of their public trust, by making what is already collected as useful as possible to the nation, but still farther to extend the laudable purpose of their institution. Their present funds we find by their petition are incompetent even to the contracted plan now pursued. It is a general complaint that the Museum is not sufficiently accessible to the Public. This must necessarily happen from the deficiency of their revenues. The trustees cannot pay a proper number of officers and attendants. This will today be in part the consideration of the committee, into which the house will soon resolve itself. But, Sir, I wish their plan much enlarged, especially on two important objects, books and paintings. This capital, after so many ages, remains without any considerable public library. Rome has the immense collection of the Vatican, and Paris scarcely yields to the mistress of the world, the greatness of the King’s Library. They are both open at stated time, with every proper accommodation to all strangers. London has no large public library. The best here I believe is the Royal Society’s, but even that is inconsiderable, neither is it open to the Public, nor are the necessary conveniences afforded strangers for reading or transcribing. The British Museum, Sir, is rich in manuscripts, the Harleian Collection, the Cottonian Library, the Collection of Charles I, and many others, especially on our own history, but it is wretchedly poor in printed books. I wish, Sir, a sum was allowed by parliament for the purchase of the most valuable editions of the best authors, and an act passed to oblige, under certain penalty, every Printer to send a copy bound of every publication he made to the British Museum. Our posterity by this, and other acquisitions, might perhaps possess a more valuable treasure than even the celebrated Alexandrian collection, for
notwithstanding that selfishness which marks the present age, we have not quite lost sight
of every beneficial prospect for futurity. Considerable donations might likewise, after
such a sanction of parliamentary approbation, be expected from private persons, who in
England, more than in any country of the world, have enlarged views for the general
good and glory of the state.

The British Museum, Sir, possesses few valuable paintings, yet we are anxious to
have an English school of painters. If we expect to rival the Italian, the Flemish, or even
the French, schools, our artists must have before their eyes the finished works of the
greatest masters. Such an opportunity, if I am rightly informed, will soon present itself. I
understand that an application is intended to be made in Parliament, that one of the first
collections in Europe, that at Houghton, made by Sir Robert Walpole, of acknowledged
superiority to most collections in Italy, and scarcely inferior even to the Duke of Orleans
in the Palais Royal at Paris, may be sold. I hope it will not be dispersed, but purchased
by parliament, and added to the British Museum. I wish, Sir, the eye of painting as fully
gratified, as the ear of music is, in this island, which at last bids fair to become a favourite
abode of the polite arts. A noble gallery ought to be built in the garden of the British
Museum, for the reception of that invaluable treasure. Such an important acquisition as
the Houghton collection, would in some degree alleviate the concern, which every man of
taste now feels at being deprived of viewing those prodigies of art, the Cartons of the
divine Raphael, King William, although a Dutchman, really loved and understood the
polite arts. He had the fine feelings of a man of taste, as well as the sentiments of a hero.
He built the princely suite of apartments at Hampton-court on purpose for the reception
of those heavenly guests. The nation at large were then admitted to the rapturous
enjoyment of their beauties. They have remained there till this reign. At present they are perishing in a late Baronet’s smokey house at the end of a great smokey town. They are entirely secreted from the public eye; yet, Sir, they were purchased with public money, before the ascension of the Brunswick line, not brought from the *Herrenhausen*. Can there be, Sir, a greater mortification to many English gentlemen of taste, than to be thus deprived of feasting his delighted view with what he most admired, and had always considered as the pride of our island, as an invaluable national treasure, as a common blessing, not as private property? The Kings of France and Spain permit their subjects the view of all the pictures in their collections.

A remarkable opportunity, Sir, or improving the national taste in painting, which was lately lost, I hope may now be recovered. The incomparable Sir Joshua Reynolds, and some other great painters, who do honour to our country, generously offered the late Bishop of London (Dr. Richard Terrick) to adorn the Cathedral of St. Paul’s, a glorious monument of the magnificence of our ancestors, with some of their most valuable works; but the proposition had to encounter the most absurd prejudices of a tasteless and ignorant prelate (Dr. Robert Lowth), which were found to be insuperable. We have the satisfaction at present of having in the see of London a gentleman, not only of solid piety, but of the soundest learning, and of exquisite, classical taste. I hope at such a favourable moment the proposition will be renewed and accepted.

As almost all arts and science have, a connection with each other, they will likewise give each other a mutual assistance, and the beautiful art of engraving, which is now carried among us to an astonishing degree of perfection, will come to the aid of her sister painting. We have shewn our attention to that art this very session. I hope
hereafter, even in this cold, raw climate, to be warmed with the glowing colours of our own Gobelins tapestry, and I wish encouragement was given be parliament to that noble manufacture, which in France almost rivals the powers of painting. The important advantages of such of commerce too we may learn from our neighbours.

I am not alarmed, Sir, at the great expence, which some gentlemen seem to dread as the inevitable consequence of what I have mentioned. The treasures of a state are well employed in works of national magnificence. The power and wealth of ancient Greece were most seen and admired in the splendor of the temples, and other sublime structures, of Pericles. He boasted, that every art would be exerted, every hand employed, every citizen in the pay of the state, and the city not only beautified, but maintained by itself. The sums he expended, on the public buildings at Athens, in the most high and palmy state of Greece, after their brilliant victories over the Persians, diffused riches and plenty among the people at that time, and will be an eternal monument to the glory of that powerful republic. The Parthenon only, or temple of Minerva, which is said to be the most beautiful piece of antiquity now remaining in the world, and is of the purest white marble, cost, with its statues and sculptures, above a thousand talents, near 200,000l.

One observation here, Sir, naturally occurs, which justice to the trustees of the British Museum demands. No public money has ever been more faithfully, more frugally applied to the purposes for which it has been given, than what they have received. Perhaps the trustees of the British Museum are the only body of men who have never been suspected of want either of fidelity of economy. I think therefore we may safely trust them farther, not penuriously, but largely, especially when their accounts are so frequently submitted to our examination.
Learning, Sir, and the polite arts, have scarcely more than three enemies, ignorance and stupidity always, superstition often. The noble lord (Lord North, First Lord of the Treasury, and Chancellor of the Exchequer) with the blue ribband, who is at the head of the finances of this country, possesses wit, genius, a great deal of true taste, and a very cultivated understanding. The most important establishment of this kingdom in taste and literature now supplicates his assistance and protection, and I trust the arts will find in him a generous benefactor and a powerful protector.
Appendix C


Cambridge University Library.

March 25, 1775


Proposal

This Collection is universally allowed to be the first in this Kingdom, and is esteemed, by the Best Critics, to be equal to any in Europe. It consists of upwards of Two Hundred Pictures, after which engravings are now executing; which will be published in Numbers, and printed in Two Volumes, of the same Size as the Proprietor’s former Undertakings.

The whole Work will be included in about Eighteen Numbers at Two Guineas each, to be paid on the Delivery; not less that Ten Prints will be published in each Number. The Proprietor exerts his utmost Care to have the Work performed in a Manner which shall render it an Honour to our Country, a faithful Imitation of the Originals from which it is taken, and a Credit to every Artist employed in it.
The Proprietor promises that the Subscribers shall have First Impressions; that no more
that Four Hundred complete Sets shall be printed; and that as soon as the above Number
Shall have been subscribed for or sold, the Subscription shall be closed.

Number I.

This Day published, contains the Ten Following Prints, (Price 2l. 2s.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Painters</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>In the Coffee Room</th>
<th>Engravers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Swanevelt.</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td>The Happy Peasants.</td>
<td>Mason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willibert.</td>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Holy Family, with St. John on a Lamb.</td>
<td>V. Green</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Van Dyke</td>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Sir Thomas Wharton, A whole Length.</td>
<td>Ditto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procaccini.</td>
<td>4.</td>
<td>The Marriage of St. Catherine.</td>
<td>Ditto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L. Caracci</td>
<td>5.</td>
<td>The Placing of Christ in the Sepulchre.</td>
<td>Ditto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Rosa</td>
<td>7.</td>
<td>The Prodigal Son</td>
<td>Ditto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P. Brill.</td>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Africa.</td>
<td>Browne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snyders and</td>
<td>10.</td>
<td>A Fruit Market</td>
<td>Earlam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long John</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D

Noel Desenfans, *A Plan, Preceded by a Short Review of the Fine Arts, to Preserve Among Us, and Transmit to Posterity, the Portraits of the Most Distinguished Characters of England, Scotland, and Ireland, since his Majesty’s Accession to the Throne. Also, to give Encouragement to British Artists, and to enrich and adorn London with some Galleries or Pictures, Statues, Antiques, Medals, and other Valuable Curiosities, without any Expense to Government*, London: 1799

Transcribed from the copy in the collection of Rare Books and Manuscripts Department, British Library

To the TRUSTEES of the BRITISH MUSEUM.

My LORDS and GENTLEMEN,

I BEG leave to submit this PAMPHLET to your consideration,

And have the Honour to be,

With great Respect,
MY LORDS AND GENTLEMEN,

Your Humble,

Most obedient Servant,

NOEL DESENFANS

(London, Jan 10, 1799)

Notwithstanding I have lived near thirty years in this country, whose government has been pleased to incorporate me with the natives in all their rights and privileges, I yet hardly dare venture to publish the least pamphlet in English; but as elegance is not essential to offer a place, I shall be satisfied if I am understood.

The idea occurred to me only a few days since, on being informed that monuments are about the be erected in St. Paul’s Cathedral, to the memory of Major-General Dundas, Captain Faulkner, and Captain Rundle Burgess; and in Westminster-Abbey, to that of Captains Harvey, Hutt, and Montague.

I felt a secret pleasure on reflecting, that those brave officers, who fell in defence of their king and country, will live in marble, as serve as memorials of patriotism, loyalty, and heroism.
Gratitude has ever been the characteristic of Great Britain; in no country are merit and services rewarded with more zeal and promptitude; the common men are, equally with their commanders, the objects of her solicitude; and when their wounds or advanced years call them to retirement, she provides them an asylum, where they are supplied with the necessaries of life: but if any one should fall an honourable victim to his courage, his wife and children are immediately provided for by some of those laudable subscriptions that are invariably raised after an action. Besides, the tribute of a monument erected in memory of an officer, is alike sacred to all the valiant men who fought and fell with him.

My gratification would have been as great as sincere, in beholding the likenesses of those commanders; and I cannot but heartily regret the want of public gallery appropriated to the portraits of our distinguished characters; Europe does not present such a one; it is reserved for Great Britain, ever eager to exalt merit to set other nations the example of an establishment, which cannot fail proving a stimulus to emulation in every class.

Should not the portraits of a Wolfe, a Heathfield, a Howard, a Cornwallis, a Chatham, a Mansfield, a Howe, a St. Vincent, a Rodney, a Duncan, a Nelson, a Warren, and other great men, who have so largely contributed to illustrate this reign, be assembled, in order to afford us the daily enjoyment of them, and be transmitted collectively to posterity?

Their respective families regard them now with veneration; yet they will, perhaps, fall a sacrifice to the cravings or necessities of avaricious or profligate descendants; and those portraits which should be guarded with a jealous care, and excite public admiration, may be fated to moulder into dust at the door of a broker’s shop.
Another motive, no less powerful, makes me desirous that such a plan should be adopted: I see with amazement and pleasure, the rapid progress which the Fine Arts have been making in Great Britain for some years past; and while I regret that men of abilities should suffer for want of encouragement, I suffer myself, that those abilities should degenerate for want of employment, which, if they remain inactive, must inevitably be the case; for the Fine Arts, when deprived of practice, are on the eve of a lethargy.

Three centuries have not yet elapsed since painting has been known and cultivated here; but, perhaps, from time immemorial, architecture and sculpture have been so in this country; which however, with the exception of a few architects, produced no eminent artists till the Royal Academy was instituted; the best works, therefore, that have been done here in painting and sculpture, previous to that fortunate epoch, were executed by foreigners. Henry the Eighth, though in so many respects a perfect contrast to our present sovereign, was, however, like him, a lover and patron of painting, for he long employed Hans Holbein, who became celebrated in his service.

The next English monarch who displayed real taste, was Charles the First, who, besides being endowed with a good natural capacity, traveled through France and Spain, where he saw the performances of the greatest masters. At Madrid he was presented with the excellent pictures, which, when he returned home, contributed to keep up and improve that knowledge he had acquired in foreign countries.

From that period, taste rapidly spread through the nation, and in a short time our nobility vied with each other in forming collections, whilst Charles was daily increasing his own, not only with the best works he could procure from abroad, but also with those
of Ruebens, Vandyck, and other artists, who were employed for him in palace of Whitehall.

But as soon as providence permitted licentiousness and superstition to triumph over that ill-fated prince, his loss, on a sudden paralysed taste, and the Fine Arts, as in a total eclipse, were plunged into darkness; the King’s pictures were sold, and scattered on the Continent: and the unfortunate artist, deprived of his royal patron, banished all hope, and dropped the pencil. This was the first check painting experienced in England.

In reading the history of Painters, I have remarked that they generally excel in proportion to the patronage they receive from sovereigns. Less ambitious of wealth than honours, and artist looks up to a monarch as the fountain-head of his wishes, and a wise prince, who has at heart the good of his country, and knows how to form great men, never denies a smile to rising merit.

The Royal Academy of London, though of no earlier date than the year 1768, has acquired celebrity throughout all Europe. Such is the emulation of this seminary, and with so much avidity do the numerous candidates struggle for any vacancy that happens, that I have frequently doubted, however honourable it may be to have a seat in the House of Commons, whether the difficulty is not as great to obtain one in the Royal Academy. This emulation is, in great degrees, excited by the uniform and constant patronage the King has conferred on the institution; its annual exhibition is honoured by a visit from their Majesties, after which it is the resort of the nobility and gentry, of foreigners, and all men of taste.

Every Artist, whether he his [sic] a member of the academy or not, has the privilege of sending his performances to the exhibition, where the certainty of their being
viewed by persons of the first rank and judgment stimulates his utmost exertion; and I have no doubt but this has, in no small degree, contributed to the fame our artists now enjoy.

I perfectly remember the exhibition made soon after the Royal Academy was founded, and candour compels me to say, I never saw worse productions that those they were composed of, particularly in the painting. Indeed, it seemed as if its rules and principles had been totally unknown to most of the exhibitors, who had not the least notion of drawing, transparency, colouring, or expression. There were, however, scattered amongst those paintings, a few diamonds in the necklace of false stones, the works of a very limited number of artists, so of whom had studied in Italy; they prevented the rooms from being deserted; though, perhaps, the King’s patronage was their best support: for his Majesty’s wish that the Fine Arts should be encouraged, having been declared, his example and indulgence were seconded by the public.

I call on those who have witnessed the primitive exhibitions of the Academy, to attest the astonishing progress it has made since that period. If private enemies, or the superficial connoisseur of this country, will dispute it, I apply to foreigners, who have rendered British Arts justice, not only by extolling their works, but also by purchasing them at very high prices.

Being informed, a few years since, that a small picture, representing a Child at Prayers, by Sir Joshua Reynolds, was on sale at Paris, though I immediately sent Mr. Perregeaux, the banker, a commission of two hundred guineas, I could not obtain it, as the picture was deemed worth a great deal more.
I do not, however, mean to assert, that all Sir Joshua’s performances are alike meritorious, for I have seen many indifferent ones of his hand; and so altered were his style and manner in the latter, form those he had formed in the earlier period of his life, that on my shewing him some pictures I had from the very family for which he had painted them, he actually enquired whom they were done by.

Blessed with superior capacity, and flattered by having attracted the notice of his sovereign, who placed him at the head of the Academy, and conferred on him the honour of knighthood, Sir Joshua made the greatest efforts to distinguish himself; and he soon, by his own works in Painting, equaled the greatest of the old masters whilst by his excellent discourses to the students, he formed their taste; any by encouraging emulation, he raised ambition, that powerful spring of the human mind, in the younger artists, who are now become the ablest professors in Europe. Such in the result of an establishment which has caused no kind of expense to government; but let us examine what advantages the nation has besides derived from it.

The revival of the Fine Arts has been a source of more benefits to Great Britain, than a superficial observer, who looks on them as an amusement, would be led to suppose; they not only amuse, but are a profitable occupation; and by opening the mind and habituating our youth to employment and industry, they ward of vice and dissipation. We may, therefore, justly apply to the Fine Arts, what Cicero said of the Sciences, *Adolescentiam alunt, senectutem oblectant*, &c.

Our innovators, that fresh set of false and impious philosophers, who, in order to trample on laws, dare deny their God, are now setting up Nature as the author of the world, and of all commodities and luxuries, when in fact, Nature, our common and
savage mother, however grand and beautiful, does no more than produce man feeble and naked, and leaves him, with all his infirmities, at the mercy of the four elements.

But the eternal and only philosopher, who created the world, has also created Nature as a mere instrument to his immutable will, and through her daily gives life to millions of beings, which he endows with force to support their natural infirmities, and with sufficient instinct to supply their natural wants; so that, form the elephant to the smallest quadruped, and from man to the minutest insect, every living creature is enabled to provide its food and its home; but, although that instinct procures form them no further advantage, it evidently comes from God; therefore from his also, and not from Nature, must come that industry, those arts, and refinements, to which are owing the commodities and luxuries every polite nation enjoys.

Let us view those parts of the Russian dominions, and other countries, where the Fine Arts are still unknown; we shall find their inhabitants in a state of incivilization and ignorance, little better than savage nature. So peculiarly is refinement the characteristic of the Fine Arts, that they cannot be cultivated without it; and at the same time that they influence our mind and manners, they diffuse taste, and correct it in every class.

That taste has penetrated into our manufactures, and renders British goods of a better quality than any in Europe, so that they fetch higher prices in foreign markets, where they are sough for as superior merchandize.

Innumerable, almost, are the blessing which the Fine Arts, since their first introduction into this country, have poured on the nation. To Architecture we are indebted for our elegant [sic] and comfortable homes; for our awful and august temples, and those superb and noble edifices with which the metropolis and other parts of the
country are decorated. It was the powerful and fairy hand of architecture, that threw 
across Thames those magnificent and useful bridges; and that has raised those 
tremendous and dismal, but necessary fortresses, where crime immured can no longer 
hurt innocence or disturb society. To architecture we owe our very ships, the sources of 
our wealth and commerce; those light and traveling buildings, with which the skilful and 
intrepid Briton masters the seas, and defies his enemies.

Are we not also obliged to Sculpture for having embellished our public places and 
buildings; and for affording us the consolation of paying a last tribute to those heroes 
who have sacrificed themselves through loyalty and patriotism? ‘Tis Sculpture has filled 
Westminster Abbey with those monuments we so much admire, and which are so much 
envied by foreigners, who, no doubt, envy us no less the honour of having possessed the 
great men they are sacred to.

How truly grateful do I feel to Sculpture, for having enriched us with the statues 
of our monarchs! I mean of those who have endeared themselves, by studying the public 
good, and supporting with courage that load of cares and anxieties and the troublesome 
grandeurs, which unknown in private life, are, unfortunately for princes, inseperable form 
royalty. Yes, her divine chisel has perpetuated their figures in marble and bronze; but, 
happy Britons! ‘tis chiefly on gold that Sculpture has impressed the august features of 
your kings, and its vast circulation has long proclaimed your unrivalled opulence, and the 
glory of their reigns.

Painting, whose branches are so numerous, rescues us from passing many hours 
between four melancholy walls; and not only contributes to our wealth, but affords us a 
variety of pleasures.
Like the inhabitants of a magic palace, we find assembled around us, in her diversified works, the charms and grandeur of Nature; and witness under our own roofs, the most interesting events, the heroic and memorable deeds of the past and present times.

‘Tis her bold pencil that has traced those majestic mountains and stupendous rocks, that luxuriant landscape and enchanting sea-calm, and those tempestuous oceans rocking our formidable fleets, the invincible guardians of our fortunate coasts.

In those pictures she commemorates John signing the Magna Charta, and the Defeat of Tippoo’s Forces; ….that records Alexander’s Entry into Babylon; ….the following suite are Reviews of our Troops, whose discipline is as characteristic as their loyalty; …. In this Sea View, our ships, like a floating city, are returning, loaded with Indies’ produce; ….in its companion, A brisk Sea Gale, our sailors bring into port the captive enemy; ….that, which represents the benevolent Titus lamenting his having passes one day without doing any good, excites my breast, sentiments of loyalty and attachment for a good prince, equal to the abhorrence which the expressive pencil of Lebrun creates, by recording the Cruelties of Herod; …yon picture, so genial to my feelings, is emblematical of the glorious Revolution of 1688; in its wisdom dictates the British Constitution, and expels forever, from the country, usurping despotism, and savage anarchy.

Painting adorns the chaste bosom of a faithful wife, with a gift dearer than pearls; and to alleviate our impatience and soothe our sorrows, she presents us with the unfading image of our absent and our long departed friends.
Painting arrests the flight of time, and, in spite of the ravages of years, preserves the most exquisite beauties in their youthful bloom; and gratifies us with the portraits of those amiable women, who, no less endearing than beauty, pour balm on life, and render it comfortable.

Her pencil has transmitted us our brave defenders, our vigilant and upright magistrates, our zealous prelates, our distinguished lawyers, our vent’rous merchants who have enriched use with the eastern and western wealth, our loyal patriots who have supported with equal ardour the rights of the sovereign and of the people; and those few, but truly great ministers, who, unmindful of private fortune, have dedicated their time and superior abilities to the good of the country; who, disturbed by clamours, harassed by envy, persecuted by calumny, and overcharged with labours and anxieties, have lived in the midst of storms, and whose retirement, as the only reward of their faithful services, has been embittered by the displeasure of their prince, and the hatred of a deluded people.

For some years past, Painting has added to our commerce in a new branch, which has enriched many individuals, and contributed to swell the public revenue; for, since the art has acquired vigour in this country, and taste is more spread, the number of collectors of pictures and prints has considerably increased, so that, previously to the war, the importation and exportation of both, into and from Great Britain, was immense; and as a heavy duty is paid at the Customs House, in their importation, government drew large sums on their account; and that principally from the foreign dealer, who, with the money he received for those he had bought, purchased other pictures to take home.

Exclusively of that duty, imported pictures generally come to the hammer, either in whole collections, or introduced into sales of furniture, when they again pay a duty to
the Excise; and as most of them arrive unframed, our gold-beaters, carpenters, joiners, frame-makers, gilders, and other mechanics, are considerably benefited by that traffic.

Painting has rendered another service to Great Britain, by raising the art of engraving to the highest pitch; and I may with justice say, this country now possesses the first painters and the best engravers. Indeed, our printsellers are convinced of it, and may attest, that before the rupture of peace, they used to export vast numbers of prints, for which large sums have been remitted from abroad; a proof that the prints taken from the works of British painters, are in proportion, as highly valued there as the works themselves: and that those are really so, we cannot doubt, when we recollect the great prices that have been paid on the Continent for the performances of Sir Joshua Reynolds, Gainsborough, Wilson, Mortimer, Wright of Derby, and others of our artists.

Previously to his painting for Messrs. Boydell three historicals for about 2000l., Sir Joshua sent two of his pictures to Russia, for one of which he received 1500 guineas, and, if I recollect well, was to be paid 1000 for the other; it was about that time he painted a Holy Family, for which Mr. Macklin paid him a very large sum, and 800 or 1200 guineas for the Cottagers; the same year Sir Joshua sold the portrait of the celebrated Mrs. Siddons, in the character of Melpomene, and a Nymph, for which he received 1000 guineas.

There are men of acknowledged judgment in the art, who do not view Sir Joshua’s works with the partiality their excellence deserves, but the gratifications of the mind are as various as those of the senses. Rembrandt’s style was the opposite of Poussin’s, yet the eminence of both is undisputed; their performances are more and more coveted, and every day increasing in value. Such, I may venture to assert, from their
many admirers, will be the case with Sir Joshua’s productions, which moderately calculated, will not be valued at less that 100,000l. He who has so enriched this country, has not eaten the bread of idleness!!!

Nor can a fortune acquired by an artist be compared to one made by commerce or the cultivation of an estate. Commerce is a mere exchange of commodities; and the possessor of an estate, however careful his management, does only what many others do as well, so that he, in fact, adds nothing to the common property. But an able artist, in enriching his family, adds to the property of the nation, since he creates by his genius the materials of his fortune.

Unique and happy talent, which by animating a canvas, renders it of a high pecuniary value; or gives life to a stone, and makes it worth its weight in gold!!! Surely, the philosophical one, so long and so vainly sought for, could operate no greater wonders.

Let it not be objected, that the value of pictures, statues, &c. is imaginary. Though circumstances may sometimes occur to depress their price, as well as that of diamonds and other property, yet the time must return when they will fetch their intrinsic value.

There was a period when the works of the greatest masters, both in painting and sculpture, were sold uncommanedly cheap; and the very large sums we pay for them, since taste has gained ground in this country, are the best vouchers that the intrinsic merit of pictures and statues constitutes their real value, though their producing it to cash depends on circumstances. Notwithstanding, therefore, our artists are individually interested in their productions being disposed of without delay, it is immaterial to the nation at large, whether they are exported immediately or not; for once in being, they are a valuable
acquisition to the country, and must be considered as gold in ingots, whose coinage is reserved for the future.

I must not omit mentioning among the different advantages which the institutions of the Royal Academy has produced during the last twenty-eight years, that its annual exhibition brings, in the course of a month or five weeks, between three and four thousand pounds; with which that respectable body not only defray the expences of their establishment, but also maintain a public school of drawing, architecture, sculpture, and painting, and are at the charge of sending every year into Italy, some British youths for their improvement; besides which, they make an annual allowance to a number of poor widows and orphans; and the remainder of the money is vested in Bank Stock, as an accumulating fund, in case of emergencies, their ever becoming burthensome to the government.

The Nation has besides, acquired by that institution, a considerable property in the paintings, statues, library, and other valuables that in the Royal Academy.

Notwithstanding our Artists have deserved so well of us, they have scarcely at present any employment. The war having put a stop to our correspondence in many parts of the Continent, they receive no commissions from abroad; and unfortunately, the laudable undertakings of Messrs. Boydell and Mr. Macklin, for whom they used to paint, are also at an end; many persons who have sufficient knowledge to discern their merit, are not in circumstances to employ them; and many, whose influence would permit it, are deterred by the old prejudice, that modern productions are of little or no value.

At Paris, Rome, Vienna, Madrid, &c. we find in the most famed cabinets, modern pictures amongst those of the old masters, as their connoisseurs consider the excellence
of the work, without appreciating it for being two centuries or two years old. The prejudice has, however, been carried here to lengths truly hurtful to the modern Arts; it has discouraged our collectors from embracing the example set them in neighbouring states, and has caused them to overlook those works, which the taste and knowledge that formed their rich and superb collections must force them to admire.

I have long sought for the origin of that singular prejudice, which truly revolts common sense, and can attribute to it no other cause than this: When Rubens, Vandyck, and other good artists, lived here under the patronage of Charles the First, they painted, besides the portraits of the Royal Family, those of the principal nobility and gentry, whose descendants wished likewise to transmit theirs to their posterity. But as Charles’ martyrdom had caused the downfall of the Arts; from that period, and during many years after, this country no longer possessed any eminent painter, so that they were obliged to set to men of no talents, who professed themselves artists; but upon their works being put in competition with those of Rubens and Vandyck, the connoisseur, with justice, pronounced those modern productions to be of little or not value.

The pencil, however, continued in ignorant hands, which is the cause we even see at this day, in the apartments of our nobility and other people of fashion, many of those stiff, gaudy, inanimate figures that are a disgrace to the Art, and which taste ere this, would have condemned to the flames, had it not been restrained by respect for the memory of those they either do, or were intended to represent.

---

* I must except Cooper, the justly celebrated miniature painter Sir Peter Lely and Sir Godrfey [sic] Kneller, who also came here about that time, had abilities, but were not first rate artists.
The Fine Arts remained at this low ebb till taken, as I have already said, under the immediate protection of George the Third, who has been pleased to give them an august asylum. But although they have real friends in men of true taste, it is hardly possible to credit the injuries they suffer from superficial connoisseurs, who, hoping to impose upon us the effrontery for knowledge are continually depreciating their works.

Those petit-maitres, who, in general, are possessed of some copies, extol them as undoubted originals; and persecute, with bitter animosity, the artist who will not submit to the unpleasant task of falling into ecstasy [sic] before them. But should he prostitute his judgment, and condescend to praise their antiquated canvasses, and half-mouldered panels, he may, perhaps be so far honoured as to hear, that he possesses taste, and does not paint quite so ill as his brother artists.

A man of merit will never demean himself; and the aspiring artist, attached to his studies, having no time to spare in idle visits, cannot go and court fortune at the breakfast-table of a pretended connoisseur.

The period, I hope, is not far off, when the common adage, that nothing is good but what is old, will be totally done away; for as capital pictures of the most renowned schools, are now more frequently than ever exhibited in different parts of the metropolis, taste is improving more and more and by comparing the works of the old masters with modern British productions, instead of deciding by their ears the merit of our Artists, everyone will judge by their own eyes, how well they are entitled to encouragement.

In fact, can any thing be more ridiculous, than to censure a performance, merely because its origin cannot be traced from the 14th or 15th century! And can we help bestowing our sovereign contempt of those soi-disant connoisseurs and critics, who
pronounce on the authenticity of a picture by minutely examining its back, and who declare it a first-rate performance, if they can trace age in its antiquated performance? The influence, however, which such men possess, has, in a great degree, laid the fate of our Artists at their mercy.

A man of sense considers, that a knowledge of the Fine Arts, is acquired by practice and study, as much as by capacity, and neither praises nor depreciates what he does not understand. Far from being bigoted to statues and pictures on account of their antiquity, he is satisfied that their age cannot constitute their merit. At all times, and in all polite countries, there have been, as there are at present in Great Britain, a considerable number of inferior artists. *Non cuivis homini contingit adire Conrinthum.* Their works, of course, are excluded from curious cabinets, but they serve as furniture instead of China paper, and have a proportionable value.

Raphael, Titian, Rubens, Carracci, &c. had among their contemporaries, many painters whose names have fallen into oblivion, and who earned their livelihood either by working for furniture, or by copying the performances of those immortal masters; their copies, therefore, must be nearly as old as the originals—an incontestable proof of the fallacy of their judgment, who esteem age the criterion of excellence.

But independently of that, many pictures have been made to acquire the appearance of age, even to a complete deception: and I remember, at the commencement of my collection, about twenty-five years ago, having purchased some; they were offered at a price which induced me to buy; and as the very canvas on which they were lined, to prevent them from falling into decay, appeared old; whatever uncertainty I might have been in as to their originality, I had not the least doubt as to their antiquity.
I sent for a picture-cleaner, who made use of spirits of wine, and in a moment, that which he worked upon was totally ruined; for the colours still being fresh and tender, and not having acquired that stoicity time generally gives them, went off with the varnish, which made the cleaner say, those pictures had been in the Westminster oven.

He then informed me, that there was at that time in Westminster, a manufactory, where several persons were employed in making copies, which, after being soiled with dirt and varnish, were thrown into an oven built on purpose, and moderately warmed; where, in the course of an hour or two, they became cracked, and acquired the appearance of age—and a certain stoicity; the pictures I had bought did not possess, which made me conclude, they had not been baked enough.

I will venture to assert, that many of our superficial connoisseurs have been caught, as I have been, with this snare, and have preferred to the best modern productions those of the Westminster oven. However, none of such trumpery pictures are any longer to be seen, since taste, and the number of collectors, have so much increased. From that circumstance, I flatter myself that the works of our artists will come into vogue; which I am the more desirous of, from the interest I take in their welfare, and the conviction that Great Britain will fell the beneficial effects of their being encouraged.

Men of superior abilities have always been scarce in every country, because nature and fortune must conspire to form them; and a nation is much wanting to her interests, who omits profiting by them, when possessed of such. To leave merit unemployed, is like denying oneself honey, by refusing a hive to the bees.

What advantage have not Italian artists procured their country? Attracted by their works in architecture, Painting, and Sculpture, the rich and curious from every part in
Europe, have flocked to Italy, which for many years past has drawn its best resources from its visitors.

Antwerp, the native place of Rubens, since the loss of her commerce, has been principally maintained by shewing the performances of that great man; many of which spread also in the Low Countries, together with those of Vandyck, Jordaens, the two Teneirs, and others, have greatly contributed to enrich the Flemings.

The Dutch, who know both how to appreciate every thing they possess, and to turn it into cash, have received incredible prices for the high-finished pictures of their able and patient countrymen, Potter, Berchem, Cuyp, Dow, Wouvermans, Vanderwerff, Vanhuysum, Ostade, &c.

Spain has produced but three famed painters; Morales the Divine, the great Velasquez, and Murillo, the favourite of all our collectors. Spain has thought it good policy to retain most of their works; so that few of them being dispersed, they have brought that country less gold than the Peruvian mines, but have done her infinitely more honour.

The French, by court-intrigues, were the cause of Poussin and Claude passing their lives at Rome; yet they were prudent enough to secure most of their pictures, which, joined to those of Lebrun, Lesueur, and other artists of the same school, have enabled them not only to form excellent collection for some of their nobility, but to carry on with other nations an extensive commerce, which has been of the utmost advantage to France. The very works of Vernet only, an excellent landscape and sea painter, but much inferior to Claude, and who was still alive eight years ago, have produced no less than a million of livres; and those of Greuze, his contemporary, nearly double the sum.
At the epoch of the revolution, most of the French collections gave way; and the noble fugitives, who, on emigrating, were so fortunate as to export theirs, have experienced, that pictures have an intrinsic value, and are a real resource.

But I will now present the Plan I first mentioned.

A PLAN

*Gutta cavat lapidem, non vi, sed saepe cadendo.*

Great Britain, differing now in so many respects from other Monarchies, does not possess, like most other countries, a collection of superbly costly pictures, for the enjoyment of the sovereign, and to which, now and then, the public are permitted access; nor is it probable the King will ever form such a one, as, of the money annually levied for the state, a very small portion is appropriated for the private use of his Majesty, so that I cannot see the possibility of his gratifying himself and the nation with a Gallery, such as France possessed, and such as are in Vienna, Spain, and other countries, whose monarchs have the absolute control of the public money.

The King has, indeed, scattered in different places, some very capital pictures, among which are the celebrated Cartoons of Raphael; but were they all united, they would by no means form a collection to be compared to those of the Louvre, the Escurial, &c.

Since the 15th century, the Kings of France and Spain have been purchasing pictures at vast expence. Lewis the Fourteenth, whose inordinate ambition aimed at surpassing all other potentates, added to his collection, with a profusion, which, perhaps was hurtful to his people. But although George the Third has, from the commencement
of his reign, manifested knowledge and taste, instead of researching costly pictures and statues from foreign countries, he has made the Fine Arts of Great Britain the chief object of his attention and munificence, by which the nation has acquired several excellent Artists; yet, the want of a Public Gallery is felt, not only to contribute to her splendour, but as a centre point to the dilettanti, and a study to her rising Artists.

The sale of the justly famed Orleans Collection, seems to have marked this as the period for fulfilling at once the wishes of the Student and the Connoisseur; but I am informed those pictures have been offered to Government, and that, on account of the necessities of the State, it has been judged proper to decline the purchase. Therefore, since that grand object cannot be obtained at once, we must endeavour to obtain it gradually; and for that purpose I have traced a plan, by which, without any expence [sic] to Government, Great Britain will acquire a Gallery of the Portraits of our most distinguished characters, since the accession of his Majesty to the throne; another with the productions of our Historical, Battle, Landscape, Sea, and Miniature Painters, Sculptors, and Engravers; and a third Gallery with Antiques, and celebrated Pictures of the Old Masters.

This may be carried on in any part of the metropolis; but Montague House appears to me the most proper place, because it already contains, in the British Museum which is deposited there, many attractive objects of curiosity, is the property of the Nation, and surrounded with land, on which, at an easy expence [sic], those Galleries may be erected.

The admittance to that Museum is free. Any persons desirous of seeing it, must give in their names and places of abode, and in about a month or six weeks they receive a
ticket of admission. But as many are ignorant of the mode of application, and few are
certain whether in a month they will not have more serious engagements, Montague
House continues little resorted to and little known, notwithstanding it contains many
scarce and valuable curiousities, some of which are the gifts of individuals.

I have besides remarked, unaccountable as it may appear, that all places where no
entrance-money is paid are little frequented; our theatres have never been so filled as
since the advanced price, and I am persuaded that many of our excellent actors would
sometimes perform to empty benches if the admission were free.

The exhibition of the Royal Academy begins the latter end of April, or early in
May, at one shilling each person, and closes about the King’s birth-day; during which
short space, as I have before mentioned, it generally produces between three and four
thousand pounds, without any expense to any individual, for surely the visitors of the
exhibition cannot consider their shilling as such.

As the British Museum was purchased by the Nation, the admission to it, as I
have just remarked, is free; but is their no possibility of placing it on a footing similar to
that of the Royal Academy, for the sake of raising it to the degree of splendour that will
rival, or surpass in a few years any establishment of the kind in Europe?

I am aware this cannot be done without an act of the Legislature, which I have not
the means of soliciting, and which would be, in my opinion, too great a liberty for me to
take. I, therefore, submit the plan to the trustees of the British Museum; most of whom
being men in elevation and power, may carry it into practice, if, as I do, they consider it
feasible, and likely to be productive of good to the country.
It will perhaps, be objected, that my application is ill-timed, Government having more serious business to occupy its attention than the prosperity of the Fine Arts. In peace, however, they will not want that encouragement which war has deprived them of; and, I must remark, that a country so powerful, so commercial, and so opulent as this, will probably always be engaged in, or at the eve of war.

But should the Plan meet with the approbation of his Majesty, and the acquiescence of Parliament, the following is the only method I can devise for carrying it into execution, without a grant of money.

1st, Montague House is a very large building, nearly filled with the British Museum; but the different curiosities it is composed of, may, without any detriment to them, be so arranged as to leave temporary room; to occupy which, the Trustees should make a humble application to obtain the portraits of their Majesties, and Government to name such distinguished characters, whose portraits it shall deem proper to deposit in Montague House, unless it should prefer delegating the nomination of them to the Trustees.

2d, No expence shall be incurred for attendants, there being already a sufficient number of them in Montague House, on account of the British Museum; but the Trustees will appoint a Manager or Director, with a small salary, who shall carry the plan into execution.

3d, That no inferior picture may be admitted to Montague House, the Trustees shall request the Royal Academy to appoint a Committee, which, from time to time, shall meet them, and give their assistance and advice in selecting the Artists, either in or our of their body, for the execution of the portraits.
4th, As soon as a certain number of portraits shall be voted, the Director shall give proper
notice to the different persons on whom Government shall have conferred that honour,
and the first opportunity will be taken to have them painted. The Director shall also have
the charge of applying to the relatives or friends of those who are no longer in existence,
for the loan of their portraits, that our Artists may copy them—unless the originals should
prove good pictures, and the respective possessors should consent to deposit them in
Montague House.

5th, When fifty or sixty portraits shall be completed and arranged, the free admission to
Montague House must be suppressed, and it shall be opened to the public by paying
entrance money, as at the Royal Academy; except, however, the members of that body,
their students, and any artists who exhibit with them, for whom the admission will
continue free, as well as any other artist the Royal Academy shall recommend.

6th, Montague House shall be open from ten o’clock in the morning till six in the evening,
from Lady-Day to Michaelmas; and from Michaelmas to Lady-day, from ten till four.

7th, The porter of Montague House shall receive the entrance-money, and account for it
every day to one of the attendants appointed for that purpose; and he shall remit it to the
Trustees, or their Treasurer, every fortnight.

8th, Montague House shall be open during June, July, September, October, December,
January, March, and April, by which there will be a month’s vacancy every quarter; and
this establishment cannot prove detrimental to the Royal Academy, as their exhibition
takes place in May.

9th, In order to stimulate public curiosity, a new set of ten or twelve portraits shall be
placed in Montague House every quarter.
10th, Artists employed for this establishment will be obliged to send, as they do at the Royal Academy, their pictures properly framed.

11th, The Manager, or Director, to be entitled to no salary for the first year.

12th, The different Artists shall not be paid till twelve months after Montague House has been opened; and if, contrary to my expectations, the plan should not be attended with such success as to induce the Trustees to continue it longer, the attempt shall cease at the end of the first twelve months, and the artists, instead of receiving the prince stipulated for their performances, shall only receive in proportion to the sum levied during that year; in which case, those performances shall remain the property of Montague House; or, if the artist thinks the sum too inadequate, he shall receive back his own works.

But should the plan be successful the first twelve months, little doubt can be entertained of its being attended with increased success ever [sic] year; since new objects of curiosity will be added every quarter to the establishment: so that it is probable, it will in a short time produce a fund, capable of enabling the Trustees to commence the Galleries I have proposed erecting.

The portraits of their Majesties, and other distinguished characters, shall then be removed into the first Gallery, which shall be continued gradually, as the increasing fund will allow the Trustees a latitude of expence [sic]. What emulation will it not create in every class of men, particularly in the navy and army, whom the love of fame, and devotion to their country, lead into the greatest danger?

If an officer falls in distinguishing himself, his grateful country pays his respected memory the tribute of a monument; but why should the courageous and surviving hero be
refused a mark of distinction, far superior to pecuniary recompense or momentary honours? For such are orders and other dignities, which, however desirable, must end so soon. Indeed, the compass of life is so narrow, that our rewards for heroic deeds are too little, and too little enjoyed.

How flattering to a Briton, and any subject of the sister kingdom, that as a proof of his having deserved well of his king and country, they have voted his image in a Public Gallery, to be beheld with pleasure and gratitude by his contemporaries, and to remain their in veneration to a remote posterity! A more flattering wish ambition cannot form; nor can a more desirable reward be offered to a disinterested and truly great man.

No opposition can be made to this plan, on account of a dearth of distinguished characters; for, since the accession of the Brunswick Family to the throne, no reign has been more illustrated than this, by eminent men, both in the navy and army, by orators, ministers, divines, lawyers, philosophers, physicians, authors, artists, &c: and as talents and sciences are making daily progress, and naval and military virtues, loyalty, patriotism, and courage are more fervent than ever, we may look forward to an ample field of merit for us to select new subjects.

Should it, however, be judged more proper, the Gallery may begin from an earlier epoch; as I dare say many bad pictures, though, perhaps, true likeness of distinguished characters, may be found for our artists to make superior copies from.

The second Gallery also, to be built as soon as the fund is adequate to the expence [sic]. This will become the grand object of exertions for the best artists of every description; her the Sculptor will deposit his busts and statues, the Architect his plans; the Engraver with his prints will enrich the portfolios appropriated for that purpose; the
Landscape, Sea, and Architecture Painters will display the grand views of art and nature, whilst the Historical and Battle Painter will record the glorious actions, and brilliant victories of his country.

If ever emulation stimulated genius, it must be on this occasion; not because the works of our artists to be deposited in this Gallery will be liberally paid for out of the fund, which, I suppose will be increasing in the hands of the Trustees; but because they will be certain of their continuing in that Royal and National Establishment, where they will have an opportunity of transmitting their names to posterity. By such a policy, in the Vatican, and other palaces of Italy, the artists formerly strove with a noble emulation, and produced those *chef d’oeuvres* which command our admiration, and to obtain which the French have lately waded through so much blood, and have not been sparing of their own.

In this second Gallery will also be deposited the patient labours of the Miniature Painter, of the Medalist and Draftsman, as well as the works of the eminent Female Artist; so that beauty and domestic virtue will also contribute to the fame of an institution, sacred to valour, talents, patriotism, and loyalty.

The third Gallery shall contain Antiques, and first-rate Pictures of the old Masters. The Trustees will, perhaps, now and then, when opportunity offers, buy a capital picture, but it never entered my mind to fill this by purchases out of the fund: I have carried my expectations further.

Notwithstanding Great Britain, as I before observed, has not what in other countries is termed a Royal Collection; she is, nevertheless, possessed of more capital pictures than any other in Europe, where the Sovereign, the Princes of the Blood, and a
few of the Courtiers, only can boast of having a collection. Property being more equally
divided in Great Britain, most of our nobility and gentry are possessed of a collection; so
that, besides the quantity of noble private cabinets we see in the metropolis, an immense
number of pictures are spread in different country houses; and as, since the French
Revolution, and the troubles in Flanders, Holland, Germany, and Italy, the importation of
pictures from thence into this country has been greater than every, our collections are
daily increasing in both number and refinement. For, as best the best wines are imported
here on account of the heavy duty, so are the best pictures; since the importer pays
equally a guinea per foot on the good and the bad, his profits on the latter would not be
equivalent to the customs.

But, although so many pictures have of late been poured into Great Britain, their
quantity, instead of lessening, has increased their value. An abundance of the necessaries
of life, which must be immediately consumed, render them cheap; but the longer the
pictures of esteemed masters are kept, the most valuable they become. Accidents in
cleaning, and the injuries of time, daily increase their number; those, therefore, that are in
careful hands must daily increase in their value; and a period will arrive, when many of
those pictures which the French Revolution has caused to be brought here, will return to
the Continent, where they will be sold for double or triple the price they now cost.

The great number of pictures in a country, by extending taste, increases the
number of purchasers; for, by acquiring the knowledge of pictures, men are able to judge
of their own pecuniary value by their merit; and as soon as they are connoisseurs, they
become collectors, some out of love for the art, many out of vanity, and many more out
of speculation.
The abundance of specie in a country does not lessen its value, because it is universally understood, that the usual quantity only is in circulation, and that the abundance we enjoy, occasions a scarcity of it in others. So it is with those first rate pictures of the old masters; if they are no longer scarce in Great Britain, they are more so on the Continent from whence they come.

But it is in this instance alone that I can compare pictures to gold; for, however precious that metal is, the superiority of fine pictures over it, is beyond comparison. The possessor of gold shares it in common with thousands; but, an original picture cannot be in two places, its proprietor may boast its exclusive enjoyment.

Rich as Great Britain at present is, in fine statues, antiques, and pictures, I am so sanguine as to expect, that when the third Gallery shall be erected, the gifts and legacies of individuals will not be wanting to fill it gradually. A connoisseur, who is true lover of the art, dreads nothing more than the dissolution of his cabinet after his decease: it is natural enough to carry, even beyond life, our attachment to such innocent amusements as have contributed to render it agreeable.

The connoisseur may, it is true, order in his will, that his collection shall not be sold; but the testator, who considers such a restriction necessary, must have perceived that his legacy would give his heirs no gratification; it is like bequeathing a man a house, in which he is determined never to live, and which you bind him down neither to let nor sell.

A gentleman some years since, who, I understand, had no near relations, left a collection of considerable value, the sale of which was prohibited in his will, in the most positive and direct terms; it was notwithstanding, sold: as the legislature, doubtless for
good reasons, annulled the restriction. I mention the circumstance, only to suggest, that had the establishment I now propose existed at that time, the testator would, probably, have enriched it with the gift of his pictures, which were sold for the comparatively paltry sum of eight or ten thousand pounds, although a great part of them were immediately after resold at very high prices to foreigners, who carried them to Paris, where they are now placed in the new Public gallery of the Louvre.

Nor is it less probably that the late Earl of Orford, who collected with great judgment, would have bequeathed his pictures to his country; for nothing is more flattering to a collector, than the objects of his curiosity and amusement should afford pleasure to others. His lordship left for life to the honourable Mrs. Damer, whose exquisite taste in the fine Arts he well knew.

I must add, that I am myself acquainted with some gentlemen possessed of good pictures, whom I have heard lament the want of a place where they could order their collections to be deposited.

But will not those bequests to the third Gallery injure a lawful heir, by depriving of a property he might otherwise inherit? God forbid that I should ever suggest an idea, tending to the hurt of anyone! Although my opinion is immaterial; as the wisdom of the legislature would not permit the injuring of an individual.

We cannot suppose, that to enrich this establishment, a father, a brother, an uncle, or near relation, will become so unnatural as to deprive their kin of a property which they intended for them; but many people have none but distant relations, whom they frequently regard but little, and are as little regarded by; exclusively of which I cannot see
what injury an heir can receive, by being deprived of an object that would give him no
gratification and which himself and his descendants would be bound not to part with.

‘Tis also proper I should observe, that, although a whole collection may
sometimes be bequeathed to this gallery, it is probably that many lovers of the fine Arts
will limit their gifts to two or three favourite pictures, which some will deposit there even
in their life-time, so that in a few years, perhaps, this establishment will add a new degree
of splendour to his Majesty’s reign, and become beneficial to society.

All pictures, however, that may be bequeathed or sent to this establishment shall
not be indiscriminately admitted, as every means and precaution must be used to elevate
its reputation; should a collection, therefore, be bequeathed to Montague House, the
Trustees, and the Committee appointed the Royal Academy, should meet, in order to
select such pictures, statues, &c. as shall be worthy a place, and under them the donor’s
name should be written. The remainder of his collection should be sold, towards
increasing the fund of the establishment, or to be returned to his family, as the testator
should direct.

Before I conclude, I must observe, that I am far from thinking the plan perfect in
its present state; I submit it to the Trustees of the British Museum, in the best state it has
occurred to me, and should they improve it, so far as to carry it into execution, I shall, in
some measure, have gratified my sincere attachment to his Majesty and the country, as
well as my friendship for several British artists, who, if the plan takes place, will receive
encouragement, not only from the Trustees, but from the commonalty at large; for as the
different counties generally follow the example of the metropolis, it is probable they will
adorn their town-halls with the portraits of their favourite Representatives, Mayors, Sheriffs, Aldermen, and others, who have either honoured or benefited them.

The connoisseur will be equally gratified by finding in Montague House a resource both in modern and old productions, that are the objects of his research. Several Gentlemen of respectability have almost no other amusement; though fortune, perhaps, may not afford them the means of forming a cabinet, there they will be amply indemnified; for such is the peculiar advantage of the Fine Arts, that their productions, when properly taken care of, without losing any of their qualities, give daily pleasure to thousands, and will afford the same to future generation.

The following are, in my opinion, the objections which may be made to the plan:—That as part of the British Museum consists of small articles, which must be minutely inspected, they can be seen only by a select company at a time, and not by crowds of people, as is usual in public exhibitions; it was in consideration of that circumstance that I proposed a temporary room for the portraits, till there should be sufficient fund to erect the first Gallery, as then the new establishment may become perfectly distinct form the old one; nothing can be more easy to do than to arrange the articles I have just mentioned, in a private room, where small parties only, as usual, may be admitted at a time.

The other objection is, levying money at the door of Montague House; to this I have to quote the example of the Academy, a Royal Institution, whose exhibitions brings yearly a large sum in the course of five weeks; we, surely, may expect to raise a superior one during eight months, from the Royal and National Establishment I propose, which will be so interesting to the nation at large, and patronized by the legislature; but should it
bring only a similar sum, it would, in the course of four or five years, be in a state of forwardness.

Let those who disapprove of the entrance money, consider the trivialities of that objection to a plan, which is to procure gradually an establishment of the utmost grandeur, utility, and value.

Let them reflect that Italy exists no more, and that Great Britain, which may so justly aspire to the honour of indemnifying Europe for so great a loss, would, by such policy, acquire the highest degree of splendour; that already possessed of many chef d’oeuvres of sculpture, and such masterpieces of art, as the Banqueting House, St. Paul’s, Blenheim, Greenwich Hospital, Somerset House, the Bank, and other public buildings, the want of Public Galleries of Pictures is the most sensibly felt.

The plan I have offered is simple and easy, and although still capable of improvement, is, in its present state, neither burthensome to government or to individuals, is far from being injurious to commerce, or a clog to the operations of the war; and without a possibility of its being detrimental, it offers a probability of advantages, far more than equivalent to the objection against entrance-money.

After the most mature consideration, I have not found any other means of accomplishing it. I could not think of an application for the necessary sum, as I know the State money is applied for the support of the State; and I laid aside the idea of a subscription, for, although the fortune of every individual is at his own disposal, no subscription should be raised but for public exigencies, or the relief of the poor. In fact, when we induce a friend to subscribe a sum for an object of amusement, we deter him from subscribing it for a necessary one.
Nor can I flatter myself, although the plan may meet with the approbation of many, that it would be supported by subscription adequate to the expense of carrying it into execution. Last year, when every class of men were voluntarily arming themselves on the mere report of an invasion, multitudes subscribed to the voluntary contribution; but it was in defence of their King and Country, therefore, to support their nearest interest; and however dear the Fine Arts may be to Britons, I cannot expect they are as dear to them as their Constitution.
Appendix E

Undated Newspaper Clipping on the subject of the Orléans Collection in London


The avowed enemies of this Collection will have it, that the name of Orleans has given to most of the pictures a sanction which they will lose when dispersed in private cabinets; and that several valued very high at the Palais Royal, would fetch very little in an auction room.—But, if a picture is good and valuable in a palace, must it not be equally so in a cottage or a stall?

Those who say that the Collection consisted of above seven hundred pictures, and is now reduced to four hundred and seventy five, are certainly mistaken;—for why should the present Duke of Orleans reserve any?—The Collection must be imported in the same number as when the valuation was made.

It is objected by those who rise maliciously against this Collection, that, amongst the pictures which are said to be painted by Correggio, there is in reality but two by his hand—the two small ones.—But what proof have they of that truth?—And is it not equally absurd to say that, out of the six Raphaels, there is but one that will be acknowledged of the master, viz. of the St. John; because the other five are in the manner of Perugino, who, it is though, has worked on them?—All the Connoisseurs well know, that, in his early days, Raphael imitated the stile of Perugino, whose disciple he was?...

…A most puerile objection is also made against the pictures of Paul Veronese, because they are so large that they cannot be admitted into our London houses. We shall
grant that they are fit for few, but how many of our Nobility and Gentry have large halls in the country, which they will be glad to decorate with them.

Some people will have it, that, of all the pictures there are only twenty-five that deserve to be called of the first rank.—To this we shall answer, that, supposing this is so, the whole being sold at one hundred thousand guineas, each first rate picture will only cost four thousand, and that is no very great price. Let all the others be brought to the hammer, and they must together fetch a sum which will be an evident benefit:—therefore the subscribers shall have made a good bargain.

After all, when they have selected the best of this assemblage for themselves, it is probable, that, if the remaining part are offered to the public, they will sell handsomely:—for is there a Collector but will be happy in the purchase of one, however inferior, and proud to say, “I possess a picture of Orleans Collection”.

278
Appendix F

A Letter to Noel Desenfans, ESQ. Late Consul-General of Poland in Great Britain, occasioned by the second edition of his catalogue, and his answer to what he terms “The Complaints of Painters.” By A Painter. [Martin Archer Shee?] British Library, Rare Books and Manuscripts.

Pudet haec opprobia nobis Et Potuiffe dici, et non potuiffe refelli.
It shames us all such slanders should be born, untaxed with spirit, and unpaid with scorn.

London 1802.

Preface:

What the writer of the following letter has to say to the person whom he addresses, few will feel any curiosity to examine, who have not some knowledge of the publication which occasioned it.

The author may therefore take it for granted, that his readers are not unacquainted with the hostile aggression of that consul-general of criticism, Noel Desenfans, esq. on the defenceless frontiers of the graphic tribe.

They will doubtless have witnessed, by what a coup de main he has surprised them, assaulted their strong hold, attacked their principles, and routed their panic-struck pretensions, while resistance has been ineffectual, and even submission vain.

In short (to defend from these stilts of metaphor, upon which great writers so much delight to strut and exhibit), the reader is supposed to have seen a short catalogue in two volumes octavo, of some pictures purchased for his majesty the late king of Poland, whose good taste informed him that this country was the best stocked, and cheapest market of art, and his consul-general the most sagacious collector.
Not content, however, like picture-dealers of humbler rank, to solicit attention to the works of those great masters which the collection in question contains; the celebrated author of the catalogue thought he could not do better than avail himself of the opportunity which it afforded, of enlightening, the public mind of some points hitherto much misunderstood. Thus, while he instructs the connoisseur by elegant criticism, and appropriate praise, to admire the productions of taste and genius, he also liberally proves, by well-chosen anecdote, and philosophical disquisition, that their authors are to be held in contempt; that in proportion as the head improves the heart degenerates, * and the (horresco referens) amongst the various professions, which the avocations of society produce, the votaries of the fine arts are the most envious, cruel and malignant of men.**

This opinion, I believe, has not hitherto been general in the world; and, although the public, qualified, and unprovoked assertion of it might be supposed, amongst timid minds, to contain a quantum sufficit of offense for one little work, yet was it not enough to satisfy the “rabies maledicendi” of our great catalogist.

The living as well as the dead must be sacrificed on the merciless altar of his illustration; and with the spirit and animation of the ancient satirist, he cries out to the trembling artist of the day, in the indignant postscript which called fort the following pages, “Mutato nomine, de te fibula narratur.” The diurnal prints pressed into service, have resounded with the war-whoop of his hostility, and Mr. D---‘s attack on the painters

---

* “How is it that the faculties of the mind attain superior excellence, without the heart improving in like proportion? We, on the contrary, see this frequently corrupt and degenerate, whilst the other soars to perfection; and the annals of the fine arts too often present us with impressive examples of this fatal truth.” Vide Catalogue, vol. i. p. 99.
has been industriously enforced upon our attention with all the importance of a public event.

The author is aware that it will be objected to him, that to notice such and attack from such a quarter, is to give it consequence which it could never obtain by any other means. He acknowledges the justice of the remark, and has only to observe, that the ludicrous arrogance with which the second edition, and its additions, were ushered into the world, struck him in so forcible a light, that he could not resist the impulse to lay down his palette and pencils for a moment, and sport a fly-slipper on the occasion for Mr. D---‘s particular use.

The author has now but to request that as the following pages were written “currente calamo,” his reader may look with indulgence on the many inaccuracies they must contain, which more leisure for his pen, and more respect for his subject, would have enabled him to remove.

A Letter, &c.

*Turpe est laudari ab illaudatis*

Sir,

When an author’s work has arrived to the honour of a second impression, it is generally a period of much satisfaction and self-complacency; it is an evidence that his labours, if they have not been approved, have not been neglected; and however those who have been *let into the secret* may suspect it as a test of merit, it proves (what perchance
may be the more agreeable demonstration to some mind), that the performance is sold at
least, if not admired.

You, Sir, may naturally be supposed to participate in the common feelings of that
class of men to which your late work shows you to be so great an ornament; and are, no
doubt, at this moment, like other celebrated authors, blushing under all the honours of
literary reputation; and placidly speculation on that niche in the temple of immortality
which the taste and gratitude of an admiring age must necessarily assign to you.

As I really do not envy, neither am I disposed to diminish your agreeable
sensations on the second edition of your important toils: yet from the curious mode in
which that circumstance has been announced to the public, I feel unaccountably impelled
to obtrude on your notice, and disturb, for a moment, the train of your reveries, by some
passing remarks.

You are please, Sir, to heighten the curiosity of the public, already so much on the
stretch, by declaring in you advertisement that that the second edition of your catalogue
contains, with other important addenda, a reply to the complaints of the painters. The
complaints of the painters!!! Risum teneatis, amici?

As one of those persons included under that denomination, permit me, with all
due submission to so high and authority, with respect to language, to doubt the correct
application of the word complaint in this instance. Though it would be true that all
liberal and independent artists, who have had the happiness to examine your
extraordinary production, have but one opinion, uttered in the gentlest terms which even
your vocabulary skill and skill and experience could suggest, might not sound very
pleasing in your ears; yet, Sir, am I still to learn that they have so forgotten their own consequence, or yours, as to approach you with a complaint.

Complaint, Sir, is the expression of weakness in the grasp of power; it results from a sense of injury, and an expectation of redress: can you, therefore, seriously, even for a moment, consider it a homage which can ever be paid with dignity, with decency, at your shrine? Do you imagine, even in the very phrensy of your critical inflation, that the painters of this country can ever recognize, even in the consul-general of Poland, the ability to injure them, although he were beyond a doubt to evince the inclination?

No, Sir, believe me, whatever other sensations your labours may have excited in our breast, that passive, mortified, and helpless feeling, from which the meekness of complaint proceeds, will not be found amongst them.

It is not in the puffing prelude of a picture-dealer that the arts of this country can receive a wound. It is not in the interested effusions of clumsy quackery, labouring in its vocation, that we can fear malignity, however we may expect it, or feel impertinence, however we may observe and contempt it.

I am afraid, Sir, that in the triumphant exultation of the moment you may overrate your high powers, and suppose effects from them they are but ill calculated to produce. Above all, Sir, I would caution you how you ascribe to your literary claims that portion of notice which attends you on the present occasion. You might have worn your pen to the stump in idle panegyrics on pictures, which it is your interest to praise; you might have hung out your literary bush (though the proverb here is rather unlucky for you); you might, like any other dealer and chapman, have distributed your catalogues, put forth your advertisements, and circulated your puffs, with all unnoticed impunity of the
Panorama, or the Phantasmagoria itself; had not your hardihood disdained the safe obscurity of your professional fastnesses; had you not sallied forth with all wantonness of unprovoked attacked, and solicited attention by offence.

But beware, Sir, how you excite and examination into your pretentions to the character you would assume; how you put us on inquiring by what strange process of transformation you have been metamorphosed into a formidable critic and connoisseur; the self-appointed reformer of the public taste; the arbiter elegantiarum of the day.

It is not polite, I know, Sir, and, except on occasions like the present, it is hardly liberal, to take the eye from the present splendour of a great character, and turn it to the twilight gleamings of his first career. Had you, Sir, but “born your faculties meekly about you;” had you not stepped out of your road, and thought fit to use your high rank and estimation in society as the pledge and passport of that foul assault on my profession, which your late little work (as you with admirable candour call it) contains, I would have been the last to insinuate the variations of your course, or that you were not always gifted with those great powers, which constitute you at this moment the mirror of accomplished [sic] connoisseurship, and the terror of the graphic tribe.

I know that habit is powerful, and that teachers of every description are apt to retain their didactic propensities, under circumstances very different from those in which they were with propriety exercised. To this influence of custom, Sir, I am induced to attribute your present unlucky ambition, which, as you have ceased to communicate to your pupils your instructions in grammar, prompts you kindly to favour us with a few lessons on taste. Your terms are indeed moderate for the first course; but I fear, Sir, your qualifications for the office you have chosen are more than suspected; we cannot
readily trace the connexion [sic] between the rudiments of language, and the refinements of art, nor see, how professing the one, gives good reason to suppose a proficiency in the other. We cannot discover in what chapter of Boyer or Perrin* you have studied the muses and graces; neither can we be convinced how the multifarious concerns of that important post you have so long enjoyed as consul-general of that great commercial country, Poland, could have allowed you to cultivate and establish that superiority of critical skill which should authorize you, even in your own opinion, to talk with presumption on subjects beyond your ability, and dictate with arrogance where you ought to hear with submission

Do not imagine, Sir, that I mean to cast any disrespect on that humble occupation, in which the utility of your labours was more evident than in those higher spheres of action to which they have so unaccountably led. A teacher is always a reputable character while he adheres to his proper province, and presumes not to instruct where he is himself untaught. Had you followed this rule, Sir, your talents might have been less conspicuous, but they would have been more respected. Had you indulged your literary cacoethes in discussing the cases of nouns, the conjugation of verbs, or, in Familiar Dialogues, French and English, for the use of young ladies; nay, Sir, had your ambition taken yet a loftier flight, and, in your high-sounding character of consul-general of Poland, enlightened this nation boutiquiere by a treatise on the commercial consequence of that great maritime kingdom; I, for one, would have submissively bowed to your authority, and might perhaps have benefited by your information.

* Two famous masters of the French school, with whose works Mr. Desenfans was some time since eminently conversant.
But you have, Sir, as the lawyers say, traveled out of the record; you have launched beyond your depth; and, in the floundering furor of your struggles, you have splashed and dashed around you, till you sink exhausted in the froth and foam you have created.

Yet, Sir, I believe I do you wrong: I believe I ascribe to you an ambition of which you are innocent, even in your vainest moments. I really do not think you seriously hold yourself competent to discuss the merits of art.

All superior minds pursue their objects by extraordinary ways. And the most obvious is seldom in the real aim they have in view. I doubt not, therefore that I have mistaken that for your end, which is only your means: and some perhaps may wonder at my dullness, who have at times pretended your objects to be palpable to the most shallow penetration. Even I now begin to suspect that your design, notwithstanding your liberality of anecdote and criticism, biography and abuse, was not so disinterestedly directed as to improve the public taste, as to puff into notice, and importance, that long celebrated collection, the loss of which the poor king of Poland would doubtless have lamented even more than his crown and dignity.

With this view, sanctioned by long established custom in all trades, you have judiciously stepped forward to present to the connoisseurs of the day a pair of critical spectacles, which kindly enable them to see with the eye of admiration, and induce them to purchase with the purse of liberality. In pity to our dim-sighted dilettanti, you have shed on the gems of your cabinet all light of panegyric, and established by their claims to excellence, by evidence which must be irresistible, because it is equally pertinent, disinterested, and unsuspected.
It may be asked, perhaps, by unseasonable curiosity, why you could not have set off your wares to the best advantage? Why you could not have exercised your literary ingenuity in that art so humorously illustrated in The Critic by the great dramatist of the day, and in which your talents are not only unequal, but undisputed? It may be asked, in short, why you could not have invited the public to the performance of that Polish force, which has been so many years in preparation for them, got up at great expense and rehearsed on two former occasions with new scenes, dresses, and decorations? Without wantonly volunteering an attack on a profession to which you owe whatever consequence you may imagine yourself to profess; without raking with filthy and offensive industry in the foul jakes of exploded scurrility, for dirt which to bespatter the long venerated shades of departed genius? Why could you not contentedly hug yourself in the enjoyment of that affluence you have procured from their labours, without officiously blurring in the public face, idle and discredited to their disgrace? Tales originally invented by scandal, preserved in the literary lumber-rooms of babbling biographers, and hashed up to serve a purpose, as an offering at the shrine of that malignantly curiosity, which ever prompts the proud, and the mean, to devour with eagerness whatever tends to lower greatness or lessen merit.

It has hitherto been the practice of liberal minds to treat with respect, and affection, the characters of those who have adorned the ages in which they lived, and left to posterity the monuments of their genius, or their virtue. Grateful for the benefits derived from their wisdom, for the pleasures provided for us by their ingenuity, we have been taught to consider their foibles with indulgence; to turn with generous alacrity from
the frailties of man, to the perfections of the genius, and lose sight of all which can lessen our respect for the one, or our admiration of the other.

Your *morality*, Sir, teaches you a different lesson, and that leads you to believe that no circumstances in the life of a great man are of so much *importance*, or can be half so interesting, as those which tend to vilify and degrade him; which excite contempt for his understanding, and abhorrence of his heart.

It was reserved for you, Sir, in the boldness of your biographical *presumption* to pique yourself on reviving the forgotten libels of great characters; on retailing an hodgepodge of contemptible anecdotes, which, if doubtful, *common justice* would consign to oblivion; and, if true, *generosity* would grieve to relate.

Heirs of immortal fame! Ye sacred shades of Rembrandt, of Rubens, of Berghem, of Velasquez, and of Hogarth! If you are at all conscious of the follies of the time, with what indignation, or rather with what contempt, must you look down on the puddling malevolence of this *quondam grammarian*, this *mood- and sense-monger*, this *ci-devant retailer* of parts of speech! How must you think in your shrouds from the searching *scrutiny* of his *anecdotic eye*, from the touch of his *keen* and *pungent* pen!

*“We are surprised that the revered Mr. Pilkington, who mentioned Rembrandt in his account of painters, should have omitted the *most interesting* details of the life of this artist, whose conduct was a perfect image of his pictures—*a complication of wisdom and folly*—a strange mixture of economy and prodigality.”* And what, kind reader, are the interesting details which the reverend Mr. Pilkington has so surprisingly omitted in his account of Rembrandt?—That he was ignorant—not indeed of writing and reading—that he was capricious—that he was such a miser, as to sacrifice the character and morals of his son to avarice, and make him *act the rogue* for his father’s benefit—that he was contemptible enough to circulate a report at his death, to enhance by deception the value of his works—that he was a prodigal, a bankrupt, and a fugitive!!! Are these anecdotes, which (even proved beyond the possibility of a doubt) *taste* and *feeling* would wish to remember of Rembrandt? Vide Desenfans’ catalogue, vol. ii. p. 1
And you, ye living sons of art! ye puny products of a stunted culture, and a
kindless soil! Do you not tremble before the lowering brow of this critical Goliath? Do
you not writhe beneath the grasp of his power? Under the lash of his polished irony?

Beware how you rouse him in his wrath; else, in the plenitude of his dictatorial
authority, he will crush your petty pretensions, and degrade you from the ranks of art!
Poor Hogarth!! Alas, Sir, what offence could the manes of that unhappy artist have
committed against you, to draw down upon him so lamentable a fate? With one dash of
your all-potent pen, you have blotted him from the catalogue of painters for ever. You
have touched him with the talisman of your power, and he stands stripped of that title and
estimation in which the ignorance and false taste of the age had so preposterously
arrayed him.

We cannot even say of him, as Lucan said of Pompey, “Stat magni nominis
umbra;”–for you have assailed him with more than the powers of a Caesar, and his
reputation falls beneath your sword.

We have read, Sir, of strange transformations in the days of pagan and petical
metamorphosis: Lycaon was changed into a wolf, Acteon into a stag, and the unfortunate
companions of Ulysses, by the potency of the Circean cup, were degraded to a swinish
multitude.

Your magic skill, Sir, has revived and rivaled those miracles of old. You wave
your wand in the awful circle of taste and science, which you have drawn around you: the
powers of Hogarth confess the mighty spell, and he sinks an engraver to all future times.
It will be the ambition of some future Ovid, to adorn with all the graces of poetical embellishment the wonders you have performed. Nay, the exploded painter himself, were he living to witness the irrevocable doom you have pronounced upon him, would no doubt assist to celebrate your triumph; and perhaps that humble capacity in which your critical fiat has placed him, extend to the sphere of your renown, but making you the hero of a new series of admonitory prints, entitled “The Connoisseur’s Progress”.

This, Sir, is an age remarkable for extraordinary events; big with revolution and change. From the complexion of the time, it would seem to be that period alluded to by the prophet—when all that is low shall be exalted, and all that is elevated shall be depressed.

You are not without your share, Sir, in this general jumble; and as in your aggrandisement you furnish us with an example of one part of the prophecy, so in your works you would kindly assist to facilitate the other.

But it is to be hoped, Sir, that you have not yet touched, with Wolsey, the highest point of all your greatness. There is a dignity yet within your grasp, and no doubt dazzling in the eye of your ambition, beyond even that high and important function with which, you so often, and so modestly remind us, you were lately invested. The enlightened Poles will not have the exclusive honour of distinguishing such desert. Your disinterested services in the department of the fine arts, cannot fail of being acknowledged, and rewarded, in that country where they were performed; and the least
that you can expect, is to be elevated to the rank of director of the dilettanti tribe, * and chief consul in the republic of taste

On this happy occasion, Sir, I should witness the ceremony of your inauguration with almost as much delight as the poet describes to have felt, when

Rome in her capital saw Querno fit
Thron’d on seven hills, the Antichrist of wit.

But let me endeavour to repress the exuberance which results from the luxuriancy of my theme, and restore you to the calm enjoyments of conscious consequence; and the placid anticipation of that dignity, which in the fervor of my prophetic zeal I have marked out for you.

Indeed, Sir, were I to indulge in the suggestions of the moment, and pursue your literary progress

“Through all the madness of the mazy dance,”

there would be some danger of my observations rivaling the bulk of those inviting volumes which have occasioned them—a thing certainly not uncommon amongst learned scholiasts, and accomplished commentators.

I confess myself to be much distracted in my admiration of the mass of various erudition which enriches that exquisite melange, that most interesting olio of literary, political, biographical, critical, anecdotal, mythological, satirical, and (though last, not least, if I may presume to coin a word adapted to the occasion), puffistical ingredients in question. I am doubtful in which of your various characters you have distinguished

* The author requests he may not be considered making any allusion, in this passage, to the truly respectable Dilettanti Society.
yourself most; though I own I have been considerably affected by the profundity of your penetration, as a deep and cause-investigating politician.

You have, Sir, with that bold spirit of original thinking, which is your peculiar characteristic, traced backward with unequal ability the loosely connected chain of moral consequences, and dragged into the light new causes of civil disorganization, to which nothing but your sagacity could have been directed.

You have discovered a new army of insurgents, the persons of the muses and graces, and marshaled them in formidable array, to the panic-struck imaginations of our alarmists, as the pestilent Jacobins of the day. You have founded your political tocsin in the silence of our slumbering security, and warned the governments of Europe, how they leave at large, and unmanacled, those subverters of empires.*

Now follows, kind reader, an historical document, to put beyond doubt the dreadful effects of this most dangerous of all the fine arts, music:**

By the clearest, the most logical, and most irrefragable arguments you have proved that all the horrors of revolutionary insanity have resulted from the machinations of those common disturbers of society—rebellious musicians, democratic poetry, and

---

* “The fine arts also became the chief instruments in the hands of the skilful conductors of the revolution, for inflaming the minds of people. The pencil was busily and effectually employed in representing subjects the most humiliating and offensive to government; and music, the most dangerous of the fine arts, when ill applied, resounded with airs of sedition and rebellion.” Vide Catalogue, vol. i, p. 29

** “Such is indeed the power of music, that Elric, the second king of Denmark, having at one of his feasts ordered a musician to play a warlike air, was so well obeyed, that himself and his guests, inflamed with fury, flew to arms, and four of them fell victim to the impassioned transports of the monarch.” –Ibid. “We could quote other instances (observes this able philosopher) of dangerous music, and what horrors did it not excite in France? Murder became habitual (in consequence of dangerous music) to that ill-fated people, and the groans on the glutted guillotine were drowned by the tunes of Ca ira and the Marseillois hymn.”—p. 30—bow down ye sons of Apollo, and adore!!
inflammatory painting. With the spirit, if not with the consistency, of a second Plato, you would ungratefully proscribe the fine arts in your republic as dangerous inmates and lurking traitors.

It is to be hoped, Sir, that your liberal and valuable hints on this subject will be attended to; and that, hereafter at least, the turbulent tribes of taste will be restrained within due bounds; as (as I am particularly anxious to thrust upon you all that greatness of which you may be capable), perhaps we may yet have the happiness of feeling you raised to the post of consul-general of their proceedings; and nothing of their dangerous creation tolerated, but what shall bear as the pledge of public security, and the imprimatur of merit—Avec privilege du Desenfans.

You have, Sir, among many other valuable pieces of information, kindly told us in your instructive work, “That it is not the possession of a palette and pencils which constitutes an artist, as the generality of the profession seem to believe.”

What a pity, Sir, that, in the communicative generosity of the moment, you did not condescend to inform us what it is, that constitutes a connoisseur!

Such a piece of information from your high authority, would be an inestimable acquisition, as it would, no doubt, at once settle a point, and which, to the great discomfiture of many respectable persons who lay claim to that character, is now likely to remain undecided.

You might, Sir, by “turning your eye inward on yourself,” have favoured the world of taste with a most delectable receipt for that epicurean made dish, an high-
seasoned critic, deduced from long practice on the most refined principles of French cookery, and referred us for a probatum est, to the royal palate of the King of Poland.

But here again, Sir, I have to apologise, I am precipitate.—A I read, I discover new beauties—I find all deficiencies supplied. Thus, though it be true you have not indulged us with any positive information on the subject, yet you have given us (if I may be allowed the expression) some negative light—you have indeed, Sir, most distinterestedly, and tuo periculo, touched on some things, which do not form a connoisseur: a statement** which however we may be disposed to believe from your example, we had no great reason to expect from modesty.

Poor Doctor C—has here fallen a victim to the “manly indiscretion” of your pen, in the way of characteristic illustration. When Greek meets Greek, THEN comes the tug of war. Were the little doctor, as you term him, but living, to retort the valorous attack of his great drawcansir [sic] assailant; what a rare critical conflict we should behold! Buckler to buckler, shield to shield!—what a coruscation of intellectual light from the hostile collision of two such luminaries! But the doctor has quitted the field, unconscious of his posthumous enemy; and his fame, like that of Hogarth’s, falls to rise no more.

* The author acknowledges that he throws out this passage, as a bone, to the commentators; the Cunninghams, the Sanadons, the Burmans, and the Bentley’s of the day—He forsees that it will excite much controversy; the copyist will be accused, new readings will be proposed; and the greater part of that sagacious tribe will for once agree in suggesting the word quackery, in this place, as a necessary emendation of the text.

** Catalogue, vol. ii. p. 213. “There is a class of men who, possessing by chance some good pictures, believe themselves to be connoisseurs, assume the airs of critics, and, armed with the formidable terms, design, colouring, transparency, outline, and other which they have learnt from the virtuoso who visits their collections; they repeat them like parrots, to acquire consequence in the eyes of those who happen to be more ignorant than themselves.” O admirable instance of etourderie!! unequalled simplicity of self-condemnation!!! Was there no friendly artist, no commiserating virtuoso visiting Mr. D.’s collection, to snatch this unlucky passage from the press, and save him from a selo de se on his pretensions?
But I am still left beyond my leisure, or my intention, to wander in the interesting maze of your remarks.

Do not imagine, Sir, for a moment, that my design, in this address, was to enter into any thing like a discussion of the topics which you have introduced; or a refutation of the many idle things which have dropped from your erratic pen. I candidly acknowledge, Sir, that, although I have felt disposed to break a ludicrous lance with you, yet, I shrink from all contest of serious argument with such a foe; and as the natives of your country are remarkable for understanding an equivocal expression in the most complimentary sense, you are heartily welcome to record your triumph on the avowal.

We painters, Sir, are in the habit of hearing, and of reading, much curious disquisition on the subject of our art; and out ears becoming callous to the unmeaning jingle of misplaced technicals, and the pedantic jargon of distempered criticism. The temple of taste is, indeed, peculiarly exposed to the intrusion of the ignorant and superficial; for,

“Fools rush in, where angels fear to tread.”

It is, unhappily, the sanctuary of charlatans and impostors, who, culprits against common sense in the inferior departments of life, take refuge within its precincts, and are safe.

But, however cruel, groveling envious, and jealous, we may be, Sir, (on your respected authority) amongst ourselves, I may, without flattery, affert, that we possess in

* Catalogue, vol. i. p. 100. “By a singular fatality, instead of that noble emulation, the painter is often susceptible of a groveling envy, and a degrading jealousy, which, strange as it may appear, not only augment, as he acquires perfection, in his art, (so that the best painters must always be the most malignant) but also arm his cruel tongue against the
no common degree the power of bearing with true Christian patience much bad language, and worse criticism, from dilettanti quacks and picture-dealing connoisseurs. A great poet has said of a great character, whose genius was the pride of our profession, and the ornament of his country, that,

“When they talked of their Raphaels, Correggios, and stuff,

He shifted his trumpet, and only took snuff.”

This pacific, forbearing temper, under yet greater provocations, is really general amongst us; and I will venture to say, that we could have heard even you, Sir, expatiate with all that eloquence and critical acumen you possess, on the principles of our profession, with the most decorous gravity and placid resignation, had you confined yourself to those refined speculations which are so much the fashion of the day, and nearly as harmless to the public taste, as they are no doubt entertaining to those who produce them.

But you, Sir, scorned the inglorious paths of peace and repose; conscious of your might, you have stepped forth like valorous knight of La Mancha, in quest of adventures, and resolved to exhibit your prowess on the innocent flocks of art, in whose fleece you find yourself so warm and comfortable.

I will not, Sir, for a moment suppose, that the fury of your onset has been influenced by a consideration of the weakness of the foe; that you hugged yourself in the cloak of imaginary security, from a conviction, that we sons of the brush, have little leisure or skill for combat in the literary field; and that, like the formidable champion of England at a coronation, you have come forward, “chased is in complete steel,” to throw

meritorious works of his brother artists, as they did the cruel hand of Cain against his brother Abel.”
down the gauntlet, under an impression that the bravado will be *safe* and the challenge *unaccepted*.

I will do you the justice to believe, Sir, that you have no great objection to a conflict in the public arena; aware that, whatever may be your *fate* in the fray, there is some advantage to be derived from the *éclat* which attends it. Notoriety will do some minds then there is no hope of celebrity:

> *Pulchrum est digito monstrari, et dicier, ‘Hic est!’*

And I have no doubt that you will, on this principle, condescended to be pleased even with my humble endeavours to add to that reputation which you have already acquired. But however you may receive this *greeting*, you certainly have no reason to be *surprised* at it: and I trust that you will not take example by those whining *pretenders* to the art, whom you mention to have so *querulously* approached you, and lessen your *dignity* by the language of complaint.

You have taken upon you, Sir, to slander, as far as in you lies, a body of men, of whom it may be justly said that they are never slighted but by ignorance, nor insulted but by brutality. You have arraigned them at the bar of the public, as guilty of the most degrading, the most contemptible delinquency, and ransacked your *poetical* imagination for figures to enforce the charge. *Thorny paths, hornets and hives, serpents and vipers, owls and sun-beams,*

*Catalogue, vol. i, p. 100. “Woe be the youth with every generous sentiment and aspiring abilities (good grammar!) who enters on this thorny path! For the rising merit of a painter is as insufferable to the eyes of another as the sun-beams are to the eyes of the owl; and instead of offering him help and encouragement, the very veterans of the profession will, on his first appearance, pursue and browbeat him as a hornet approaching a hive to rob the bees of their honey; so that the inexperienced candidate has not only to surmount the accumulated difficulties of the art, but a host of artists and unprovoked enemies, and with*
all the metaphors of malignity, (to imitate a passage of a celebrated writer) shine through the virulent dullness of your page in a blaze of abusive illustration.

But happily, Sir, your impression is not equal to your zeal; your authority as an evidence in this case bears no proportion to your powers as a rhetorician; and it is not the first time that a malicious charge has recoiled upon him who preferred it; and that the culprit has been found in the accuser.

I am sorry that the mildness of complaint, which you say my terrified brethren addressed you, has produced so little effect, and that you have returned to the field, not only unsoftened but exasperated; with fiercer wider warfare, rather than appeased and pitying reproof.

You have put forth your answer to what you contemptuously term the complaints of painters; and what is that answer? An aggravation of the original offence; a vulgar and pointless sneer at that desert which you are incompetent to appreciate.

We are doubtless infinitely obliged by your kind “endeavours to root out” our evil habits, and restore us to the rank of those happier professions which you deem untainted by our jaundiced propensities. But you should reflected, Sir, that although your prescription be made up fecundum artem; yet, whatever may be our moral, or

them injustice and jealousy, whose serpents and vipers are already pouring their poisons on his early works. Bravo, Monsieur Desenfans!!!—a liberal account of a liberal profession!!!
professional distempers, we have not such confidence in the Sangrades of the day, as to submit to you for their cure.

The members of the Royal Academy, however, as the head of that profession which you have aspersed; as the protectors, and in a great measure the depositaries of the talent at which level the barbed arrows of your sarcastic wit, will no doubt take some marked opportunity of evincing their respect for you. And as the present vacancy in the office of professor of antient [sic] literature presents itself, a-propos, for that purpose, you cannot do better than offer yourself to a situation for which your great learning so eminently qualifies you; and there can be no doubt that all competition will shrink at your approach.

You have indeed, Sir, in your new office of censor of our defects, brandished your pen with so much unnecessary violence; you have flourished your weapon around you, with all that wanton indifference which denotes eager, unpreparing offence; and, according to the old observation, he who strikes the first blow must abide by the issue of the battle.

In vain would you attempt to contract the extent of your attack, by unknown exceptions, or mental reservations. Your censure (such as it is) is general: and the man who casts his brand into a crowd, deserves to have it thrust into his face by the first hand that can seize it.

Permit me now, Sir, to take my leave, and to conclude with presumptuous hope, that in the third edition, to which your valuable toils must necessarily extend, you will graciously be pleased, in addition to the many letters you state yourself to have received
from the *genus irritabile* of art, to notice the address of him who subscribes himself, with all the respect which your talents and their objects demand,

A PAINTER.
Appendix G


Dear Sir,

As you are the President of the Royal Academy, which is in this country, at the head of the fine arts, I think it proper to address myself to you, on the subject of a rumour, that even the Painters of that institution have taken offence at a Descriptive Catalogue of Pictures I lately published, merely on account of my having inserted in it, an observation resulting from a perusal of the Biography of the old Masters, “that the professors of the art, were often subject to jealousy, and that mediocrity was unknown in painting.”

The latter is so evidently true, that I deem any other appeal than to common sense, superfluous, to vindicate it. With respect to the other, I cite those authors, as sufficient proof, on whose authority I have advanced the assertion—in the *Abrégé de la Vie des Peintres, the Discourses of Félibien*, and in De Piles (works so highly valued by connoisseurs and artists) you see all I have said is respecting the jealousy of the painters of their time; and I find now that the celebrated Dr. Johnson has thrown his weighty authority into the balance.

Permit me to add, that I have often been witness to the malignant avidity with which the best productions of the day, have been decried. The talk of giving the fullest proof of this, would be an easy one, did I not consider it as a duty I owe to some individuals and myself, not to compromise them in any degree.
You are yourself a painter! Look into your own heart, and tell us candidly whether you have never felt a secret envy on seeing the happy production of some contemporary, highly extolled? and when you have witnessed your own works depreciated, have you attributed it to their want of merit, or to jealousy? If you and your brother artists have felt, as many your great predecessors did on such occasions, I consider myself justified.

But I see that when self-judged, we are soon acquitted; and I submit to the further talk of proving, that far from having entertained the least intention of giving offense to the painters, my aim has been directed to the advancement of their art, and their own interests.

In the first place, Sir, you probably recollect, that in the course of my Catalogue, I have stated, that the multitude being generally ignorant of the true beauty of pictures, it is the artists and the connoisseurs, who being the competent judges of their merit, direct the purchases of those collectors who are dissident of their own judgment—thus in the supposition that I believed the pictures I was describing, and shortly intended to expose to sale, to be all of the first merit, I could not but have been sensible, that I in a great measure, depended upon the painters; and it is not customary, I think, to court people by insulting them.

It is then clear, that a view to my interest ought to have made me cautious; and it is hardly possible to believe, that I could so widely misdirect my judgment, as endeavour to obtain that the artists should be favourably disposed for me, through the medium of premeditated injury; this circumstance alone will evince that such an intention could never for a moment have occurred to me.
Besides, it is probably that, connected as I am, and have been during a long course of years, with painters, having lived in the strictest habits of friendships till their expiring moments, with Sir Joshua Reynolds, the late Mr. Wilson, and Mr. Gainsborough, and now in those of intimacy with many others, is it possible, I say, that I should suddenly, and without and reason, and cause of offence, have the weakness, the wickedness to start a self-created foe to all my friends, and hold them to the world as objects of contempt?

Is it probable that, after having honoured, and encouraged as far as in me lay, a profession that I have not embraced, but to which I owe a part of what I possess, I should have thought of vilifying it? and that having so frequently praised and extolled it, I should, flying to the opposite extreme, have become a deadly persecutor of it? and to what end?—But it is time, Sir, to inform you, how I was led to make those observations I have communicated through my Catalogue.

You read, about three or four years since, a trifling work (that the Royal Academy did me the honor of placing in it’s library) which I published for the encouragement of painting, and you may perhaps recollect I fought for the cause of English collectors not admitting modern productions into their cabinets, amongst those of the old schools, as is the case in Paris and elsewhere—it appeared to me the more singular, as, although England may not boast a great number of excellent painters, it is acknowledged to possess, at the present period, some of the first in Europe.

I then thought to have discovered one of the causes of this misfortune attached to English painters, and mentioned it in the plan I then published; but in framing my Catalogue during last Autumn, I believed an additional cause to be that of jealousy, which appeared to me too prevalent through every age, in the profession, and which has
formerly, as well as in our times, clouded the genius, and deprived men of the greatest merit, of the encouragement they so richly deserve.

The painters of every country, complain of want of employ; can we be surprised at it, when men of talents have the weakness to depreciate each other? For who will employ Peter, when his estimation in the public mind is lost through the insinuations of Paul, whose works suffer equally through the retorts of the other?

I thought myself at liberty to state it as a misfortune, that there did not generally reign through the painters, that noble emulation which prevails in other liberal professions, particularly in the British army, where the officers and soldiers are praising and mutually encouraging each other by reciprocal example; in that army, an inconsiderable part of which, by such conduct, good discipline, and hereditary bravery, have wrested, in Egypt, the title of invincible from the most experienced and most courageous troops under heaven.

Yes, Sir, in my zeal for painting, I have had the candour to tell it’s [sic] professors the truth, but with equal circumspection and firmness. I refute the accusation of having unearthed the vices of the dead for the cruel pleasure of exposing them to the glare of the day, because, among other reasons, I think they are best when concealed, for it shades the grossness of their deformity—but if I have unveiled them on this occasion, it has been with a view of benefiting the artists of our time.
“The faults of our fathers,” says a great writer, “are sometimes as useful to us as their virtues, for they deter us from committing them ourselves, by shewing us their enormity in their own example.”

But after all, why should the body of English painters raise the cry against me? I entreat them to review my catalogue without prejudice—I ask but impartiality—they must feel a conviction that I have on that, as on former occasions, only aimed at the furtherance of their prosperity, and the advancement of the fine arts in Great-Britain.

It appears indeed singular that the painters of this country only, should conceive themselves aggrieved by what I have observed of the envy as prevalent in the profession! Have I made particular mention of them?—I spoke of the generality, and guarded it with various exceptions—there is not therefore an individual breathing, who can with justice, reproach me with having selected him as a mark for contempt.

Notwithstanding this, an anonymous Assassin, styling himself “a Painter,” considers himself as personally insulted, and under that pretence, has attacked me with unexampled abuse, throughout a long letter, as if smarting under an injury received by my hand—but is the minister who tells us, from the pulpit, that men are addicted to avarice, lying and debauchery, to be assaulted with stones and dirt by the first passenger

*“How sweet a task it is to praise!! Then how unceasingly painful must be the office of the slanderer, a description of men who breathe only defamation on the living and the dead!—but, like the policy which condemned the criminal to a public execution, that it may serve as a warning lesson to others, the faults of our predecessors are held out in the most glaring deformity, that it may caution our contemporaries to avoid them.” Vide Descriptive Catalogue, No. 108.
in the street, under the pretence that being himself a man, he found himself accused among others?

What has not been said and written of the lawyers and attorneys?—does it follow from thence, that there are not many of them of the most distinguished integrity? And has it ever happened that either of them, has in anger dropped his pen, and issued from Lincoln’s Inn, to avenge his profession on the writers?

Whatever is said or written of a nation, profession, or collective body, can never cause personal insult, because it is invariably understood with exceptions, and as no individual is personally attacked, individual complaint is impertinent.

The same Anonymous, placing himself as the champion of the body of painters, in an excess of fury reproaches me, among a prodigious number of Latin phrases, with having said, “that the painters in England had offered me their complaints,” which is by no means, conformable to truth, since there is no such an expression in either of the editions of my catalogue.

The instant after, mounting on his stilts, and swelled with Latin, he cries from behind the curtain, with all the arrogance of a Billingsgate woman, “In your insufferable ambition, remember, Sir, you have not always been what you now are—you have been engaged in commerce—you have been a grammarian, and finished by being nothing more than the consul of poor Poland, which is not a maritime country;” a circumstance as well known by the most indifferent geographers, as it is that I have filled the different situations he has assigned to me.

But what is singular, the anonymous writer seems to have designed them as terms of reproach, and as if to raise in me the blush of shame; when in fact, I see nothing in
them either elevated or degrading—at least in filling them, I was somewhat useful to society, which is no longer the case, since I now do nothing; but I am at a loss to conceive what gratification my vanity can draw from it—if it is an, I partake of it with too great a multitude, and when honours are so widely dispersed, they cease in my opinion, to be so.

I had nearly forgot, Sir, to mention that my concealed antagonist, amongst other epithets he has bestowed on me, has included that of “Quack.” I do not justly comprehend the propriety of the metaphor; for although he may perhaps one day or other, receive from me a pill of uneasy digestion, I have never yet busied myself in the composition of any, nor mounted on a theatre in public, as he probably will, at Temple bar or Charing-cross, led by the officers of justice, from whom imposters and defamers seldom escape.

The object of my invisible adversary has been plainly directed to crush the approaching sale of the collection of pictures that I had formed for the late King of Poland; you have already seen part of them, and found some, as you informed me, of the first merit; I think you will also be pleased with the others; you cannot expect that they are all of superior worth; for as his Majesty designed several of them as studies for the artists of his dominions, it was not his intention to bestow an equally large sum in the purchase of every one.

You know, Sir, I had great reason to expect the reimbursement of my money, through the protection of our government, but I was compelled to abandon it’s intercession through the misfortune of having my vouchers and other papers burnt, with those of the embassy, at the departure of Lord Whitworth from St. Petersburgh; I have at
length adopted, as the only remaining mode, a sale of those pictures, by public auction, which some irritated painters are endeavouring to injure.

Compelled, however, by my engagement with the public, in consequence of the publication of my catalogue, to a sale, which is now no longer optional, I have, notwithstanding the apparent loss attending it, entered into the necessary engagements with Messrs. Skinner and Dyke, and to secure a genuine sale, have bound myself not to buy in, by direct or indirect means, a single object.—I now draw to the close of my justification.

You may recollect, Sir, being at my house, about the middle of last December! It was a few days after you had made you discourse to the Students of the Royal Academy, which you then spoke of, and it afforded me an opportunity of reading to you some pages from my Catalogue, that was then unpublished, and among other passages, those two that have so highly drawn on my the displeasure of the painters.

You certainly, at that time, like myself, found nothing objectionable in them, for had you, your friendship would have induced you, I conclude, to mention it. I was not however, a little surprised, when at our next meeting, which was in about a week or two after, you began (but then too late, for the Catalogue was published) to start objections to it.

The first was, that I had styled Hogarth an eminent engraver—I had indeed formerly seen some of his pictures touched with spirit, but not by any means, possessing superior merit; and I had seen, among some productions of his graver, many prints so exquisitely fine, that I considered him at the head of his profession as an engraver. You
then informed me I should have ranked him among the first-rate painters, and styled him
the greatest that England ever had or would produce.

The next objection you made to my work, was, that I had taxed Rubens with
envy—I did so on the authority of those writers I have already mentioned at the
commencement of my Letter, and for the reasons I stated to you, but although I decline
pressing my opinion on the subject of Hogarth, of whose Pencil you have probably seen
many chef d’oeuvres, you must allow me to differ from you with regard to Rubens.

Rubens, you say, was too great a man not to have been good-natured and
amiable, and to have been subject to jealousy.

That he was a very great painter, is evident by his works, but who informed you,
or from what source have learned that he was free from weaknesses, and distinguished
for his conciliating disposition, and peculiar goodness?

A few great men may have united with their superior abilities, those truly
desirable qualities; but if you attribute them to Rubens, merely because he was an
eminent artist, undeceive yourself, and be assured that the greater number of those
elevated characters, have, like other men, had their virtues chequered with vices: nay, that
towering genius which distinguishes them from the generality, often renders them
insupportably vain and ambitious; and their mind being occupied with grand objects and
important pursuits, they study less than the ordinary class of men, those pleasing
attentions which form the charm of society, and are too frequently irritable and ill-
tempered. Rely on it, Sir, the wife of a great man, is not always the one whose fate is
most to be envied.
Without recurring back to times long past, to search for examples of what I advance, have you not a very recent proof in an anonymous letter just addressed to me by your great fellow professor? For a painter of such genius, who so completely masters his Latin, and who “currente calamo,” in post haste, as he informs us, can express himself so forcibly, must doubtless excel as much in painting as in literature, and consequently asserts his title to the rank of a great man.

But (as a striking proof that they are not all exempt from weaknesses) the production of a mere descriptive Catalogue, is considered by him as a cause for umbrage, and inflamed on a sudden against a person who has never done him in the least harm, he conceals himself to strike in safety, and the anonymous coward descending to the vilest injustice, endeavours by an atrocious calumny, to stigmatize me as a calumniator.

However, as “there is no ill wind but benefits some quarter,” my incurring the displeasure of our great man, has enriched the English libraries, with a small volume, the more curious, that it is the production of a Painter who understands Latin, and fails not to make use of it; and yet the author informs us (notwithstanding the excellence of the work) that it would have been much better written, had his respect been higher for me, the humbled subject of his expeditious labours, and the unfortunate object of his mighty resentment—But if he could so off-hand and with unexhausted malignity, go through the work of insult, what a master-piece would they production of his pen have been, when gall might have flown leisurely from it, had he sat by his fireside, surrounded by the chef d’ouevres of his pencil!—surely in that case, our great Latinist would have proved himself a literary meteor!
As it is, however, that I may witness closer his uncommon abilities, and hear more of his Latin and of his verses, he has offered me beside his own, a niche in the Temple of Immortality—but a powerful neighbour, is in my eyes, a dangerous one, and I renounce it.

“Terretur minimo pennae Stridore Columba

“Unguibus accipiter, Saucia facta tuis.”

Happy anonymous painter!—You will not need the aid of an interpreter to understand this, for you have been at school—and have taken great care to convince us of it.  

But to return to Rubens! I beg you will permit me to caution you against many idly circulated reports, from some of which arose the vulgar error of his having been invested with the order of the garter by Charles I. because that monarch conferred on him the honour of knighthood.

The biographers of Ruben informs us, that he was not only a great artist, but that he was also endowed with a capacity that rendered him equal to the affairs of the first importance, and that the King of Spain, his master, frequently employed him in his secret negotiations, with the greatest success.

He was remarkably fond of shew and parade, and so generous, that one day meeting a painter who was continually censuring his works, Rubens asked him the reason of it.—“I do not wish you harm”, replied the other, “but that I may procure some employment for myself, I am under the necessity of depreciating your pictures, and at this moment, am so poor that I really have not bread to eat.”—Rubens immediately gave him some money, and sent him to his tailor, to be clothed at his expense.
He was a man of the most unshaken integrity, but proud, and of the severity so excessive that the French compared him to Sully, the immortal minister of Henry IV. of France, whom the courtiers used to call the Negative, pretending that the word yes, had never escaped his lips.

His temper was so violent, that his pupils dreaded him, and he one day dismissed two of them for a very trivial offence.

As he frequently employed De Wildens and Snyders in painting the landscape and animals in his works, they being once at dinner together, observed, that their labours greatly contributed to enrich them; and their conversation having been reported to Rubens, he was so offended, that he lost no time in painting a grand chace, which being finished, he sent for the two artists, that they might see he had no occasion for their help, and having loaded them with reproaches, “you are two great ignorants” said he; “and may see that I am your master in everything,” after which he dismissed them.

You must confess, Sir, that a man so imperious and so vain of his merit, gives us by his single trait great reason to believe that the writers have not misinformed us respecting his fears that the imminent talents of Vandyck and Jordaens might one day, rival his own.

But in speaking to you freely and so loud, I am aware that I may again arouse the anonymous avenger of the manes of Rembrandt, who is now probably reposing on the laurels he acquired in his late attack—that Quixotte protector of deceased artists, may perhaps make use again of his “fly-slapper,” or brave me anew with a challenge “to break a ludicrous lance” with him.
Already perhaps, the fruitful genius of my anonymous adversary, furnishes him with fresh obsolete beauties, and he may again be on the point of exclaiming, *these are, Sir, contemptible anecdotes, which if doubtful, common justice would consign to oblivion, and if true, generosity would grieve to relate.*

Again perhaps he, in an excess of ardour, may, by a blast of his sepulchral trumpet, summon the heirs of immortal fame, and repeat, *ye sacred shade of Rubens, &c. &c. &c.*

After which he may regale us with a fresh scrap of Latin, followed by the verses of his own reflection, and then we shall hear anew.

“Rome, in her capital, saw Querno sit, thron’d on seven hills, the Antichrist of wit.”

Or another apt quotation:

“Of Correggios and stuff, and of his trumpet and snuff.”

But, Sir, let us leave this painter-author, to speak of another, whose permission I have to do so.

It is of Mr. Rigaud, who holds a distinguished rank in your Academy, and who has written to me, expressing his disapprobation of my catalogue, not in terms of invective and reproach, like my anonymous addresser, but in such a letter as I should have expected to have received from him, polite and friendly.

*If the family of Medicis, says Mr. Rigaud, who have so highly encouraged the arts in Italy, and Louis XIV, in France, had entertained the same opinion of painters that you

* Bravo, Bravo, Mr. Anonymous—your thoughts are strikingly, singularly new.
do, we should not at this day possess those superb chef d'oeuvres, that have been 
executed by their orders, for they would not have employed them.

Mr. Rigaud is acknowledged by all those who have the pleasure of his 
aquaintance, to be a man of sense; but the most sensible are liable to err.

Are the weaknesses then of our fellow creatures to debar us of holding intercourse 
with them? If so, we must seek communion in other worlds, perfection being denied to 
humanity in this.

Does morality enjoin us to destroy Raphael’s *Tranfiguration* and his other divine 
works, because he indulged himself in pleasures, and shortened his days by too long a 
visit to his mistress?

It is well known that his immortal rival, Andrea del Sarto, abusing the confidence 
of his patron, Francis I, robbed him of a considerable sum of money, under the pretence 
of buying pictures and statues for him; and are his works less celebrated, less beautiful, or 
less coveted on that account?

Do we inquire whether the architect who has raised the light and the commodious 
edifice we live in is troubled with the vapours of the spleen? Or whether the cook who 
pampers out appetite, is the slave of jealousy?

In fact, of what consequence is it to the possessor of a picture, whether its author 
was envious or liberal, prudent or debauched, provided it has those beauties that 
characterize the works of genius?

Had it been believed, some short time since, that the inventor of gunpowder was a 
drunkard, can we suppose the discovery would have deterred the Hero of the Nile and his
undaunted seamen, from carrying dismay into the heart of Copenhagen, and our avenging thunder into the affrighted North?

Genius and talents have no connection whatever, with the private virtues and vices, and great men, though not free from imperfections are not the less presents sent to us by heaven.

Indeed, it is of little consequence to a nation, if those who hold the reigns of government, are also liable to human frailties, (And where shall we find men who are not?) provided they do not influence their public duties—therefore their private conduct the people have not any claim to censure or investigate.

It is the same thing with men of abilities in general—we profit by their studies and their genius without enquiring further—their private virtues and vices concern themselves solely, and whether guided by one or the other, our respect and gratitude are due to sovereigns and other great men, for the good resulting from their labours, and the wisdom of their government—if in addition their private conduct is good, we owe them that esteem every good man is entitled to; but if not so, they are not less the objects of our respect as is the father of a family to his children, whom he rears and provides for, without edifying them by his example—but I am deviating from my subject!

To return to it—A friend of mine, having been informed that many painters had taken offense at my catalogue, sent me, a few days ago, the *Rambler*, that well-known production of one of our brightest oracles, and I read in it, the following passage:—

“It was once ingeniously confessed to me, by a painter, that no professor of his art ever loved another. This declaration is so far justified by the knowledge of life, as to damp the
hopes of warm and constant friendship between men whom their studies have made competitors, and whom every favourer and every censurer are hourly inciting against each other.”

--Dr. Johnson.—Rambler, Vol. II. No. 64, page 63.

Is it possible to assert in more positive and express terms, that painters are jealous of each other? And what have I said more?—I have guarded my assertions with exceptions, and Dr. Johnson did not. However, he published his sentiments with impunity, and no one raised his hand or voice against him.—But Dr. Johnson had not, like myself, a collection of pictures, on the eve of selling, so that interest and cabal did not create him enemies.

I trust I have fully proved in this letter, Sir, that I have not only never intended to vilify or insult the body of painters, but that I have not in fact done so, since I have only asserted what Dr. Johnson has done before me; who, like myself, had no such design in view; but stated it as a misfortune particular attached to the profession.

For my own part, I should have omitted mentioning it, had I not flattered myself with stopping in some degree the progress of the evil, and preventing for the future, the fine modern productions of the art, from suffering the same depreciation in the eyes of the public, that they have hitherto done, by warning detracting artists that their envy and manœuvre [sic] were observed; but my zeal has been misinterpreted, and candour, I see, will not be able to find a foot-path, where flattery may ride with ease.

However, Sir, victim of displeasure I have not merited, I understand the press teams with invective and abuse against me; and that some are prepossessing the
collectors against the pictures I submit to the hammer, other assassins, concealed by an anonymous garb, are sacrificing and selling for a few pence, a good, I value more than life, that unsullied reputation I have endeavoured to acquire during the thirty-two years that I have lived in this country, honored, I trust, with the public esteem, as well as with the private confidence and friendship of some of the most respectable characters, who not unfrequently have condescended to make the first advances.

Till last December (in the beginning of which month, that unfortunate catalogue was not published) I have enjoyed those blessing without interruption; for till then, no harm was said of me; and is it possible that I should have forfeited them in the course of the very few weeks that have elapsed since?

Have I offended the laws? Or has my conduct given cause for scandal? Have I injured anyone? Has any man cause of complaint against me?—let him appear! Nay, I defy even the assertion that I have not done at all times, the good that I had the means of doing.

But my enemies lie in obscure, impenetrable ambush, and shoot their poisoned darts in perfect security, accusing me of insatiable ambition, and charging me in their libels, with having amassed through avarice, the enormous sum of three hundred thousand pounds, through that daring, ridiculous assertion should alone be sufficient to send their lying prints among the fairy tales of the time yore.

What marks have I given of ambition, or what proofs have they of my wealth?—satisfied with the mediocrity of my station, and of my fortune, I have never fought to over-step either although the contrary is stubbornly asserted by an unknown hand, obstinate in evil, who ranks me in the number of imposters and slanderers—
It shames us all, such sland’rs should be borne,
Untax’d with spirit, and unpaid with scorn.

Another villain, (whom I suspect to be a foreigner, whose misery, when he was
totally unknown to me, I lightened by bestowing on him and his infant family, at different
periods, upwards of 120 pounds, but who now finds himself piqued at my having refused
him 500 pounds, that he solicited of me, for some undertaking he had in view) aims with
equal industry to injure me, seizes the moment that he thinks propitious for this purpose,
when the displeasure of the painters, is at it’s [sic] height, and prints a libel against me in
French verses, or rather rhymes, so atrocious, so compounded of scurrility and
falsehoods, that the editors of the public papers must have refused it admission, and the
booksellers have not dared to publish it.

However, the infamous poetaster, not to lose the pleasure and prospect of
meditated vengeance, has had recourse to a stratigem, and distributes, under cover, his
libel, which he sends by the medium of the post, to most of the political inhabitants of the
metropolis, and many in the country, venting his venom, at a proportionably greater or
less expence of postage to them.

Should the miserable culprit to gratitude, succeed by his manoeuvre, in injuring
the pending sale, I hope still to recover that, which I value as infinitely more precious,
public esteem, and I shall regain it when reflection succeeds to the first transports of
prejudice; for a nation, proverbial for it’s [sic] bravery and love of justice, will spurn the
efforts of treacherous, anonymous, and oppressive machinations.

I am, Dear Sir, your obedient and humble servant,
Noel Desenfans

Feb. 26th, 1802.
Verses to RALPH.

SURE, Ralph you are a curious blade,
Thus good SIR JOSHUA to aid;
Proceeding on proverbial plan,
‘Like Master,’ you, and he ‘like man:’
You tell the public a fine story,
Exclaiming lo son Pittore;
Yet ‘tis well known you are no Kneller,
But trusty keeper of the cellar;
No cloth to cover you are able,
Your lyre is covering a table;
Your pencils are a knife and fork.
You nothing draw—except a cork;
Old Buck,—‘twould better be by halfo,
To have assum’d the name of Ralpho;
You might, in Hudibrastic form,
Have boldly ta’en the town by storm;
Made rebels of the land to stare,
And gentlemen with foreign air
Pretend they Signor Ralphp knew,
Amongst the dilettanti few.

However, Ralph, your Exhibition,
Is, I confess, in good condition;
But tell me truly how come you,
So very strong a thing to do,
As showing Leda and the Swan
For Miss to peep at through a fan.
Appendix I

Joshua Reynolds to William Crib, 14 April 1791, from the Collection Frits Lugt, Fondation Custodia.

Dear Sir

April 14 1791

Go to my house & tell George to deliver you the Picture that is over the Chimney in the blue Bed Chamber, I wish you would get it lined & varnished which I believe it wants very much as it has not been moved from the place these thirty years. It is a copy after Claude Loraine, I am told if it was an original it would have been worth a thousand pounds; as a Copy I should think it is worth half, at any rate I will not sell it under two hundred Guineas. If you cannot sell it at that price order a [let] the handsome frame for it [to be new gilt] and let it be hung up in the Parlous by the time I come to Town.

Yours Sincerely

J. Reynolds

P.S. Don't let any body know to whom the picture belongs.