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‘A Defect in their Education’: Blake, Haydon, and the Misguided British Audience

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Keats’s friend Benjamin Robert Haydon was one of those painters who, along with James Barry and William Blake, blamed the demise of grand-style history painting in Britain upon a corruption of the public taste that had generated a preference for what they considered to be the ‘lesser’ forms of portraiture and genre painting. Artists like these, along with poets like William Wordsworth, lamented the disproportionate interference of amateur and professional critics whose influence undermined the supposedly innate ability of all individuals to understand and appreciate the arts, even in their most complicated forms. Haydon joined his painterly peers in calling for an improvement in the ‘education’ of the public to produce an audience that was both more aesthetically insightful and more critically independent.

KEYWORDS painting, history, audience, public, aesthetics, nationalism

In 1865 the French anarchist French Pierre Joseph Proudhon, disgusted with the elaborate public fuss over elitist art academy exhibitions in Paris, wrote this: ‘Why can’t we leave artists to their own business, and not trouble ourselves about them more than we do about rope-dancers? Perhaps it would be the best way to find out exactly what they are worth’.1 Proudhon’s remark testifies to the extent to which ‘the fine arts’ — painting in particular — had by mid-century already begun its migration to the periphery of the national (and international) cultural conversation in Europe and the West, a marginalized position in which the fine arts have largely been mired ever since. While more recognizably populist forms and formats among the arts have subsequently achieved both a presence and an influence in public affairs and political discourse, that variety of art whose historical roots are entangled in the academies and the private studios of the Art Establishment has over the past century and a half

become something of an afterthought among the politically and socially committed. As Claire Light put it in 2008, in an on-line review of the activist mixed-media artist Christine Wong Yap’s ‘socialist-realist-influenced graphics, screenprinting, muralism, flyers, t-shirts, and buttons’, the sort of art produced by “political” and “ethnic” artists’ really cannot coexist peacefully with sedate academic art: ‘The moneyed, mainstream international arts scene places aesthetics and formal issues far above content. Even if this weren’t so, any political or identity content in art makes the work — and the artist — automatically suspect’.²

Wong Yap is only one of many contemporary visual artists for whom it is essential that ‘art’ be rife with social and political activism. The impulse, however, dates back at least to Romantic-era British caricaturists like Rowlandson, Gillray, and the Cruikshanks, and it follows through Romantic-era continental contemporaries like Goya and Gericault and Napoleonic propagandists like Gros. It continues on up through more modern artists as diverse as Wyndham Lewis in early twentieth-century Great Britain, the Mexican Communist artist Diego Rivera in mid-century, and the HIV/AIDS activist Frank Moore and the transplanted Briton Chaz Maviyane-Davies in the contemporary United States. This interventionist commitment was not always so — and yet, paradoxically, it also always was so. Because activist artists are frequently perceived to be — or because they deliberately cast themselves in the self-dramatizing roles of — prophets scorned in their own times, like the furious Jeremiah of the Scriptures, there has always been a fundamental disconnect between what the paying public claims to want in the art it patronizes and what at least a small but vocal dissenting minority of the artistic community claims that public needs to be patronizing — for its own good and for the good of the nation. This is the issue taken up in what follows, in a discussion of the iconoclastic artists William Blake, first, and then Benjamin Robert Haydon, friend of Keats, Hazlitt, Wordsworth, and a coterie of artistic cognoscenti that flourished in the heady times of Regency and post-Regency Britain, when the public arts were at a critical crossroads.

The later eighteenth century and the first part of the nineteenth century in Britain witnessed what turned out — to the surprise of many — to be an ultimately unequal combat between the ‘high’ art of the academy (including, of course, the Royal Academy) and a more deliberately ‘popular’ (and populist) art that has come to be associated with the caricature print and the rise of the illustrated mass-market periodical. While these two varieties of visual art — fundamentally different in their intellectual and aesthetic assumptions, procedures, and intended audiences — may be said in one sense to define the two poles of the period’s art, they are not ordinarily positioned upon the same artistic continuum at all. Instead, the alternative to the academic ‘high art’ epitomized in grand-style history painting is visible in that intermediate variety of art that developed during this transitional period. Christopher Rovee has observed that this ‘exhibition culture’ was rooted not in the traditional private enclaves of patrician privilege but rather in widely accessible public galleries that offered a set of visual materials that modeled for an emerging middle class a set of attitudes and behaviours that they associated (not always correctly) with the elite classes.³ Because the emerging British bourgeoisie would, as the century progressed,

wield increasing economic — and therefore also social, political, and ‘moral’ — power and authority, artists not surprisingly contended for the preference — and, more important, for the pocketbooks — of this newly empowered class of patrons who were learning to exercise that patronage in wholly new ways, and in the burgeoning marketplace economy of nineteenth-century Britain.

In some respects, then, the comment by Proudhon with which I began acknowledges the presence by mid-century of a sort of market economy in the arts that was clearly beginning to supersede the traditional programme of patrician subsidies and patronage, whether private or public. What sells will sell, in short, and the artists who produce it will prosper; the others will starve and die off. But even in such a Darwinian model of art and aesthetics, one would think, the principles of taste — or connoisseurship — that drive the market must still be formed. This essay examines this matter of forming the public tastes; and, while Haydon serves as a particular barometer for the matter during the latter stages of the Romantic era, I want to place him within a broader context that is delineated both by members of his own circle (including Keats) and by predecessors like James Barry and William Blake, both of whom paid a considerable price for their advocacy of a committed and principled national art.

In academic circles, as in contemporary talk radio, over-simplification is a convenient shortcut for ideologues who want us to understand that they see things much more clearly and intelligently than most everyone else. Artists have never been immune to immoderate talk either, nor have their critics, whether they be paid professionals or simply average persons-on-the-street like any of us who go to galleries, look at exhibitions, and draw our own conclusions, arrive at our own judgements. We have all heard someone say of a modern work, ‘That’s not art! I could do that!’. Responses of that sort say two things. First, they express a value judgement that reflects the speaker’s own standards of taste — standards that have been conditioned by her or his previous experience of art in all its varieties, and especially as she or he has encountered it in formal spaces like galleries and museums. And second, despite their belligerent wilfulness, they imply what is in fact an essentially democratizing view of art as a vehicle that is — at least potentially — open and accessible to every one of us.

I shall begin with some of the responses of William Blake and Benjamin Robert Haydon to what they regarded as the faulty — even perversely wrong-headed — judgement of the professional reviewers and the intellectual aristocracy to which those reviewers catered. Their critiques make clear that both artists advocated a democratizing of connoisseurship that was grounded in an ‘educated’ and self-empowered public audience. Their views about visual art recall what William Wordsworth had written about poetry at the very beginning of the nineteenth century, in his preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. There Wordsworth declared that the poet ‘is a man speaking to men’, which formulation inescapably implies that any individual is therefore capable of being a poet. Wordsworth’s claim is the equivalent of the dictum in Revolutionary France by which social and hereditary distinctions were levelled and everyone took on the same title: *citoyen* — citizen.

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Even so, Wordsworth did not really envision a whole nation of poets. William Blake did, by the way, and he inscribed that belief at the bottom of the first plate of his brief epic, *Milton* (c. 1808): ‘Would to God that all the Lords people were Prophets’ (E p. 96; *Milton* 1). For Wordsworth, the poet is necessarily set apart from everyone else who is potentially — but has not yet arrived at actually being — a poet. The poet is an individual, he says, who is ‘endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind [. . .]’. Put most simply, the poet is an individual like everyone else, but one whose ‘sensitivities’ are more delicate and responsive than those of most other people, and who consequently ‘feels’ both more profoundly and more variously than most of his or her peers.

How, then, are we to ascend from our quotidian selves and don the poet’s (or the artist’s) mantle, to become ‘Prophets’ as Blake wishes us to do? Two ways. First, we need to learn how to observe more carefully. Perhaps the most common verb in eighteenth-century poetry is ‘see’, which should tell us something about the particular sense — and the sort of mental activity — that Enlightenment thinkers, poets, and artists especially privileged. One way we can learn to ‘see’, of course, is through direct observation and contemplation: slowing down so that passive ‘looking’ becomes active ‘seeing’. Romantic visual art takes us in precisely this direction: the works of Blake, Barry, Henry Fuseli, and Haydon require us to enter into the pictures and participate in ‘making’ them — in ‘performing’ them — in ways that the works of Gainsborough do not. Sir Joshua Reynolds’s remarkable early *Self-Portrait*, for instance, painted in about 1748, still unsettles us: the artist shields his eyes against the light that is shining in upon him from our space, and he looks us directly in the eyes. There is no way for us to respond with mere passivity.

The other way we can learn to ‘see’ is for artists to train us to do so. This is no mean task, either, for untrained viewers are — precisely because they are untrained — incapable of conceptualizing that variety of heroic art which visionaries like Barry, Blake and Haydon are most intent on producing. Keats’s remark to Haydon in 1818 is instructive:

> When a Schoolboy the abstract Idea I had of an heroic painting was what I cannot describe. I saw it somewhat sideways, large, prominent, round and colour’d with magnificence, somewhat like the feel I have of Anthony and Cleopatra. Or of Alcibiades, leaning on his Crimson Couch in his Galley, his broad shoulders imperceptibly heaving with the Sea.

Keats’s ‘Schoolboy’ years were of course the first decade and a half of the nineteenth century, the years during which Wordsworth was spelling out his definition of the poet, Barry was starving, and Blake was fulminating. Keats finds it nearly impossible

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7 Reynolds’s painting is in the National Portrait Gallery, London.

to describe what he considered ‘an heroic painting’ to be; in trying to do so he crosses his media, drawing a composite image of Alcibiades’ sea-battle from Plutarch9 and another of Antony and Cleopatra that might recall any number of visual works (like Henry Tresham’s frequently reproduced melodramatic image of 1795, for Boydell’s Shakespeare Gallery, for instance) or a mental image from his own reading of Shakespeare’s drama. Keats is, in fact, trying to define his notion of the ‘heroic’ by appealing to the manner in which that sort of art seems to operate upon his sensibilities — in effect, defining what it is by how it does what it does. For Keats and many of his contemporaries, any genuine ‘heroic’ art must have existed more as a (perhaps unattainable) ideal form than as something that could be realized on canvas, where the finished image often disappointed by leaving nothing to the imagination. This may be one reason why the popular taste turned away from this sort of art and toward more approachable and comfortable varieties.

The point remains, however. Just as Wordsworth strives to cultivate among his readers both an appreciation of — and a capacity for making — poetry, so too does the visual artist labor to teach us how to see as she or he does, and consequently how to be an artist. Every work of art invites us to let it instruct us in how to see, in how to visualize a subject as its artist has done. Blake wrote that, ‘The difference between a bad Artist & a Good One Is the Bad Artist Seems to Copy a Great Deal: The Good one Really Does Copy a Great Deal’ (E p. 645; annot. Reynolds). For Blake, ‘copying’ teaches what he called ‘the Language of Art’, which he associated both with design and with execution. Thus he tells us, ‘To learn the Language of Art Copy for Ever. is My Rule’ (E p. 636). But the language of art is only that — a language: it remains for the artist to make that language come alive in service to a vision that is uniquely that of the individual artist. Nevertheless, like his contemporary Wordsworth (of whose work he largely disapproved), Blake was committed to the notion of individual potential, individual capacity. For Blake, the prophet’s business is to facilitate among his audience the prophetic vision — and the capacity for achieving it — that is presently his alone. The best prophets, and the most successful ones, according to this formulation, are those who do their job so well that they put themselves out of business by liberating their audiences so completely that they have no further need of prophets — because they can do it themselves. This is precisely what happens at the end of Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, and why Prometheus and Asia can adjourn to a blissful retreat, their transformative task accomplished.

Clear-sighted, prophetic citizens will — in an ideal world — no longer need critics to think for them either. Wordsworth’s ‘Advertisement’ to the *Lyrical Ballads* overtly advocated removing the ‘middle men’ of the critical Establishment from the midst of the direct transaction between poet and reader that would, Wordsworth claimed, empower the reader and reduce her or his passive dependence upon the opinion (and the authority) of some intermediary adjudicator of taste.10 Blake had something to

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say about this, too. To Richard Phillips, the publisher of *The Monthly Magazine*, Blake wrote in 1806:

> The taste of English amateurs has been too much formed upon pictures imported from Flanders and Holland; consequently our countrymen are easily brow-beat on the subject of painting; and hence it is so common to hear a man say, ‘I am no judge of pictures;’ but, O Englishmen! Know that every man ought to be a judge of pictures, and every man is so who has not been connoisseured out of his senses. (E p. 768)

Like Wordsworth, Blake advocates courageous self-reliance among the public when it comes to judging art.

When the Royal Academy of Arts, established by George III in 1768, specifically excluded engravers and etchers, those artisans turned to a society that had already existed, at least informally, since 1754. ‘The Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce’ found its permanent home in 1774 in the Adelphi, in the new building Robert Adam designed for it. Over the course of some seven years (1777–1784), the wild Irish history painter James Barry adorned the walls of the Society’s Great Room (its lecture hall) with enormous heroic paintings of the progress of the arts, manufacture, and commerce in England (*The Progress of Human Culture*). For this work, as for much of his work, Barry received little payment and even less public acclaim. Refusing to follow in the footsteps of fashionable painters like Gainsborough, Barry persevered in executing grand-scale history paintings like his brilliant *Lear Weeping over the Dead Body of Cordelia* (1786–1788). To his credit — and his ruin — Barry was the only British painter to follow entirely Sir Joshua Reynolds’s directions for grand-style history painting, and his increasingly paranoid devotion to this cause gradually cost him his reputation, his circle of friends and admirers, his emotional and financial stability, and finally his life. When he died in squalor in 1806, passionate advocates like Blake were outraged. Blake faulted not just the unappreciative public but also — and even more so — the conservative elitist Art Establishment represented by the Royal Academy and by the wealthy aristocrats who patronized it and its artists while excluding iconoclastic visionaries like Barry — and like Blake himself, who felt keenly the second-class status accorded him and his ideas by the snobbishly refined members of the Academy. ‘Who will Dare to Say’, he wrote around 1808 in his own copy of Reynolds’s *Discourses on Art*, ‘that Art is Encouraged, or Either Wished or Tolerated in a Nation where The Society for the Encouragement of Art. Sufferd Barry to Give them, his Labour for Nothing[.] A Society Composed of the Flower of the English Nobility & Gentry — Suffering an Artist to Starve while he Supported Really what They under the pretence of Encouraging were Endeavouring to Depress’ (E p. 636).

Of course, Blake’s private comments are predictably self-serving. Writing about the public’s neglect of his friend Henry Fuseli’s remarkable collection of grand-scale paintings on subjects from John Milton, the Milton Gallery, Blake aligned himself solidly with Fuseli and Barry: ‘The Neglect of Fuselis Milton’, he writes, ‘in a Country pretending to the Encouragement of Art is a Sufficient Apology for My Vigorous Indignation, if indeed the Neglect of My own Powers had not been’ (E p. 642). ‘While Sr. Joshua was rolling in Riches Barry was Poor & <Unemployed except by his own Energy>’, he also complains (E p. 636). ‘[O]nly Portrait Painting [was] applauded & rewarded by the Rich & Great[..] Reynolds & Gainsborough Blotted & Blurred one
against the other & Divided all the English World between them[.] Fuseli Indignant <almost> hid himself. I <am> hid’ (E p. 636). In Blake’s opinion, both the Royal Academy and its patrons had abandoned the intellectual and aesthetic principles of grand-style history painting for the self-indulgence of portraiture and genre. The failure was endemic and systemic, so much so that even Wordsworth came to associate the bourgeois taste for fashionable portraiture with ‘a British body politic whose face was changing for the worse’. Of course, this did not prevent him from nevertheless allowing Haydon to include his likeness in *Christ’s Entry into Jerusalem* (1820) and to famously paint him as *Wordsworth on Helvellyn* (1842).

Within the context of the geo-political struggle for the whole future of Europe in the early years of the nineteenth century — remember that the war with Napoleon was entering its fiercest stage with the onset of the Peninsular Campaign — this public preference for the soft and the self-indulgent in art struck Blake as a particularly egregious betrayal of the nation and the national character. Indeed, he ingeniously invoked no less a public hero than Admiral Nelson when he wrote in 1809, in the Descriptive Catalogue to his own unsuccessful public exhibition, that ‘England expects that every man should do his duty, in Arts, as well as in Arms, or in the Senate’ (E p. 549). Blake understood the risk any artist took by choosing to serve his or her country by chastising it — like Jeremiah — for its own good, and that risk is visible in his extraordinary depiction of the ‘Spiritual Form’ of Nelson.

Nor was Blake the first to draw this explicit connection between art and nation. In the Preface to the first edition of his *Rhymes on Art* (1805), the Irish portrait painter and Royal Academician Martin Archer Shee had written,

> Every person interested for the fine arts, or concerned for the reputation of his country, must perceive with more than regret, at the present moment, a growing disregard to the fate of one, which cannot fail materially to affect the splendour of the other. All patriotic interest in the cultivation of British genius appears to be at an end; those who should be the patrons of artists have ceased to be even their employers; ‘cedant arma togae’ [let arms give way to the gown] — the painter gives way to the picture-dealer: they who possess taste are indifferent, and they who pretend to it are hostile.

Shee goes on to lament the neglect of the arts in Britain, complaining that they ‘seem never to have been viewed by the public as a national object’, with the result although the arts ‘have been invaded from every port upon the continent’, there have been ‘no defence bills passed for their protection — no patriotic funds appropriated to their use’. ‘Thus circumscribed’, Shee continues, ‘the arts of the country have no resource left, but in the liberality — in the policy of the state; and unless some public exertion be made in their favour, they must sink under difficulties which neither zeal, industry, nor genius can withstand’. In light of the escalating British nationalism in

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11 Rovee, p. 181.
12 The famous image, which was repeatedly engraved as frontispiece to editions of Wordsworth’s poetry, is in the National Portrait Gallery, London.
13 Blake adapts the famous signal that Nelson sent to his ships before the decisive Battle of Trafalgar that claimed his life on 21 October 1805: ‘England expects every man will do his duty’.
14 Blake’s *The Spiritual Form of Nelson Guiding Leviathan* (c. 1805–1809) is in the Tate Gallery, London.
16 Shee, pp. xii, xv, xvii.
the later eighteenth century and its ardent acceleration during the war years during which Shee (and Blake) were writing, the explicit linking of arts and arms — of public culture and ‘patriotism’ — underscores how profoundly artists like these regarded art not as peripheral to the national interest but, rather, as absolutely central to it and indeed to the national character as a whole. This is precisely why they are so adamant about the individual artist’s civic function.

Because both the Royal Academy and the British Institution had in 1809 excluded watercolours from their annual exhibitions, Blake points out in his catalogue, he has been forced to mount his own exhibition. His language is instructive:

There cannot be more than two or three great Painters or Poets in any Age or Country; and these, in a corrupt state of Society, are easily excluded, but not so easily obstructed [my emphases]. They have excluded Water-colours; it is therefore become necessary that I should exhibit to the Public, in an Exhibition of my own, my Designs, Painted in Water-colours. If Italy is enriched and made great by Raphael, if Michael Angelo is its supreme glory, if Art is the glory of a Nation, if Genius and Inspiration are the great Origin and Bond of Society, the distinction my Works have obtained from those who best understand such things, calls for my Exhibition as the greatest of Duties to my Country. (E p. 528)

For Blake, art — and the vision it embodies and transmits to its audiences — is always about independence: independence of mind, of vision, and of personal situation. Blake believed that at every moment of our lives we are continually faced with choices, and that on those choices depends our future — indeed our salvation. Hence, as he puts it in a description of his great lost painting of The Last Judgment, ‘The Last Judgment is an Overwhelming of Bad Art & Science’ (E p. 565), so that ‘whenever any Individual Rejects Error & Embraces Truth a Last Judgment passes upon that Individual’ (E p. 562). Blake was convinced that his countrymen and countrywomen had surrendered their independence of mind and vision to an elite and misguided Art Establishment: ‘The Enquiry in England is not whether a Man has Talents & Genius? But whether he is Passive & Polite & a Virtuous Ass; & obedient to Noblemens Opinions in Art & Science. If he is; he is a Good man: If Not he must be Starved’ (E p. 642).

Blake’s quarrel was not simply with the Royal Academy and its patrons, though, but rather with the consequences for the British citizenry in general of the sort of misguided principles and taste he associated with them. Blake envisioned a national art that was not confined to galleries but that would, instead, cover the walls of public buildings, an art that would surround the people and inspire and encourage them right in the public world in which they lived their daily lives. Such an art, Blake reasoned, would at once educate the people and sensitize them to the humanizing influences of the arts. It was nothing short of a ‘national project’. Ironically, this very sort of programme was realized in America during the Great Depression of the 1930s, when government agencies like the Works Progress Administration (WPA; renamed the Work Projects Administration during 1939) funded American artists like Thomas Hart Benton, Stuart Davis, and Grant Wood to paint murals for public buildings. The impulse persists today in the mural art that is being created around the world on the blank sides of buildings as part of community-based exercises in urban renewal.
Barry, Shee, and Blake were not alone in their opinions about the civic, nationalistic import of the arts. Their younger contemporary, Benjamin Robert Haydon, perhaps the last important British painter of grand-style history paintings, shared those opinions. The self-dramatizing writings in which he portrayed himself as the artistic prophet crying in the wilderness notwithstanding, Haydon knew enough about the dynamics of the public forum to make his convictions known, even if the results were decidedly mixed. When Tom Taylor published Haydon’s autobiography and memoirs in 1853, he observed that Haydon ‘was the first artist who got a hearing in his insisting to the Government and public of England that Art is a matter of national concern’ (H, ii, 830).17

Like Blake, Haydon chafed at his perceived mistreatment by the Royal Academy, whose power and authority he was convinced was undermining both the moral and the spiritual basis of visual art. Put most simply, his complaint was that the Academy and its patrons were so over-conditioned by rules and expectations based upon retrogressive principles of taste and aesthetics that they were unable to see clearly what was before their eyes when it failed to conform to those preconceived notions. The more ‘different’ a work was, the greater was the degree of its ‘failure’ in their eyes. As Tom Taylor put it after Haydon’s death, ‘He would paint large pictures with a high aim. The patrons did not want such pictures, the public would not buy them. They flocked to see them exhibited, but that was all’ (H, ii, 825). When at the Royal Academy exhibition of 1809 his ambitious painting of the Assassination of Dentatus was placed in what he regarded as an inferior location, he was enraged by his own powerlessness to respond. He wrote, ‘This is and has been the curse of European Art for two hundred and fifty years, ever since the establishment of those associations of vanity, monopoly, intrigue and envy called Academies, and until they are reformed, and rendered powerless except as schools of study, they will be felt as an obstruction to the advancement of Art’ (H, i, 91). Haydon also raged about the imbalance he perceived between the government’s support of public sculpture and its support of painting. In the decade between 1802 and 1812 alone, Parliament voted more than £40,000 for public monuments to military and political figures. These sums were on top of large sums already raised for that purpose by cities and private corporations. The result was an explosion of monumental sculpture that found no counterpart in painting. In December 1812 Haydon, ‘Britain’s most vocal advocate of public patronage’,18 complained,

You lavish thousands upon thousands on sculpture without effect. You refuse all assistance, all public support, all public opportunities to painting. You load your churches, your halls, and your public buildings with masses of unwieldy stone, and allow not one side or one inch of your room for pictures. Is this fair? is it just? is it liberal? […] Surely you are bound to divide your favours and affections. If you shower thousands on Sculpture and fatten her to idleness with one hand, scatter hundreds into the lap of Painting also with the other, that her preternatural efforts made without friends and without patronage may be fostered and saved from being wholly without effect. (H, i, 148–49)


Haydon’s friend John Keats understood the point perfectly. Even after he had largely broken with Haydon in September 1819 over the painter’s refusal to repay a loan in timely fashion, he nevertheless wrote the always financially strapped Haydon that ‘it did behoove men I could mention, among whom I must place Sir G. [George] Beaumont, to have lifted you up above sordid cares. That this has not been done is a disgrace to the country’.19 Keats’s painter friend Joseph Severn was less charitable, attributing Haydon’s difficulties at least in part to his ‘excessive vanity & presumption’: although ‘gifted with a true genius for history painting’, Haydon’s ‘pride & vanity induced him to consider he had a right to the amplest patronage & thank[s] in a country where historical art is not cared for or understood’.20

Like Barry, Blake and Fuseli, Haydon lamented the absence of commissions for the ambitious works that most interested him. In 1814, six years before he completed his remarkable Christ’s Entry into Jerusalem (1820),21 he wrote that ‘Whilst I write this I have been eight years without a commission from the nobility, and of the thirty-nine years I have been a historical painter, thirty-two have been without an order of any kind’ (H, i, 166). The point here is not just that the aggrieved artist is complaining — naturally enough — about public preferment of what he regards as inferior art. Rather, the point is that Haydon, like Blake and Barry before him, was unceasing in his campaign to expose the pernicious effects of elitist connoisseurship. Let ordinary people judge for themselves, they all argued. Let them have good examples whose aesthetic, intellectual, spiritual, and nationalistic appeal is clear and undeniable, and the people will judge correctly — without the interference of the professional critics who serve the interest not of the people in general but rather of the aristocratic elite minority. After all, Haydon argues, even the members of that aristocracy are inadequately prepared to make aesthetic judgements because they have themselves been coerced into deferring to the supposed ‘experts’. ‘That the nobility and higher classes of this country’, he writes, ‘have so little dependence on their own judgment in art is principally owing to a defect in their education’. Specifically, ‘In neither University [i.e., Oxford and Cambridge] is painting ever remembered. Its relations, its high claim, the conviction that taste is necessary to the accomplishment of a refined character, and to complete the glory of a great country, neither the public tutors of the nobility, or the private tutors of the prince ever feel themselves, or ever impress upon their pupils. Thus, the educated, the wealthy, and the high-born grow up, and issue out to their respective public duties in the world, deficient in a feeling, the cultivation of which has brightened the glory of the greatest men and most accomplished princes’ (H, i, 233).

Haydon’s is, in fact, much the same complaint that Barry had levelled in 1775, when he wrote,

There is in our present state of connoisseurship such an extreme degree of weakness, that almost any fraud will go down: The number of our dilettanti is, no doubt, much encreased [sic] of late years, but the silly talk and mistaken judgments about pictures has encreased also, and out of all reasonable proportion. [. . .] they neglect advantages that

19 Selected Letters of John Keats, p. 387; 3 October 1819.
43 The painting is now at Mount St Mary’s Seminary, Cincinnati, Ohio.
their superior education offers, which, if cultivated with the same pains, would infallibly put them in possession of a real taste, and of such discernment in higher matters as must do honour to themselves, and be highly useful to the arts.\(^{22}\)

Interestingly, Walter Scott felt much the same way, too, later on; he noted in his journal in 1826 that instead of the eloquence he finds in music and poetry, ‘in painting it is different; it is all become a mystery, the secret of which is lodged in a few connoisseurs, whose object is not to praise the works of such painters as produce effect on mankind at large, but to class them according to their proficiency in the inferior rules of art’.\(^{23}\) Clearly, the problem for the national cultural character of an ‘uneducated’ — or, worse still, an improperly educated — public figured large in the thinking of many creative artists.

It is only a short step from what Haydon and others were saying at the beginning of the nineteenth century about this matter of education to an observation that William Morris made in 1880, in a lecture called ‘The Beauty of Life’. There Morris observes that

> The truth is, that in art, and in other things besides, the laboured education of a few will not raise even those few above the reach of the evils that beset the ignorance of the great mass of the population. [. . .] You will see a refined and highly educated man now-a-days, who has been to Italy and Egypt, and where not, who can talk learnedly enough (and fantastically enough sometimes) about art, and who has at his fingers’ ends abundant lore concerning the art and literature of past days, sitting down without signs of discomfort in a house that with all its surroundings is just brutally vulgar and hideous: all his education has not done more for him than that.\(^{24}\)

What matters most to Morris is what also matters most to Haydon: to live — to be actually and truly alive within one’s world — it is necessary for any individual, regardless of class or situation, to have benefited from the inherently salutary and uplifting influences of art. We tend to forget that Keats was but one member of an extraordinarily social community of artists and thinkers; reading the accounts in his letters of his daily (and nightly) interaction with figures like Haydon, Wordsworth, William Hazlitt, Leigh Hunt, and others, and his attendance at theatres, music halls, and galleries reminds us of how important to the cultivation of Romantic-era ‘taste’ was this sort of social interaction with persons of diverse ranks and professions. This was, in its own way, another version of the democratization of the arts (and the public community) about which I commented earlier in this discussion. When Keats tells his brothers George and Tom in 1818 that ‘there [are] three things superior in the modern world, […] “the Excursion”, “Haydon’s pictures” and “Hazlitt’s depth of Taste”’,\(^{25}\) his selection reflects the inherent interdisciplinarity of his own mind, but it also points toward the expansiveness of mind and ‘connoisseurship’ to which Keats’s circle — Haydon not the least of all — continually aspired. Ironically, it also

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\(^{25}\) *Selected Letters*, p. 70; 13 and 19 January 1818.
echoes Blake’s remark (cited earlier) about the presence of only ‘two or three great Painters or Poets’ in any age or country.

It is especially important to remember this point when we think about the world of the Victorians that was to follow. We forget too easily how hard a world that was for the great majority of its inhabitants. We like to remember cultural monuments like great paintings, satisfying novels, impressive Victorian architecture — we like to remember them in part because they allow us to forget the plight, in a world of increasing crowding, disease, and pollution, of ordinary citizens, many of whom were poor, homeless, ill, and not accorded the sort of ‘safety net’ we see in our own times in the form of social welfare agencies and government programmes. A portion of the nineteenth-century artistic community nevertheless felt a strong sense of social responsibility of the sort that we often associate with the novels of Charles Dickens. Writing in 1836 about that year’s Royal Academy exhibition at Somerset House, for instance, the Revd John Eagles lamented what he saw as the decline of British art. ‘After Sixty-eight Royal Exhibitions’, he complained, ‘the arts have retrograded. […] The faulty practice of some Royal Academicians, whose favour is to be obtained, and whose works are therefore imitated, inflicts the greatest injury on British taste. They have neglected nature, and run into bad systems which they call art. They are at total variance with all that has obtained the admiration of the world in the old masters’. Eagles’s criticism reflects the widely held opinion that by the 1830s the Royal Academy was exerting a monopoly over both private patronage and public financing for the arts. Even the founding of the Society of British Artists, in 1823, had not diminished that perception, despite the new organization’s declared intention of publicizing a more realistic variety of art than what was typically admitted to the Royal Academy’s exhibitions. Moreover, as Eagles and many contemporaries appreciated, both the art market itself and public connoisseurship was by the 1830s becoming dominated by the taste — and the purchasing power — of the increasingly affluent middle classes whose preferences were not for grand-scale historical painting on classical, allegorical subjects, but rather for the “watered-down” historical genre painting visible in the art of [Richard Parkes] Bonington and [William] Etty and even more for self-congratulatory portraits and sentimental, ‘domestic’ genre paintings. When Parliament involved itself in 1845 by sponsoring the artistic decoration of the new Houses of Parliament, that action was viewed in many quarters as yet another reason for the mediocrity of the work that emerged from the Royal Academy, whose influence (and financing) was reasonably enough seen as inevitably compromising independent artistic vision.

By mid-century it was becoming increasingly clear that an awareness of art’s social responsibilities had joined the intellectual tradition of dissent that runs from Barry and Blake through people like Dickens and William Morris, who remained adamant

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28 Ironically, this scheme was an almost total failure, despite vast sums of public funds that were poured into it. The enterprise was finally abandoned in 1863. See Gillen D’Arcy Wood, The Shock of the Real: Romanticism and Visual Culture, 1760–1860 (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001), p. 91.
in his conviction that even the most utilitarian of objects ought to be inherently ‘beautiful’, including even such everyday items as chairs, tables, and wall coverings. For as Morris said in 1878, in a lecture called ‘The Lesser Arts’, the job of the arts is not simply to decorate the private spaces of the wealthy and privileged, but also ‘to beautify the familiar matters of everyday life’. For Morris, the creation and consumption of ‘art’ was inseparable from life itself. In the socialist utopia he envisioned, Morris wrote, ‘nothing of beauty and splendour that man’s mind and hand may compass shall be wanting from our public buildings, so that in no private dwelling will there be any signs of waste, pomp, or insolence, and every man will have his share of the best’. 29

Morris’s views were not generally accepted, of course — at least not at first: radical opinions never are. But Morris understood that the battle for the audience’s mind — and its patronage — would henceforth involve the public sphere rather than only the private and privileged. And this meant extending both the definition of the arts and the range of their consumers in ways that would have been almost unthinkable a century earlier. In many respects, Morris represents the legacy of artists like Blake and Haydon whose goal of re-educating their audiences bore fruit not so much in their own times but, rather, in the times and lives of those who followed them.

Notes on contributor

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