3-21-2018

"Art Treasures" and the Aristocracy: Public Art Museums, Exhibitions, and Cultural Control in Victorian Britain

Julia Fine
University of Pennsylvania

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. https://repository.upenn.edu/phr/vol24/iss1/4
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.
“Art Treasures” and the Aristocracy

“Art Treasures” and the Aristocracy: Public Art Museums, Exhibitions, and Cultural Control in Victorian Britain

Julia Fine

“The advancement of the Fine Arts and Practical Science will be readily recognized by you as worthy of the Attention of a great and enlightened Nation. I have directed that a comprehensive Scheme shall be laid before you, having in view the Promotion of these Objects, towards which I invite your Aid and Co-operation.”

With these words delivered to both the House of Commons and the House of Lords, Queen Victoria opened Parliament on November 11, 1852. Her firm direction to prioritize the encouragement of art was a clear advancement from the early rejections of national collections at the turn of the nineteenth century and the ensuing governmental disinterest in the National Gallery. Victoria’s interest in this subject derived chiefly from her German-born husband, Prince Albert, who was keenly devoted to the state of arts and sciences in the country. His influence was seen in many different events and institutions, including the 1851 Great Exhibition, the South Kensington complex, and the 1857 Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition. Since the end of Charles I’s reign in 1649, the British monarchy had not played a predominant role in either the patronage or display of art; the prince’s active involvement in the cultural realm thus represented a significant shift. This, however, did not indicate a return to elite, aristocratic control. Rather, the prince aligned himself with the emerging professional class, as opposed to the traditional ruling aristocracy, who viewed him with scorn. Indeed, his passion for art was connected with his desire for “the Progress and Improvement of the Public.” To Albert, the
“Art Treasures” and the Aristocracy

cultivation of popular interest in the arts was of direct value to the development of British industrial craft. This ethos was shared by leading cultural bureaucrats including Henry Cole, who would play a critical role in the emerging South Kensington Museum. New conceptions about the functions of a public art museum and what it should house were developed in this mid-Victorian period, and they were articulated by figures like the prince and professionals such as Cole and the curator J.C. Robinson. The definition of fine art expanded from simply referring to painting and sculpture to encompassing the decorative arts, a term coined by Robinson referring to art objects that are also functional.\textsuperscript{5} As laid out by the 1836 Select Committee, increasing emphasis was placed on the education of the working classes, both for their moral elevation and for the improvement of manufactures. How were these novel concerns embodied in art museums and exhibitions? Did the transfer of control from elite connoisseurs to middle-class experts result in the exclusion of the aristocracy from the art world, or was the presence of the old guard still felt in these institutions? Ultimately, aristocratic control markedly diminished, but did not disappear completely.

**Art, Manufactures, and Increased Access**

The South Kensington Museum, now known as the Victoria & Albert Museum, grew out of two pivotal events: the 1836 Select Committee and the 1851 Great Exhibition. While the Select Committee was instrumental in the reform of the National Gallery in 1855, it also introduced new ideas of what art museums could contain and the effect that they could have. During the proceedings of the 1860 Select Committee on the South Kensington Museum, Henry Cole, the museum’s first director, was asked to describe the origins of its collection. He responded by pointing to the conclusions reached by the committee members in 1836. He quoted directly from the report, referring to its statement that “the Arts have received
“Art Treasures” and the Aristocracy

little encouragement in this country” and that in a nation such as England, where industry reigned supreme, “the connexion between art and manufacture is most important.” The 1836 report also posited that it would be beneficial to develop a system of public galleries and museums of art throughout the country, and the members proposed a specific acquisition policy. Cole quoted from the report, “Besides casts and paintings, copies of the arabesques of Raphael, the designs at Pompeii, specimens from the era of the revival of the arts, everything, in short, which exhibits in combination the efforts of the artist and the workman, should be sought for in the formation of such institutions.” In addition to historical objects, the committee concluded that modern examples should also be included; the combination would educate the viewer in the principles of design. According to Cole, these ideas served as a guide to the South Kensington Museum, and as a result of this report, the first Government School of Design was opened in 1837 in Somerset House, which the Royal Academy had recently vacated. Eventually, through a series of gradual developments, the Schools of Design evolved to create the Museum.

In fact, the Government had already concluded that action needed to be taken to remedy the sorry state of Britain’s manufactures before the report was ultimately published on August 16, 1836. In July of that year, the Board of Trade asked the treasury to provide money for a School of Design. The House of Commons voted in favor of a £1,500 grant for such a project, “with a view to the improvement of the national manufactures.” The president of the Board of Trade, Charles Poulett Thomson, called a meeting of artists and businessmen to become the Council of the School. Thomson was a supporter of free trade and parliamentary reform, and he originally won his seat in Parliament due to the support of the utilitarian Jeremy Bentham and the Radical Joseph Hume. However, he staffed the council exclusively with Royal Academicians, which infuriated critics like the MP William Ewart and the artist Benjamin Robert
Haydon, who had not wanted the School to be subservient to the old guard. They set up a rival institution called the Society for Promoting the Arts of Design, which did not help the fledgling Government School. As Cole reported, the first school was housed in Somerset House in London, and more were opened in various manufacturing cities throughout the country. By the 1840s, schools had been opened in Manchester, Birmingham, Coventry, Sheffield, Nottingham, York, Newcastle upon Tyne, and Glasgow. This coincided with increased access to art and art education through a flourishing press; affordable drawing books removed the activity from the realm of elite women and artists and brought it to a wider section of society. Similarly, illustrated periodicals like the Penny Magazine of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge introduced a new, working class audience to aesthetic and visual culture.

While the original mission of the School did not prioritize building a collection for a museum, various specimens were acquired under the superintendence of the Scottish painter William Dyce, appointed in 1838. His dream, never achieved, was to form a museum of industrial, or ornamental, art. He did, however, acquire plaster casts of antique sculpture; his most important purchase was a copy of Raphael’s fresco paintings of decorative patterns in the Vatican, known as the Loggie. Dyce found the responsibilities of the position too difficult, and another Scottish artist, Charles Heath Wilson, assumed the role. He was determined to build for the students a collection of more than just plaster casts. In one of his annual reports to Parliament, he noted that the School had begun to acquire “real specimens of various kinds of ornamental manufactures, and decorative work” including:

- patterns of stained-paper hangings, rich embroidered silks, and tissues of silk and glass,
- printed calicos, wood carving, ornaments of lacquered embossed metal, models in papier-
The report further noted that the School’s collection was open to the public on Mondays between one and three o’clock. However, the rooms in Somerset House did not provide adequate space for the growing number of objects, and thus not only were they generally unavailable to the public, but they were also difficult for the students to view freely.

The School of Design was dogged by criticism throughout the first decade of its existence. A letter from a professor in the School, Richard Redgrave (who would later hold a position at the South Kensington Museum), to the prime minister, Lord John Russell, encapsulated many of the critics’ complaints. There was a concern that students were simply being taught to copy; Redgrave wrote that “Nature, as the true source of ornamental design, [should] be more fully insisted upon” and that “the principles of taste only are to be sought in the application of antique art to the wants of the age.” In this way, the originality of British design would be improved, thus increasing the competitiveness of their manufactures in the foreign market. He further noted that biennial exhibitions of works of design should be instituted for both the students and the public, as this would “improve their taste.” Public exhibitions were becoming an integral part of the new educative mission for art. Eventually, critiques of the School led to a Select Committee on the School of Design in 1849, which concluded that the School had not achieved its goal of design improvement. Upon the report’s release, the Art Journal reported that there had been a “universally acknowledged necessity” for such an institution, and yet “the shadow of twelve years’ disheartening failure casts its gloom.” However, reforms
were not undertaken at that point.\textsuperscript{23} It took one of the most momentous events in the history of Victorian Britain, along with a prominent and influential civil servant, to effect change and transform the fledgling collection of the School of Design into a fully formed public museum.

The Great Exhibition of 1851, or the Universal Exhibition of the Works of all Nations, was the accomplishment of a variety of administrators and civil servants, but credit is largely given to Prince Albert and Henry Cole for both its creation and extension into permanent institutions. Albert came to England already steeped in Saxon traditions of a love for art collecting,\textsuperscript{24} and he was well-versed in all of Western art history, ranging from the Gothic to the Mannerist to the pictures popularized during an Italian Grand Tour.\textsuperscript{25} In fact, his taste in painting was advanced compared to the elite connoisseurs in control of the National Gallery before Charles Eastlake became director.\textsuperscript{26} He also believed that art was intimately connected to the character and industrial wealth of the nation.\textsuperscript{27} As such, he was appointed for membership in the rather inactive Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce, founded in 1754. He assumed the presidency in 1843, and in 1847 the Society held a successful exhibition of manufactures that was visited by over twenty thousand people. Two more were held in the ensuing years, so a national exhibition featuring wares from around the world was announced for 1851, to be divided into four sections: “Raw Materials of Manufactures – British Colonial, and Foreign, Machinery and Mechanical Inventions, Manufactures, Sculpture and Plastic Art generally.” The focus of this exhibition was not on the fine arts. A Royal Commission was enacted, and it included notables from all walks of life, including members of the aristocracy such as Earl Granville, the Duke of Buccleuch, and the Earl of Ellesmere. Members from both political parties were present, with Whig Prime Minister Lord John Russell as a representative for the Government and Sir Robert Peel for the Tory opposition. Wealthy city dwellers
including Thomas Baring and prominent cultural figures like Eastlake rounded out the group. However, just as the trustees of the National Gallery were rendered largely figureheads after the 1855 reform, the commission members did not play an active role in running the exhibition and simply lent an air of prestige. Albert led an executive committee that included Henry Cole, Charles Wentworth Dilke, Colonel William Reid, and the scientist Lyon Playfair. Funding for the building, known as the Crystal Palace and designed by Joseph Paxton, came from wealthy businessmen committed to free trade, who tended to be more supportive of the prince than the hereditary classes. In particular, £20,000 was guaranteed from the railway contractor Samuel Morton Peto.

The exhibition proved to be a tremendous success, with over six million visitors. The revenue from the entrance fees ranging from one shilling to three pounds left the Commission with a surplus of £186,000. The ability to stage the exhibition was a confirmation of Victorian superiority, and it symbolized the era's supreme self-confidence. There was, however, great concern over the poor design quality of the British manufactures on exhibit, prompting Ralph Wornum, a lecturer at the School of Design, to write a prize-winning article in the Art Journal, entitled “The Exhibition as a Lesson in Taste,” about the inferiority of English wares. Indeed, the British Quarterly Review remarked, “We have learnt from the Great Exhibition that there are numerous points in which we are inferior to the foreigner, and in some, as in the principles of design, and the science of coloured harmony, we are lamentably ignorant.” France had 1,710 exhibits at the Crystal Palace and collected 1,043 awards, as compared to Britain’s 2,155 awards for 6,861 exhibits. This was a national embarrassment and provided further proof that the School of Design had not achieved its mission. Henry Cole had long campaigned against what he regarded as the failures of the School. From 1849 to 1852, he published the Journal of Design and Manufactures, dedicated to Prince Albert, which claimed to provide
“utility to all branches of commerce influenced by ornamental
design” and worked to “aid in the reform of our Schools of
Design.” It stressed Cole’s principles of taste, which rested on
the notions that form and function must coexist harmoniously
and the beauty of an object must match its purpose. Cole had
been appointed to the Society for the Encouragement of Arts in
1846, and as such he played a leading role in the exhibition. This
experience, in conjunction with his leading advocacy against
the School of Design in its current state, made him the natural
choice to be appointed as the School’s new head, at a time when
its inadequacy had been proven so decisively. Thus, in January
1852, the Board of Trade named him to this new role; this
appointment was a critical step toward the creation of the South
Kensington Museum.

Henry Cole was born in 1808 and grew up in a middle-class
household. In 1826, his family rented space in a London home
owned by the writer Thomas Love Peacock, who had a profound
effect on Cole’s later activities and beliefs. He introduced a young
Cole to John Stuart Mill and his circle of philosophic radicals,
informed by the principles of Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarianism.
While he never became a political activist, these Benthamite
views, steeped in rhetoric against privilege, suffused his work. In
Cole’s first civil service job, he waged a reform campaign against
the Tory aristocracy-run Record Commission. Later, in his role
as cultural bureaucrat, he consistently prioritized working-class
artisans. His interest in the art world began in the 1840s, when
he published cheap guidebooks to historic sites and museums,
including the National Gallery, under the pseudonym Felix
Summerly. These were expressly created for the poorer working
class; in the National Gallery catalogue, he wrote:

Throng counted by hundreds of thousands
belong far less to the ranks of wealth owning
picture galleries than to poverty owning none but
this; and that the lowly in station are the chief
visitants, were there no other evidence, seems to be shewn in the small purchase of the official shilling catalogues. Out of every seventy-six comers only one buys a shilling catalogue. Such a scanty sale seems to prove that by far the largest proportion of visitors are those to whom the outlay of twelve-pence is the denial of a dinner, and that a cheaper catalogue is wanted.\textsuperscript{38}

Cole had a clear interest in widening cultural access to a greater section of society. He started the company Felix Summerly’s Art Manufactures, which produced household goods such as tea sets and mugs, designed by artists with whom he shared design principles, including Richard Redgrave, so that they adhered to strict standards of taste.\textsuperscript{39}

“Art Treasures” and the Aristocracy

Upon his appointment to the School of Design, Cole immediately embarked on its reorganization. He believed the School should become its own department under the purview of the Board of Trade, to be called the Department of Practical Art. Cole became the superintendent of general management and Redgrave was named art advisor. Parliament granted a budget of £10,050, and its first report, published in 1853, laid out the Department’s goals. The first two promoted general and advanced instruction in art for all classes of society, in order to advance correct taste for the producers and consumers of goods.\(^40\) To that end, the Department began to teach elementary art in its branch schools across the country, and it also instructed teachers so that they could impart their skills to students. According to the historian Janet Minihan, with this system, “Art had at last lost its official status as a polite, aristocratic skill and received significant acknowledgement of its importance in general education.”\(^41\) The third goal, and the one most important to the development of the South Kensington, sought “the Application of the Principles of Technical Art to the improvement of manufactures, together with the establishment of Museums, by which all classes might be induced to investigate those common principles of taste, which may be traced in the works of excellence of all ages.”\(^42\) The School headquarters moved from Somerset House to Marlborough House in Pall Mall, which was used as a minor royal residence and had more room for the display of collections. Prince Albert granted permission to use this space, as long as the Department aligned itself with his goals for the future of the 1851 Exhibition. He envisaged a set of permanent institutions that would apply the principles of art and science to industry; this was to be an educational mission for the working classes. The Royal Commission was extended after the conclusion of the exhibition in order to administer the surplus profits, which were used to secure a plot of land just south of Hyde Park, finally completed in 1858. It was christened as South Kensington, and numerous museums for the arts and sciences would be set
there. The museum at Marlborough House would relocate there in 1857 and be renamed the South Kensington Museum. The prince had a keen interest in science as well, and through his influence the Department of Practical Art would be enlarged to become the Department of Science and Art, with Lyon Playfair serving with Henry Cole as joint secretary and specifically in charge of scientific education. Later, the Department would be moved from the Board of Trade to the Committee of Council on Education.

The nucleus of the museum of art manufactures was located at Marlborough House. At the end of the exhibition in October 1851, Parliament granted £5,000 to the Department to purchase objects that had been on display that would function as models of good design to serve as the basis of a national collection. Cole and Redgrave served on a committee to make these selections, and their choices encompassed works from many different countries. These were moved to Marlborough, along with the original collection formed at Somerset House. Thus, the early museum was composed largely of contemporary wares, intended to instruct in the principles of taste for industrial objects. This soon changed, as evidenced by the shift from the name “Museum of Manufactures” to “Museum of Ornamental Art.” Indeed, the Third Report of the Department of Science and Art stated that the objects that had been acquired in the wake of the exhibition were diverse in nature, but were all modern, and thus, “For this reason later additions to the collection, which have been very numerous, have mainly consisted of works from bygone periods.” It went on to assert that while the Museum had an avowedly educational mission, it was meant not just for students but also for the general public and even the collector, “whose pursuits it is, for many obvious reasons, clearly a national duty to countenance and encourage.” The goal was “the illustration, by actual monuments, of all art which finds its material expression in objects of utility, or in works avowedly decorative.” These statements illuminate the purpose of
the ensuing acquisitions, which evince the subtle shift from a purely practical mission to better the abilities of artisans for the improvement of manufactures to one that aimed to raise the standards of all members of society.

Cole firmly believed in the efficacy of elevating the taste of consumers rather than focusing on the producers. The museum, by promoting his view of superior design quality, had the best chance of achieving this goal, as it was the only feasible means of educating the adult.\(^{47}\) This was seen as critical among art professionals in the mid-nineteenth century, when rising wealth among the middling classes meant that they were now empowered to purchase. However, their standards of taste had not been refined and elevated from a long history of familial collecting.\(^{48}\) Indeed, Anna Jameson had discussed the issue a few years earlier in her 1849 *Art Journal* essay, “Some thoughts on art, addressed to the Uninitiated.” She noted that, “the million’ have become patrons of art” and “thus it is a matter of very serious import that the young should be trained to discernment and refinement in the appreciation of such objects as are addressed to the mind through the eye, that the public taste should, through the rising generation, be more generally educated.”\(^{49}\) The purpose of Cole’s new museum was intimately connected with the broadening access of different sectors of society to aesthetic culture. Thus, in order to speak to all classes of consumers, the rooms at Marlborough were designed to evoke the decorated rooms of an elite collector, but there were also classrooms and lecture halls to promote the educational mission.\(^{50}\)

A combination of purchases and loans enriched the Museum’s collections. In 1853, Cole and Redgrave approved the purchase of a collection of pottery made by James Bandinel of the Foreign Office. The next year, the Gherardini Collection was up for sale. Gherardini was an Italian who had inherited a group of wax and terracotta models by Italian Renaissance masters. These were first exhibited in the Museum for one month in order to ascertain the opinion of the public as to whether or not they
should be purchased, and this collection passed the test.\textsuperscript{51} This was typical of departmental policy, as the board minutes of the Department of Science and Art reveal that items were typically displayed for a considerable period of time, from a couple months to two years, before being purchased by Parliament.\textsuperscript{52} In 1855, the late antiquarian Whig MP Ralph Bernal’s collection, which contained art objects from the Byzantine era through the eighteenth century, was a potential acquisition for the museum. These items included porcelain, metalwork, jewelry, and furniture, among other categories. While Cole and the Department had hoped to purchase this in full, the Government believed the price to be too high and ordered it to go up for auction. The Museum was not allowed to spend more than £12,000, and it obtained 730 pieces.\textsuperscript{53} Interestingly, Bernal had remarked during parliamentary debates on the Museums Act 1845, which gave local town councils the ability to establish museums, that the
country needed “a Museum of Art and Antiquities…which would be worthy of the English nation.” His collection helped to form the basis of such a museum.

One of the most important purchases in the Museum’s early acquisition history was Jules Soulages’s collection. Soulages was a lawyer from Toulouse, France, who had acquired objects in Italy including enamels, medals, glass, bronzes, decorative furniture, and majolica. His collection practices specified that “his object was the illustration of Art, and not the indulgence of a taste for the merely curious,” and his acquisitions did not typically receive the “designation of ‘high art.’” Cole wished to bring the entire collection to the Museum, and a subscribers’ fund of “disinterested and public spirited men” was set up in order to purchase it before Government approval. The subscribers included some members of the aristocracy, including Earl Granville, Lord Ashburton, the Duke of Hamilton, and the Marquess of Hertford. However, it was mainly composed of wealthy men of business, men connected to the Department of Science and Art, and artists. Nevertheless, when it came time for Prime Minister Lord Palmerston to examine the objects exhibited at Marlborough House, he disliked their medieval style and did not understand how they would improve British manufactures. His disapproval proved decisive, and thus the collection could not be retained. Even at a time when aristocratic power was receding, the idiosyncratic aesthetic sense of a politician could still retain significance in determining cultural policy. The collection was sold to the executive committee of the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition, and later the Department bought it back in portions. In fact, those in favor of the collection believed it would not only improve manufacture design, commerce, and the public taste, but would also help form “a large and complete historical and artistic museum.” The curator J.C. Robinson, who would have a profound effect on the Museum’s collection, advocated this latter acquisition policy.
The collections and individual specimens purchased for or donated to the Museum were not typically held by the aristocracy. However, aristocrats granted liberal access to their property by loaning objects for temporary exhibition. The earliest example of this came with an exhibition of Historic Cabinet Work at Gore House, also owned by the Department. Lenders to this exhibit included numerous aristocrats, including the Duke of Hamilton, the Duke of Buccleuch, the Duke of Devonshire, the Duke of Northumberland, the Earl Spencer, the Earl Granville, and Lord Willoughby d’Eresby, among others. In fact, the Museum, in both its earliest form and such later iterations as the South Kensington and Victoria & Albert Museum, was the first permanent institution to produce numerous temporary exhibitions. By contrast, the British Museum and the National Gallery relied solely on their permanent collections comprised of donations and purchases. In 1880, Robinson wrote that the system allowed “the enormous accumulation of works of art of all kinds, in the possession of the Crown, or corporations, and societies, the ancestral gatherings of the nobles and gentry of the land, and the rich collections of amateurs and connoisseurs, [to be] made available for the delight and instruction of everybody.” Indeed, this policy had a beneficial effect for both the Museum and the benefactors. A more widely held perception of the artistic value of the historic decorative arts, which were not as well known or authoritatively discussed in literature as fine arts, was encouraged by the elite status of those who lent them. Moreover, the social pedigree of the owners aroused further public interest in the items. The loaner’s name was always prominently displayed on labels and in catalogues. The announcement of the cabinetry exhibition lauded those who had “liberally offered” their objects for display and study. That the names of these contributors were so well publicized and celebrated suggests that their generosity was intended, at least in part, to reap a reputational benefit.

The tenor of the parliamentary debates over the
retention of the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park is illustrative of the tenuous position of the aristocracy at this time. After the Great Exhibition had concluded, some executives and MPs wished to maintain the physical location of the building in order to provide a recreational space for the working classes. During debates in April 1852, the MP James Heywood, a Liberal with radical tendencies who supported increased access to public museums, claimed that whereas the middle class was in favor of keeping it, the aristocracy opposed the plans, and this class division could “agitate this country.” While this statement was not entirely accurate, as friends of the movement for the preservation of the Crystal Palace included notables such as the Duke of Devonshire (Joseph Paxton’s patron), the Duke of Argyll, and Lord Harrowby, Heywood’s subsequent remarks are significant. He recounted a story in which he met a French nobleman at Haddon Hall, the seat of the Duke of Rutland. The Frenchman explained that “a reason why the English aristocracy retained their privileges and position, and the French lost theirs, [is] that the English aristocracy knew when to make just concessions.” Heywood then concluded that this was a moment for the aristocracy to “make a small concession to the opinions and wishes of the middle classes.”

Later in the debate, the Radical MP Thomas Wakley noted that the aristocracy “had risen wonderfully in the estimation of the people since they had mingled with them at the Crystal Palace,” but they would “lose more in public estimation if they now demolished that building.”

Ultimately, these impassioned pleas did not save the Crystal Palace; it vacated Hyde Park and was re-erected at Sydenham by a private company as a visitor attraction. However, these statements help to clarify the nature and purpose of the aristocracy’s involvement with a museum that was far removed from any notions of elite trusteeship and taste in the fine art of painting. Indeed, it has been described as a “middle-class space, where middle-class norms of behaviour were protected and, if
possible, enforced; middle-class values shaped and strengthened; and middle-class hierarchies displayed.”

Aristocrats were absent from the management and creation of the institution. The *Art Journal* commented approvingly in August 1861 that the South Kensington Museum did not suffer from “an effete system of trusteeship” with “gentlemen little conversant with the matters they are called upon to decide,” which had afflicted the National Gallery. Rather, the South Kensington was “new, active, intelligent, and useful.”

As with the National Gallery, members of the aristocracy did not make permanent bequests of their property. However, they did not shun the Museum, and they complied when their holdings were solicited and desired, perhaps out of an aspiration to gain in the “public estimation,” in the words of Wakley, at a time when the middle class was asserting its power in all areas of society. The *Art Journal* remarked on the temporary loan policy again in November, noting that the periodical had often focused on the incredible amount of art still held privately in Britain, including paintings and decorative art, but now “collectors have been frequently induced to allow their treasures to pass temporarily from their cabinets to the public gaze.” Thus, the *Journal* stated approvingly, knowledge of the historic ornamental objects was extended beyond “a few wealthy individuals.”

Eighteenth-century, Grand Tour-era preferences may have been irrelevant to the approach of the new museum, but Cole made sure that his firmest standard of what constituted good taste was followed. He and his fellow design reformers were attempting to become new societal tastemakers; he chose objects that he believed exemplified these principles and didactically explained his doctrine in affordable catalogues. In the early days of the Museum at Marlborough House, Cole devised a room called “Examples of False Principles in Decoration,” which later came to be known as the “Chamber of Horrors,” where he showcased what he viewed as bad taste. This attempt to impose notions of taste was not uniformly accepted, as
Cole and Redgrave faced criticism from numerous sources, including a notable Manchester economist named F.J. Prouting, writing under the pseudonym Argus. He published a series of pamphlets called *A Mild Remonstrance against the Taste-Censorship at Marlborough House*, in which he demonstrated his contempt for what he believed to be the foreign preferences of the museum’s managers. He wrote sarcastically: “Englishmen know nothing of taste…Benighted Britons…know nothing of Beauty, nothing of Refinement, nothing of Fine Art, nothing of Taste!” He charged that these notions governed Cole’s administration of the Museum. In fact, the idea of a correct standard of taste was itself a foreign, Continental creation. Prouting asserted that “if these qualities are real and definable, and if they have anything to do with morals and right-mindedness, we think England has as good a claim to the possession of Taste and to the appreciation of the Beautiful.” These complaints are striking in their resemblance to the attacks leveled against aristocrats during the eighteenth century, an era in which they retained cultural control. They too were chastised for their foreign proclivities, preferring European masters to native British artists. Cole’s attempt to impose aesthetic criteria subjected him to the same criticisms that the aristocracy had faced decades earlier when they dictated the standards of taste.

Cole was not alone in shaping acquisition policy at the Museum. John Charles Robinson was appointed curator in 1853, and he energetically drove the collection toward an art historical approach. His concern was not simply to elevate the standards of taste in contemporary society; he was primarily focused on the representation of a full history of decorative art. Indeed, he had a wide-ranging interest in art that had not been popularized in Britain yet, such as the Portuguese and Spanish schools, including the work of El Greco. He went to Paris as a young man to study art, and his experiences there were to have an effect on his later collection practices. Various antiquarian collections existed in Paris in the nineteenth century following the French
Revolution, during which many of the objects and artifacts of the Middle Ages were in danger of destruction due to their association with the monarchy and the Catholic Church. Almost immediately, however, scholars and collectors attempted to rescue these items. These grew into great collections, including the influential Musée de Cluny, which opened in 1832 and was transformed into a public museum in 1844. The French viewed this museum of decorative art not as a means to improve manufacture design, but rather as a way of showcasing history through objects. This idea of a museum featuring a historical series of art objects would come to suffuse Robinson’s activities as curator. He focused heavily on medieval and Renaissance art, engineering the acquisition of an important group of Italian Renaissance sculptures, despite the contemporary view that this had little to do with improvement of industry or taste and thus did not fit the Museum’s purported mission. Robinson was a serious scholar, writing well-respected catalogues on the works in the Museum, including the Soulages Collection and the Italian sculptures. He served as a mediator of Cole’s didactic utilitarian taste reform, and there are obvious parallels with the new director of the National Gallery, Charles Locke Eastlake, who similarly tempered the aristocratic trustees’ elite preferences by embarking on a campaign to collect early Italian masters. Experts in the emerging discipline of art history endeavored to tell a fuller story of the fine arts and material culture, rather than catering either to eighteenth-century connoisseur taste or the principles of correct design for economic benefit. Knowledge of art spread to all classes of society in this period, but it was also transforming into a serious field of study, which would have a profound effect on museums and exhibitions.

Victorian museums thus accommodated themselves to distinct visions and impulses. Regardless of the collection policy pursued, however, there remained a general sense that exposure to the art objects would be morally and educationally beneficial. When the Museum of Ornamental Art at Marlborough House
moved to its new location and became the South Kensington Museum, the institution took on even more revolutionary characteristics. The original museum aimed to be available to the broader public, open from Monday to Friday with Saturday as a free day. However, the South Kensington went even further, as Cole intended this museum primarily to benefit the working class. In his 1857 Introductory Lectures on the Science and Art Department and the South Kensington Museum, he remarked: “It is much less for the rich that the State should provide public galleries of paintings and objects of art and science, than for those classes who would be absolutely destitute of the enjoyment of them, unless they were provided by the State.” To that end, the museum was open six days a week throughout the year, with no vacation, and on three nights a week it would be open until ten o’clock in the evening. This policy was expressly for workers who would not be able to visit during the day, and it was achievable through gas lighting the galleries. Chambers’s Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Arts celebrated this as a “successful novelty…for artisan visitors who cannot come during the day.”

It was for this reason that middle-class collector John Sheepshanks decided to donate his collection of British paintings to the South Kensington rather than the National Gallery, as Robert Vernon, the other eminent collector of British artwork, had done. Whereas Vernon had longed for elite approval, Sheepshanks was secure in his middle-class identity and preferred the beneficial policies toward the lower orders at the South Kensington. He agreed with the liberal access policies, even desirous that his pictures be open to the public on Sunday. Critics charged that the location of the museum in West London rendered it too far from the working-class public it supposedly served to be of any value, and indeed the neighborhood of South Kensington did have aristocratic associations. Cole consistently defended the museum’s accessibility, reporting during proceedings of the 1860 Select Committee on the South Kensington Museum that his institution averaged thirty thousand more visitors per year.
than the British Museum.\textsuperscript{92} He was aware of the potential issues, however, and therefore he collaborated in the construction of boulevards and roads to improve access. The museum was also situated on omnibus routes, and Cole helped ensure that it would be a stop on the new Underground system.\textsuperscript{93}

As the Museum was so clearly oriented toward the accommodation of the working class, and entirely managed by middle-class professionals, it would be easy to conclude that elite aristocrats were largely absent from this new mission. However, \textit{The Literary Gazette} reported upon its opening that “The Museum appears to have excited much interest among the higher orders. It was attended by crowds of well-dressed people.”\textsuperscript{94} Further, when the Queen attended a private viewing of the museum before it opened to the public, the \textit{Morning Star} noted that she was met there by notables such as the Marquess of Lansdowne, Lord Stanley of Alderley, and the Duke of Buccleuch.\textsuperscript{95} These figures were sufficiently important to merit continued reporting on their public activities, and their art possessions were highly prized for their potential as valuable additions to loan exhibitions. Members of the aristocracy did not create this institution, or propagate the rhetoric that surrounded it, but they were generous toward it. These balancing forces, along with the emergence of scholarly art history, would express themselves in one of the most important cultural events in mid-Victorian Britain: the 1857 Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition.

\textbf{\textit{Art Treasures and Art Wealth: Equipoise in the Cultural Realm}}

As a result of the movement of art from country homes to the capital that began in the eighteenth century, art in Britain was increasingly centered in London. As part of the ongoing effort to make art and art instruction more available to the wider populace, the Museum of Ornamental Art instituted a provincial loan system in which certain objects deemed unnecessary to the
central museum would be circulated to the provinces, a practice that would be continued by the South Kensington Museum. In this way, “the contents of the Museum will, in time, have been literally brought home to each locality, and [an] incentive to the formation of permanent local museums of art will thus be given.”96 The desire to increase access to art for the entire country, especially in industrial towns and cities, precipitated the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition. Manchester was the epitome of an urban, manufacturing city in the mid-nineteenth century, controlled by the new wealthy middle class. It was not a coincidence that the most comprehensive blockbuster art exhibition in Britain took place there.97 The Art-Treasures Examiner, a special publication issued by a city newspaper, The Manchester Examiner and Times, described the origins and impetus behind this venture:

It was in the early part of the year 1856 that several of the influential merchants and manufacturers of Manchester, strongly impressed with the happy results of the Paris Exhibition of the previous summer, as well as those of the Dublin Exhibition of 1853—forcibly struck, above all, with the important claims and uses of the fine arts, and calling to mind the remark made by Dr Waagen in his valuable work, that the art-treasures in the United Kingdom were of a character, in amount and interest, to surpass those contained in the collections upon the continent, bethought them of the grand idea of bringing the élite of these works into view under one roof, for the edification of their fellow-men.98

Waagen’s Treasures of Art in Great Britain, which brought to light the numerous private art collections of quality in Britain, provided the idea to bring these works together in one space for
the benefit of the public.

This concept eventually made its way to Thomas Fairbairn, who had been a commissioner of the Great Exhibition and became the principal driver of the Art Treasures Exhibition. He was the chairman of the executive committee, composed of notable Manchester citizens, which raised a guarantee fund of over £70,000 in order to begin planning. He then reached out to Prince Albert to receive royal patronage from him and the Queen, which was, not surprisingly, quickly granted, as Albert took a keen interest in the project. The Earl of Ellesmere was appointed president of the General Council, which lent an air of prestige and authority to the exhibition. Ellesmere, son of the Marquess of Stafford, was a trustee of the National Gallery and a member of a family with a long history of involvement in the arts. Several other noblemen were approached to provide their support, including Lord Derby and Lord Overstone. Manchester businessmen were responsible for the creation and management of the project, while the royalty and aristocracy served as prestigious figureheads. This was a project that encompassed both sectors of society, although the driving force came from the newly wealthy.

In order to successfully mount this exhibition, it was critical that those who held art treasures in their private possessions would be willing to lend them. The Report of the Executive Committee asserted its confidence that gifts would be forthcoming, stating:

It will be necessary to invite extensive cooperation from all patrons and lovers of Art, and the Committee have reason to believe, from the very favourable reception which the project has already experienced...from all classes among the Public...that they will not meet with any serious difficulty in securing contributions.
Indeed, the response to loan requests was overwhelmingly positive. The solicitations often noted the support that the monarchy had given to the project; Prince Albert wrote to the Earl of Ellesmere expressing his opinion that collectors would be willing to part with their paintings and objects if they knew that not doing so would “mar the realisation of a great National object.” This was a project with patriotic implications, and the elite were expected to play their part due to the value attributed to their holdings. The contributors’ generosity was lauded in the press, with the *Art-Treasures Examiner* pointing to some of the most prolific donors, including the Duke of Hamilton, the Duke of Newcastle, the Duke of Manchester, Earl de Grey, Lord Overstone, Lord Ashburton, the Earl of Portsmouth, the Duke of Richmond, and the Duke of Marlborough. The publication sniffed at the “ingratitude” of the Duke of Devonshire, who had contributed nothing even though he held a significant collection at Chatsworth and Devonshire House. However, the duke had declined to participate due to ill health, not out of any disdain for the project, and he in fact paid a visit to the exhibition, which the *Art-Treasures Examiner* noted. Many other elite figures attended, but it was by no means a preserve of the aristocracy and the wealthy. Indeed, the organizers hoped for the attendance of the working class, and the entrance fees on Saturday afternoons were reduced in order to induce them to come. In fact, the exhibition garnered over one million visitors, greatly helped by the ever-increasing railway system that made cheap travel much more feasible.

The Art Treasures Exhibition showcased the harmony between the belief that comprehensiveness was publicly beneficial along with an increasingly sophisticated understanding of art history. It occurred at the moment when art history was emerging as a codified field of study, and the paintings and objects exhibited, as well as the way in which they were displayed, reflected this scholarly, universal impulse. The exhibition included “not only Oil Paintings, Water-colour Drawings, Engravings, and
“Art Treasures” and the Aristocracy

Photographs” but also sculpture in all media, decorative furniture, musical instruments, glass, tapestry, antiquities, and costume, reflecting the collections of the South Kensington. Both old master paintings and contemporary British art were included. Notably, Italian paintings from the thirteenth, fourteenth, and early fifteenth centuries were displayed, reflecting Eastlake’s new acquisition policy. The paintings were hung chronologically and by school. The art critic George Scharf was responsible for the selection and discussion of the old masters, and his goal was to showcase a complete sample of the history of art from the Byzantine to the Baroque. This exhibition demonstrated the same scholarly interest evidenced by the new professional class of curators such as Eastlake and Robinson.

The Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition confirmed that the possessions acquired over generations of aristocratic collecting, along with holdings of the newly wealthy purchasers of the nineteenth century, were emphatically part of the national cultural heritage, even if they were still held privately. The Art Journal remarked approvingly that “the aristocracy—of rank and riches—[were] not only willing, but desirous, that the people should, as widely as possible, participate in the enjoyments they themselves derive from their treasures.” As long as they afforded liberal access to their works, there was a sense that the objects belonged to the British public as a whole. This growing consensus was further confirmed by a temporary exhibition curated by Robinson at the South Kensington in 1862, officially titled the “Special Exhibition of Works of Art of the Medieval, Renaissance, and More Recent Periods, on loan at the South Kensington Museum,” but colloquially known as “The Art Wealth of England.” This was intended to demonstrate representative specimens of decorative art throughout the ages, and requests were sent out for donations from the monarchy, universities, corporations, and private aristocratic and wealthy collectors. Gifts were liberally given by all of the groups, and it was difficult to accommodate everything that arrived at the
“Art Treasures” and the Aristocracy

Notables such as the Marquess of Abercorn, the Duke of Devonshire, Earl Granville, the Duke of Richmond, and Lord Willoughby d’Eresby all contributed, and they were joined by other non-aristocratic collectors. This exhibit was the brainchild of a new organization of which Robinson was a member, the Fine Arts Club, which included scholars, connoisseurs, and collectors who shared and discussed their knowledge and possessions. In the late 1860s, this club was re-christened as the Burlington Fine Arts Club, an organization that brought prominent members of the old aristocratic guard, such as Lord Lansdowne, into association with professional
curators like Robinson. The historian Gordon Fyfe describes the foundation of this club as a moment of “cultural rapprochement between the old and new orders.”  

Indeed, the “Art Wealth” exhibit represented an attendant turning point in the history of the South Kensington Museum, as it had little to do with the utilitarian purpose of elevating contemporary taste and was instead a celebration of the history of collecting in Britain, often under the purview of the aristocracy.  

The historian W.L. Burn famously described mid-Victorian Britain as an age of equipoise, signifying a period of political and social harmony, one in which class conflict waned, hierarchies were made slightly more flexible, and balance was maintained. Historians have debated this interpretation, but the evolution of the South Kensington Museum and the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition in the 1850s and 1860s proves that equipoise had arrived in the cultural realm. A vast new populace was allowed ever-increasing access to works of art that had previously been the preserve of the elite. Eighteenth-century connoisseur taste no longer dominated, and there was a new expert class of curators that emphasized a more comprehensive art historical approach, while bureaucrats like Cole asserted the achievement of the education, refinement, and broadened cultural horizons of the working class as the primary goal of museums. The aristocracy had relinquished cultural control, but the oversight of a realm of society that had once been dominated by a particular class could not be so simply transferred. Indeed, even though trustees at the National Gallery lost much of their power, they were not abolished altogether. Aristocratic donations were solicited and appreciated for temporary exhibition, and their treasures were claimed as the nation’s cultural heritage, without demanding that they be bequeathed permanently to the public. The aristocracy continued to lend an air of prestige, even if they no longer managed and created cultural institutions. Just as J.J. Angerstein, a banker, followed connoisseur preferences, and Robert Vernon, a middle-class collector, yearned for
acceptance from the old guard, many middle-class grandees still aped aristocratic techniques and ideas throughout the period. The reach of the art world had been expanded to all classes of society, and it was professionally controlled, but the influence of generations of aristocratic cultural authority was still felt to a significant extent.
“Art Treasures” and the Aristocracy

NOTES

4 “The Late Prince Consort,” The Quarterly Review 111 (January 1862), quoted in Minihan, The Nationalization of Culture, 97.
6 Report from the Select Committee on Arts and their Connexion with Manufactures; with the Minutes of Evidence, Appendix and Index (London: Parl. Papers, 1836), iii, quoted in Report for the Select Committee on the South Kensington Museum, together with the Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence, and Appendix (London: Parl. Papers, 1860), 2.
7 Select Committee 1836, v, quoted in Select Committee 1860, 2.
8 Select Committee 1860, 3.
9 Burton, Vision & Accident, 18.
11 Burton, Vision & Accident, 19.
13 Minihan, The Nationalization of Culture, 45.
14 Burton, Vision & Accident, 19.
15 Third Report of the Council of the School of Design, for the year 1843-4 (From May 1, 1843 to April 30, 1844) (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1844), 3.
17 Burton, Vision & Accident, 21.
18 Third Report (School of Design), 18.
19 Burton, Vision & Accident, 22.
21 Ibid.
“Art Treasures” and the Aristocracy

23 Burton, Vision & Accident, 23.
25 Ibid., 16.
26 Ibid., 134.
27 Minihan, The Nationalization of Culture, 97.
29 Burton, Vision & Accident, 42.
31 Minihan, The Nationalization of Culture, 102.
32 The British Quarterly Review 16 (August 1852): 144.
33 Hobhouse, The Crystal Palace, 82.
35 Minihan, The Nationalization of Culture, 104.
36 Ibid., 106.
38 Felix Summerly, Hand-Book for the National Gallery, VII (London: George Bell, 1847).
41 Minihan, The Nationalization of Culture, 108.
42 First Report of the Department of Practical Art, 2.
43 Burton, Vision & Accident, 42–43.
44 Minihan, The Nationalization of Culture, 119.
45 Ibid., 36.
47 First Report of the Department of Practical Art, 30.
48 Kriegel, Grand Designs, 128.
50 Kriegel, Grand Designs, 135.
51 Burton, Vision & Accident, 34.
52 Minutes of the Department of Science and Art, October 1855-June 1856. National Archives, Kew (ED 28/5).
53 Minihan, The Nationalization of Culture, 114–115; Burton, Vision & Accident, 34.
“Art Treasures” and the Aristocracy

54 Ralph Bernal, debate on Museums of Art, 6 March 1845, *Hansard*, vol. 78, col. 387.

55 *Report of the Committee, appointed by the Council of the Royal Institute of British Architects to examine the Soulages Collection, and report their opinion whether it would be expedient to recommend its purchase by the Government* (9 February 1857). Nominal file: Soulages Collection (MA/2/S12), V&A Archives.


61 *First Report of the Department of Practical Art*, 299.


65 *First Report of the Department of Practical Art*, 299.


67 James Heywood, debate on Exhibition of 1851—Crystal Palace, 29 April 1852, *Hansard*, vol. 120, col. 1352.


69 Heywood, debate on Exhibition, col. 1352.

70 Thomas Wakley, debate on Exhibition of 1851—Crystal Palace, 29 April 1852, *Hansard*, vol. 120, col. 1381.

71 Burton, *Vision & Accident*, 42.


75 Kriegel, *Grand Designs*, 137.

76 Burton, *Vision & Accident*, 32.

“Art Treasures” and the Aristocracy


84 Davies, “John Charles Robinson,” 173.


86 Burton, *Vision & Accident*, 38.


88 Burton, *Vision & Accident*, 76.


99 Exhibition of Art Treasures of the United Kingdom, to be Opened in Manchester in May, 1857, Circular No. 1, British Library.
“Art Treasures” and the Aristocracy


102 Ibid., 26.

103 Letter from H.R.H. Prince Albert to the President of the General Council of the Exhibition, 3 July 1856, in *Circular No. 1*.

104 *The Art-Treasures Examiner*, iii.

105 Ibid., 1.


109 Ibid., 110.

110 *Circular No. 1*.


112 Ibid., 137.

113 Ibid., 139.


117 Ibid., 67.


120 Burton, *Vision & Accident*, 68.


Images


Page 22: William Linnaeus Casey, *The First Room at Marlborough House*, 1856,
“Art Treasures” and the Aristocracy


watercolor, © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.