

The Independent Turner Society

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www.jmwturner.org

Jonathan Djanogly MP
Chairman of Arts and Heritage APPG
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

18 August 2023

Dear Mr Djanogly,

Further to my letter of 7 July, I enclose my comments on the response of the Department of Culture in *The Sunday Telegraph* (6 August) to our Call for an Inquiry into the Turner Bequest and Gallery. The Telegraph's report was unfortunately timed, as it transpired that Lord Parkinson had not read my letter to him and the Department had automatically reverted to its usual stance. What I have written now perhaps simply states the obvious.

The issue to a large extent is about whether today's curators know better than the artist how his "Turner's Gallery" should be treated. That seems unlikely. Firstly today's curators do a course in museum studies on the received contemporary fashions. Then there is no requirement that they have a particular love or knowledge of the work of the artist in question, but are up for hire by whatever museum will give them the most prestigious position. Meanwhile the great aim of experts on the artist is to have a big comprehensive retrospective show, for which they deem certain works essential, without which the show would be much diminished. With "Turner's Gallery" one has all the works ready assembled, without all the risks and costs of transport, and there for the thousands of visitors who cannot get to the temporary exhibition, if only today's curators did not split the collection and send a large part of the rest almost continually out on loan.

Supposing Praxiteles had left a representative collection of his sculptures to show his development to be kept together in perpetuity and that by some miracle that had survived down to today, that would be regarded as a World Heritage Site, protected from the vagaries of those temporarily in charge of it. Of course what would be likely to have happened is that it would have suffered all the depredations of fashion beloved of today's curators. The works would have been abhorred as pagan, converting images of Apollo into Christ, or they would have been smashed up as immoral or suffered neglect by the philistine majority. The counterparts of these ignorant vandals exist today.

Whereas at museums devoted to a particular artist, as the Turner collection should be housed, as Kenneth Clark and others appreciated, generally the curator is chosen for having some sympathy with the artist and his ideas – and maybe even his wishes. I am not sure that that has been the case with the Van Gogh Museum at Amsterdam, but that has had the particular problem of housing a small collection of small pictures which attracts a huge number of visitors.

Today's *Daily Mail* devotes its front page to the theft of numerous objects from the British Museum's store and the sacking of a senior curator. There is nothing surprising about this or that the museum had been alerted to thefts in 2020 and had apparently done nothing about that. When I was at Manchester City Art Gallery the restorer disappeared off to Australia with some of its pictures. Nothing was done about that and he was never charged. Museums do not like the embarrassment of admitting to losses or damage, as Sir Nicholas Penny

admitted in his secret evidence to the Burrell Committee. In Turner's case it was reported that the British Museum could not account for 100 of his drawings (all catalogued in detail over 100 years ago) on their transfer to Tate. One of Turner's four paintings he made his final exhibit at the Royal Academy has disappeared since it was transferred to Tate Britain. Some watercolours were damaged in the Tate flood of 1928.

Other oils have been damaged by restorers. Earlier some of the drawings at South Kensington faded due to continuous harmful exposure to daylight, the effect of which had been established by scientists, but was contested by the amateurs, the subject of a long exchange of letters in *The Times* collected together as a booklet by Sir J.C. Robinson, a former curator at South Kensington and Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures. In that case the evidence against the museum cum amateurs view was published, though it continued to be ignored, the Wallace Collection continuing to exhibit its Turner watercolours constantly within living memory to their detriment.

Of course the authorities can go on ignoring the failures and the issues they highlight. But to do so simply demonstrates how shallow the national attitude to its greatest painter is when it puts his face on the £20 note while remaining satisfied with a situation which other countries would not abide.

To raise these questions in the slack summer period is perhaps untimely, but I hope that you and your colleagues in the All-Party Group - I am sorry to hear that Lord Cormack is temporarily hors de combat - can give them the consideration they deserve.

I reiterate my point that the present parlous condition of the country should not be a factor. An Inquiry is needed whether or not it leads to the desired new museum, which in any case will require a long gestation - as Henry Moore said, these things move slowly, if not quite as slow as in Turner's case. The need is to begin to abandon the paralysis that has existed since the first Committee made its Report in 1861.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Selby Whittingham

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Lord Mendoza
Provost
Oriol College
Oxford OX1 4EW

13 August 2023

Dear Provost,

Further to my letter to you of 10 July, I enclose my comments on the response of the Department of Culture in last Sunday's Telegraph to our Call for an Inquiry into the Turner Bequest and Gallery. The Telegraph's report was unfortunately timed, as it transpired that Lord Parkinson had not read my letter to him and the Department had automatically reverted to its usual stance. What I have written now perhaps simply states the obvious.

Since writing that comment, I have now seen the report in the New York Times, 9 August, "The Barnes Foundation loosens its straitjacket." In my "The Fallacy of Mediocrity" (to the logic of the arguments in which Richard Robinson gave his assent, though he objected to the title!) I had suggested that some loosening of Turner's restrictions on lending his 100 or so finished pictures similarly to allow limited and specified lending. However, whereas the National Gallery and Tate believe that they are not bound by any restrictions in Turner's case, the Barnes had to get the sanction of a court of law. This gives added reason for our call of a Committee of Inquiry which, we hope, would result in the reunification of Turner's Turner Gallery bequest with specific restrictions in the Act setting that up. If one reads the debates on all the Acts passed on the national museums, one sees that the question of lending works in general was strongly contested. If, by chipping away in successive bites, those advocating a liberal policy have succeeded, that has been without regard to the specific case of Turner. Moreover the idea that the National Gallery and Tate, governed as one though involving two museums, should continue to be regarded as one for lending purposes after they have been split by the National Gallery and Tate Gallery Act, and now involving not two, but five museums, is out of date. There is a strong art history case besides for the National Gallery showing other Turners from other bequests it has received.

Congratulations on your new appointment to Historic England. I recall with pleasure consulting the photographic archive when housed at Regent's Park and visitors were offered a cup of tea! I have made much use of the records of listings since.

My classics contemporary, Gerard (Gary) Codd (Oriol 1963), remains bedbound after nearly being killed off by our local hospital, but thanks to friends is reviving. He much appreciated your letter in answer to his deploring the proposal to remove the statue of Rhodes and has voiced the intention to leave his money to Oriol.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Selby Whittingham

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Chairman: Robert Walmsley

Secretary: Dr Selby Whittingham

Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay
Minister for Museums etc.
House of Lords
London SW1A OPW

3 July 2023

Dear Lord Parkinson,

I am writing to ask if the Government might set up a committee of the House of Lords to inquire into the proper and best way of carrying out J.M.W. Turner's wishes for his "Turner's Gallery", following the precedents of the Turner committee (1861) and the Chantrey one (1904).

In 2025 falls the 250th anniversary of the artist's birth. In every generation since his death there have been complaints that his wishes have been flouted and his bequest treated in an unworthy way. Almost universally the Clore wing "for Turner" has been judged as unfit for purpose and Dame Vivien Duffield has said that she has regretted giving the money for it.

The history is long and the issues are complex. Only such a committee with the time to hear all the evidence can do justice to those. Over the last 35 years I have collected the evidence and submitted that and the arguments employed to leading people in the law, history, museums and art.

I realise that this may not be considered a good time for such an undertaking, but there never is a good one. Turner has been unlucky in that respect, as I touch on in a piece which I have just written on Lord Rosebery and the governments 1870-1910 which took the first steps towards overturning Turner's wishes and scattering his pictures.

As a historian, you will surely appreciate the unfortunate part history has played. (I note that you have written about Sir Geoffrey Butler, about whom my mother, Barbara Whittingham-Jones, wrote an appreciation in *The Gownsmen* of 4 May 1929, when she was an undergraduate at Newnham College!).

One of our members is writing to her MP, Dame Maria Miller, on this matter. Since 1975 quite a number of MPs have taken an interest and given support, but it is futile expecting the Department of Culture to give a worthwhile opinion when it does not have the information on which to base one.

We would be happy to have the chance to meet you to discuss the matter. When Turner died the fate of his bequest was regarded as a great national issue, and so it should be today, when his face appears on the £20 bank note, his name is used – sometimes in vain – by a number of bodies, his pictures fetch ever larger sums and he is rarely out of the news.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Selby Whittingham

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Jonathan Djanogly MP
Chairman of Arts and Heritage APPG
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

7 July 2023

Dear Mr Djanogly,

I have written to Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay calling for an ad hoc Committee of Inquiry into the "Turner's Gallery" Question. Some members of the APPG know about our long campaign, but I thought I should send you a copy of my letter, with which I have enclosed an account of the facts concerning Turner's will.

Though the latter are now clear, Tate has continued to muddle these up. This is a consequence of museums being misers, as Henry Moore termed it, and their being willing to do anything to hold on to what they have got. The Culture Department, which pays little attention to fine art (and so consequently that is true also of the committee which monitors it), goes to the Tate for an authoritative opinion, which is clearly absurd, as Tate is not a disinterested party (besides the fact that it has got most of the "bequest" more or less by accident).

The history, on the other hand, since Turner's death is long and complex, and and most people do not have the time or will to devote to mastering that, though I have done my best to set it out in our publications. Then there are museological questions as well as artistic ones. It has seemed to me that probably the House of Lords, as in 1861, is best fitted to cover all these aspects.

There are also practical considerations. In industry the idea of demerging part of a company to create greater value is familiar. It has been practised occasionally in the case of museums, as Sir Alan Bowness, when Tate Director, pointed out to me, in the cases of the British Museum/Natural History Museum and National Gallery/Tate Gallery. However, when I started in 1975, British curators were antediluvian and called "artists' museums" mausolea, though some get many times the number of visitors that the Clore wing at Tate Britain does.

For some the key practical consideration is that the country is bankrupt and cannot afford to build a new gallery. This is an unpersuasive argument if one considers (a) the millions spent, sometimes badly, on museum buildings in the last 15 or so years; (b) the generosity of private benefactors for good causes; (c) what we propose at this stage is simply the re-uniting of the "Turner Bequest" vested in its own board of trustees. That in itself would not entail a new building, as the Tate has had collections before governed in that way such as the Chantrey Bequest.

Of course the Tate and National Gallery would object to such a re-unification as contrary to their free hand to do almost as they like as at present and and because it is designed in part to lead in due course to a new separate gallery. Others, who have little interest in Turner, will also be against, as they want any money going for their own projects.

Why should the curators have a decisive say? If one looks at the Proceedings of the 1861 Committee one will see that the two curators who gave evidence, Sir Charles Eastlake and Richard Redgrave, were largely negative, though the committee in its Report ignored them.

I have known many curators since the 1950s, having been one myself later, and generally they are charming and public-spirited, but the public's interests too often they regard as synonymous with their own. Didier Rykner in *La Tribune de l'art* (1 June) has a piece headed "The museum has been very generous", in which he says "curators are in no way owners of the collections in their care ... contrary to what some think." I long ago wrote a slightly humorous piece on this subject for *The Spectator* and Robert Medley RA included remarks to the same effect in an article in the same in the 1970s.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Selby Whittingham

PS

Maybe your father, as a noted benefactor of the London museums, has some sympathy with the idea that a donor's wishes should be carried out as near as possible?

I see, incidentally, that he has revived Coats Patons. My first published article on Turner – in *The Burlington Magazine* in 1971 – was about a watercolour that then belonged to a member of the Coats family. Coats incorporated the Clark thread manufacturing business at Paisley, the family from which Lord (Kenneth) Clark, who was the first to give me encouragement in my campaign, descended.

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Lord Mendoza
Provost
Oriol College
Oxford OX1 4EW

7 July 2023

Dear Provost,

I have sent a letter (copy enclosed) to Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay calling for a new ad hoc Committee of Inquiry into the “JMW Turner's Gallery” Question. I have written extensively on the issues involved, which have continued to be misrepresented, notably by supporters of Tate Britain. The controversy has got more complicated ever since Turner died, despite the House of Lords Committee Report in 1861, which was largely ignored because of the disputes over the future of the National Gallery, as Neil MacGregor eventually agreed with me and that the cause was not the ones usually cited by opponents of justice for Turner – that his will was muddled and that Turner, his lawyers or his cousins were to blame.

The 250th anniversary of Turner's birth falls in 2025. It would be very appropriate if a solution was found in the reign of our present monarch and the college's Visitor who, uniquely among our sovereigns, has been an admirer of Turner's works.

Having just read the biography of Lord Rosebery by Leo McKinsty I have been prompted to write the enclosed couple of pages on him as a Turner collector. The biography has more on his friendship with Cecil Rhodes, the statue of whom Oriol has happily kept in place.

McKinstry pays tribute to Rosebery's gift of foresight, which perhaps he owed to his wide reading of works on history after he went down from Christ Church. I see you have recently entertained, with Michael Gove, a party of PPE students. I wonder if those planning to enter politics would do better reading history – or indeed geography (I recall a Labour Colonial Secretary mixing up the African countries he was visiting!)? Looking at the list of past prime ministers I see that most had studied Ancient History or Modern History down to Harold Wilson, who switched to PPE. The only exception since has been Boris Johnson, who took the Greats option at Balliol. When I put the Turner case to him when he was Opposition Shadow on Culture, he replied that he “very much” agreed that an inquiry was called for. However the Tate then misled him about the facts, just as it had put into the late Queen's speech when she opened the Clore Gallery “for Turner” a deliberately misleading claim that Turner's wishes were now met. In fact today none of his conditions are and the Clore wing has moved further and further away from even what it promised in 1987.

Sir Alan Bowness, the Tate Director at the time, told me that our wish (which is based on practical considerations) that there should be a separate Turner Gallery might be realised in time just as the Tate had separated from the National Gallery. I think that was more a sop to myself - just as other sops were offered to the Turner Society at the time, but never resulted in action - but the fact is that the Tate has benefited by separation just as the Natural History Museum did by separation from the British Museum. In commercial life it is accepted that a demerger can lead to added value for both parts of the enterprise. So it could in this case.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Selby Whittingham (Oriol 1960-64).