

The Rivalry between Leonardo and Michelangelo. Dr. James Lindlow Tuesday 15 January 2019

Arts Society members were treated to a riveting exploration of the rivalry between two giants of the Italian Renaissance: Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. Dr. James Lindlow developed his thesis that though the two artists were very different in personality and background, (and Leonardo was 23 years older than Michelangelo), they both responded to each other's creativity and skills while competing with each other with varying degrees of contempt and animosity. Both artists began their careers in Florence where the powerful Guilds had established a tradition of successful artists competing with each other to win artistic commissions that brought fame and potential wealth. Dr Lindlow cited the famous occasion when 7 finalists submitted designs on the theme of "The Sacrifice of Isaac" for the Baptistery door. It was a surprise that of the 2 finalists, the younger and less well-known Ghiberti was awarded the commission instead of Brunelleschi (who later made his name as architect of the magnificent cupola of the Duomo). Such pitting of one artist against another was common in mercantile Florence, where the Guilds were determined to get value for money! So the stage was set.

Leonardo was from Vinci, near Florence, illegitimate and of humble origins, while Michelangelo Buonarroti Simoni was the second son of an ancient Florentine noble family. It seems their temperaments were very different too. Commentators on the great artists such as Giovio and Vasari praised the talents of both men, but noted the generosity, sweetness and affability of Leonardo while criticising the volatility of Michelangelo and the fact that he was slovenly, wild and professionally secretive. Dr Lindlow showed how the 2 artists had proved themselves in such works as Michelangelo's painting of "The Entombment" (NGL) and his sculptures, especially the tender "Pieta" (1498, in St Peter's) and his powerful and exquisite "David" (1501-4, also in the Vatican); and in Leonardo's case, his accomplishment in sculpture in such works as the maquette of a rearing horse (Budapest) and in painting in his dramatic "Last Supper" (1495/8) and the poetry of "Leda and the Swan" (1504). So in 1504 they were both commissioned to paint a separate massive mural illustrating successful battles of the past. This was art as propaganda for the Soderini family, the rising power in Florence as the Medici power waned. Sadly the original paintings no longer survive, but fortunately later copies do, as well as numerous associated preparatory drawings by Michelangelo and Leonardo, and in considering these, Dr Lindlow sensitively revealed just how much the two artists had affected each other's practice and noted their differences too. He highlighted the superb observation of the human form displayed by both artists, particularly the musculature of the naked human forms in Michelangelo's painting, and the revolutionary nature of the interlocking horses' heads in Leonardo's. The startling and immediate difference was that while Leonardo's painting surely fulfilled the commission criteria, Michelangelo's revelled in displaying the day before battle when the soldiers stripped naked to swim in the Arno! This artist would always "do his own thing"!

The lecturer went on to show how the work from around that time by both artists seemed to have been influenced by the rival. He suggested that Leonardo's "The Virgin and Child with St Anne and John the Baptist" seems to be responding to the more sculptural forms of

Michelangelo; and the latter artist produced some delicate Tondi and his Bruges “Madonna” (1504) that showed the tenderness always seen in Leonardo’s paintings. Dr Lindlow commented that in later life, though Leonardo expressed his skill as a sculptor, he was essentially a painter, and Michelangelo though creating the most moving sculptures, became more famous for his paintings in the Sistine Chapel. Leonardo, engaging in the academic debate about the relative values of painting and sculpture, wrote that Sculpture was “the more mechanical art” which made the artist sweaty and messy and led to a disorderly household, whereas the painter could practise his art in elegant clothes and maintain domestic harmony! Perhaps the lowly born artist was stressing how the artist is more than an artisan, as well as suggesting the source of Michelangelo’s personal squalor. If so it seems that Michelangelo was to have the last word as referring to Leonardo’s point of view, he wrote that “my serving girl could have written better.”

Unsurprisingly the lecture was very well received as Dr Lindlow had vividly dramatized the rivalry and differences between the two artists while showing the wonder and power of their artistic achievements.

Written by Kate Siebert

The Wind in the Willows through its illustrators. John Ericson Tuesday 19 February 2019

Kenneth Grahame’s beautiful prose is widely acknowledged, what is less known is that it has been illustrated by more than 90 artists, making it the most widely illustrated book in the English language. It deserves recognition as a novel which has not just humour and entertainment but also wisdom and meaning.

The Wind in the Willows, written by Kenneth Grahame, was first published in 1908. It is the one and only success of Kenneth Grahame, a hugely popular book with over 90 illustrators.

John told us that he was first introduced to The Wind in the Willows when he was six years old. Since then, he has re-read it many times. He suggested that the book is really aimed at adults, citing some of his favourite lines from one of the main characters, the Water Rat extolling the virtues of boating: ‘Believe me, my young friend, there is nothing – absolutely nothing – half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats. Simply messing,’ he went on dreamily: ‘messing-about-in-boats ...’

The four main characters could perhaps be construed as the different parts of Grahame’s personality: Ratty who wrote poetry; Mole was inventive and loyal; Toad was naïve and Badger was solitary and serious. Indeed, after Arthur Ransome reviewed the book when it was first published, he questioned who the book was really aimed at.

The story is concerned with adult themes such as loyalty and friendship; generosity and humility; the human condition; fear of radical change in social and economic power; class and

class struggle and of course food! Ratty prepares a picnic for the Sea Rat, consisting of a yard of French bread, garlic sausage, cheese and a bottle of sunshine (wine), while the Sea Rat describes his journeys around the world. These are not concepts that children would readily understand.

The many illustrations of Ratty's house in the river bank are quite sophisticated, lavish and almost human-like. Mole End is more rural. At the beginning of the book, Mole is spring cleaning and white washing. Illustrations show pictures on the wall of The Infant Samuel and Queen Victoria. He seems rather ashamed at the humbleness of his abode. By contrast, Toad Hall is a grand place; 'an eligible self-contained gentleman's residence.' It is said that the House may be based on Maple Durham, but more likely Hardwick House, where Grahame had been a guest to the then owner Charles Rose. Incidentally, Rose liked fast cars as did Toad. Toad Hall must have had servants, there is evidence of wealth everywhere. Ratty and Mole stumbled across Badger's house by tripping over the doorscraper and deducing that there must be a front door. Badger's house is rustic and rural. 'The ruddy brick floor smiled up at the smoky ceiling; the oaken settles, shiny with long wear, exchanged cheerful glances with each other; plates on the dresser grinned at pots on the shelf, and the merry firelight flickered and played over everything without distinction.'

Grahame was born in 1859 in Edinburgh. Following a move to Inveraray, his mother died of scarlet fever and his father could no longer cope, so he was sent to Cookham Dene to live with his grandparents. He was to remain in the Thames Valley from then on. After school in Oxford, he was sent to the university, but his Grandfather refused to pay, so he became a clerk at the Bank of England, eventually rising to Secretary. He lived first in Blewbury and then Pangbourne and the inspiration for *The Wind in the Willows* is believed to have come from this area.

The book began as a series of bedtime stories for his son, Alastair, whose nickname was Mouse and then Grahame continued with letters whilst Mouse was away at school. When combining these later in preparation for the book, the original notebooks show many edits which Grahame may have made with a more adult audience in mind.

Mouse was born blind in one eye and with a squint in the other. His parents treated him as an adult and he became quite socially inept. Having spent unhappy terms at Rugby then Eton, he was educated by a tutor who then got him a place at Christ Church. Again, he didn't settle and during the second term, he walked across Port Meadow in Oxford and his decapitated body was found near the railway. A devastated Grahame never wrote anything of significance again.

The Wind in the Willows has been illustrated by more than 90 artists. First published in 1908 with no illustrations apart from the cover, spine and frontispiece. In 1913, Paul Bransom, the first illustrator depicted the animals with no clothes. By 1922, Nancy Barnhart drew Badger, Ratty and Mole in smart country wear and Toad as an upper class gentleman, then in 1927 Wyndham Payne's famous ink on paper and yellow colourwash appeared. The most remembered however was E. H. Shepherd who worked for Punch, where the assistant editor was A. A. Milne. A. A.

Milne knew Grahame and suggested Shepherd as an illustrator for *The Wind in the Willows*. Shepherd knew he could improve on the existing illustrations and so started sketching in the Thames Valley meadows.

The many illustrators had much to consider: Were the book's characters really animals or people? What about the relative size of a badger next to a mole? How did a toad drive a car or the caravan? Toad changes as the story progresses, he is small in jail but much bigger as a washer woman.

John Ericson finished with a vast array of illustrations as he told the story, beginning in Ratty's rowing boat and the fat, wicker luncheon-basket – 'There's cold chicken inside it, cold tongue cold ham cold beef pickled gherkins salad French rolls cress sandwiches potted meat ginger beer, lemonade sodawater .

The Wallace and Frick Collections and their connection with Knole.

Hilary Williams. Tuesday 19 March 2019

The Wallace and Frick Collections hold benchmark collections of late eighteenth, early nineteenth century French art, including porcelain, enamels, furniture, paintings and sculpture. In addition, both are rich in Flemish, Dutch and Italian masterpieces. The Wallace Collection is housed at Hertford House, London and the Frick Collection is in Manhattan, New York.

The first four Marquises of Hertford, but in particular the 3rd and 4th, were leading collectors of art in the 18th and 19th centuries. The collection was kept at their London townhouse, Hertford House. Richard Wallace was the illegitimate son of the 4th Marquis. Although he took his mother's surname, he was raised by his paternal grandmother in Paris and grew up to be a Francophile and philanthropist. Following the death of his father, the 4th Marquis in 1870, Wallace inherited everything and then continued to add to the collection with the help of his new private secretary, Sir John Murray Scott, a fluent French speaker and a lifelong partnership began. Scott was an extraordinary character with great charisma. He was the son of a doctor, a cousin of Sir Walter Scott and a barrister.

The ruthless, but aesthetic Henry Clay Frick (1849 – 1919) from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, first came to the Wallace Collection when it had been bequeathed to the nation in 1897 by Lady Wallace, Richard Wallace's widow. In the first three years after her death, Scott encouraged visitors to come, although the Collection was not fully open to the public. Frick, desiring something similar for himself and realising that John Murray Scott was now out of a job, asked Scott to become his advisor to help acquire art works such as those he had seen at the Wallace Collection. Consequently, the collections have many parallels.

Looking at some of the Wallace exhibits; the 4th Marquis bought a *Secrétaire* writing desk, originally made for Marie Antoinette in 1780 by Reisener. Made in marquetry and gilt bronze, it

has 'che de tria' on the underside, indicating that it belonged at Versailles. Many such items were probably removed during the French Revolution. Some that went on the open market, were found by dealers working for Frick, ended up in the Frick Collection.

Also in the Wallace Collection, porcelain from the Manufacture de Sèvres, such as the Pot Pourri à Vaseau, commissioned by Louis 15th. Sèvres was also bought by newly affluent Americans and also Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild of Waddesdon Manor, where another fabulous collection of late 18th and early 19th century objects is housed.

Wallace exhibits mid-16th century French enamel dishes and boxes, such as the Martial Courteys' Apollo and the Muses enamel on copper; a large 1580s dish from Limoges. The Collection reflects the cyclical developments in French art, from the painting by Claude Lorrain (Gellée) Landscape with Apollo and Mercury and then onto Rococo; there are two massive paintings over the staircase by Francois Boucher, The Rising of the Sun and The Setting of the Sun. Also very prominent is Les Hasards Heureux de L'escarpolette / The Swing, by Fragonard from 1767 and a very rare work from a 26 year old Frans Hals - The Laughing Cavalier, 1624. The 3rd and 4th Marquises both bought Dutch masters such as the pair painted by Rembrandt in 1632 – Jean Pellicorne and Son, Caspar and Susanna van Collen, wife of Jean and Daughter, Anna. Susanna is wearing a humble black, but very beautifully embroidered dress, with a spectacular millstone ruff, hence the term a millstone around your neck.

Henry Clay Frick was a wealthy industrialist, manufacturing coke for the steel industry. He commissioned the building of Frick Mansion in Manhattan, which even had a lawn, an incredible symbol of wealth in America at the time. In the French style, with an amazing central atrium and fountain, and using English oak furniture, the gallery contained statues, paintings from JMW Turner and Rembrandt to name just a few.

As a business man, Frick was most fortunate to have been in the right place at the right time, but as an avid collector, he was also lucky because he was able to hire two of the most influential and well informed art dealers – Joseph Duveen and Bernard Berenson. These men were instrumental in creating some of the phenomenal collections of the 20th century, including the mediaeval manuscripts, coins and medal collection of one, J. Pierpont Morgan.

The Frick Collection contains a rare and refined group of art including St. Francis in the Desert, by Bellini, 1480 and Van Eyck's Virgin and Child with Saints and Donor, with Bruges in the background, the foreground boasting blue and white floor tiles with a geometric design, possibly Arabic – indicating that Bruges was a centre of great trade. Also, two paintings of men facing each other by Hans Holbein of Sir Thomas Moore – immaculately painted, and Thomas Cromwell – not half so grand, from 1532. There are three Vermeer masterpieces; Frans Hals and a self-portrait by Rembrandt 1658.

Frick toured many English houses around 1900 and managed to acquire eleven Van Dyck paintings. Also in his amazing collection of French, Italian, Spanish and Netherlandish art are

Goya, Duque de Osuna, 1790s; Claude Lorrain's Sermon on the Mount, 1656; dining room panels by Fragonard which Frick bought from JP Morgan when he died; by Igres, Comtesse d'Haussonville, a beautiful and more clean portrait of a lady, possibly a newlywed, 1845 and then some impressionism, Le Promenade by Renoir 1875. Many British works ended up in the USA, Frick alone obtained eleven paintings by Turner, including Harbour at Dieppe, 1826.

Both the Wallace and Frick Collections contain contemporary and historic pieces, the key time being 18th century. Amazingly, the connoisseurship which led to the sumptuous collections at the Wallace Collection in London and the Frick in New York, is connected by John Murray Scott. He remained at Hertford House with Lady Wallace until her death in 1897, when he continued to take private groups around the Collection. Although Lady Wallace bequeathed the Collection to the nation, she left everything else to Scott. During this time, not only did he become an advisor to Frick, but on 27th March 1897, he met Victoria Sackville-West of Knole in Kent. Scott never married, but Victoria, who was married to the unfaithful Lord Sackville, became the love of his life. When John Murray Scott died in 1912, he left his massive private fortune to Victoria, which in turn helped Victoria's daughter Vita to set up the Sissinghurst Castle Gardens in Kent.

Saint or Sinner . The Changing Image of Mary Magdalene Dr. Sophie Oosterwijk FSA Tuesday 16 April 2019

Dr. Oosterwijk elaborated the background to the enigma of Mary Magdalene; a highly suitable topic for Holy Week. Having first dismissed as highly fanciful Dan Brown's concept that the somewhat female looking figure sitting next to Christ in the Last supper is Mary Magdalene, Dr. Oosterwijk went on to explain she is a conflation of four female characters. These come not only from the Bible but also from such writings as the Gospel of Philip, omitted from the official compilation, as well as the highly popular stories from the Golden Legend. Artists took all these as their inspiration in a variety of ways including painting, stained glass, psalters, tapestries and statues.

It is confusing that Mary is the name of more than one person in the Biblical narrative, quite apart from the Virgin Mary herself. There is Mary the sister of Martha, and the Mary who features prominently in the resurrection story. Then there are two unnamed women. One who interrupts Christ at dinner, weeping and washing his feet with her tears before drying them with her hair and anointing them with expensive perfume and also there is the woman exorcised of her seven demons. All aspects of these stories appear in the artistic narrative.

Crivelli depicts Mary as beautifully dressed with lovely blonde hair holding a little jar with a knowing look in her eye. A similar image comes from the 19th century artist Hugues Merle

where, apart from the small crucifix, she looks like a Hollywood star. By contrast Mary was also seen as a personification of the seven deadly sins with horns on her head when she appears in the temptations of St. Antony in the desert. While she is often shown splendidly dressed there is also the repentant Mary nearly naked having rejected her clothes and jewels. In another, Virtue is chasing the deadly sins away. In Vermeer's painting of the house in Bethany, Mary is seated listening attentively to Christ, while her sister Martha works in the kitchen. A similar interpretation comes from Velasquez and here Mary is far too smartly dressed to be busy with chores. While the woman weeping at Christ's feet is also beautifully dressed, it is the kneeling image while touching his feet which is continued into many crucifixions such as that by Rogier Van de Weyden. It is the Biblical narrative around the resurrection which gives us the most information about Mary. Here she is clearly a member of the disciples and the first person to whom He appears. Initially she mistakes him for a gardener and if he looked like either of the two images we were shown I'm not surprised! Dr. Oosterwijk explained that the Latin phrase, *Noli me tangere* should be more properly translated from the Greek as *Do not cling to me*. Thus Mary's instinctive human response is rejected by the resurrected Christ. She is then given the responsibility of passing on the good news to the disciples. This is beautifully illustrated in a 12th century psalter at St. Albans where she stands, finger raised, teaching a bunch of distinctly cowed disciples.

Although it is mainly through painting Mary's story is told, she may also be found with her long blonde hair and jar in the Pre-Raphaelite stained glass windows of Bradford Cathedral, in tapestries, psalters and statues. Amongst the statues, that of Donatello stands out. It is a powerful life sized image in painted wood showing a skeletal Mary with rotting teeth and sunken eyes covered by her long hair. While Mary may be shown as naked or splendidly dressed, holding a skull or a jar, it is the long hair which remains a constant in the depiction of the enigma which is Mary Magdalene.

Report by Jenny Thorpe

Zaha Hadid -Architectural Superstar Prof. Colin Davies Tuesday 21 May 2019

Professor Colin Davies, formerly editor of *The Architects' Journal* and Professor of Architectural Theory at London Metropolitan University, described Zaha Hadid as an avant-garde 'form-giver' of modern architecture and a successor to architects such as Mies van der Rohe and Corbusier and early twentieth century abstract artists. Her career falls into two parts, the first as an architectural artist and project designer when she developed a reputation for producing spectacular drawings and paintings for unbuildable buildings. Then she proved herself in designing and building some of the most famous iconic buildings in the world which revolutionised the neo-classical vernacular architecture of the 1980s.

Zaha Hadid was born into an upper class family in Iraq where her father was a wealthy industrialist and politician in Mosul. Her talent for design was recognised and indulged from early in her childhood. After school in Europe and a degree in maths at the American University in Beirut, she studied at the Architectural Association School of Architecture, London in the early 1970s. Her professor, Rem Koolhaas, described her at graduation as "a planet in her own orbit" while Elia Zenghelis said she was the most outstanding pupil he ever taught. He described her as the inventor of the 89 degrees because of her resistance to regular forms. The design for the Peak Leisure Club in Hong Kong in 1983, like a bundle of sticks thrown onto the hillside, looked impossible to build but illustrated her aversion to the regular, symmetrical standard features of traditional architecture. Her designs suggest movement and irregularity.

Zenghelis said, "She had spectacular vision. All the buildings were exploding into tiny little pieces." This explosion of sectional views can be seen in her drawing for the Malevich Tektonic Bridge Project in 1977 where a hotel sits on a streamlined design for Hungerford Bridge, but is surrounded by the same design from different viewpoints. However, her designs proved too controversial for universal appeal. A competition to redesign Grand Buildings in Trafalgar Square had to be abandoned when the judges, including Prince Charles, disagreed on the winner and her winning design for the Cardiff Bay Opera House was rejected although later adapted into the plans for the Welsh National Assembly building. Hadid suspected that racial and gender prejudice were against her.

It was the development of Computer Aided Design and later Computer Aided Manufacturing that enabled Hadid's irregular, gravity defying designs to be built, where every concrete block can be unique in size and shape. The BMW Central Building in Leipzig (2005) is a zig-zag shaped structure with irregular levels and office areas opening into the factory, while the Phaeno Science Center in Wolfsburg stands above cavernous open spaces and the MAXXI Museum in Rome (2010) consists of curvaceous forms lying over each other with vast windows of reflecting glass overlooking the classical buildings around it.

The most recognisable building to us is Zaha Hadid's Aquatic Centre for the London Olympics of 2012 with its even more radical use of curves in the roof and walls. The Riverside Museum of Transport in Glasgow (2011) consists of one form curving upwards like a brush stroke with another vast window reflecting ships on the Clyde and, on a much smaller scale, the light, curving Magazine Restaurant at the Serpentine Gallery in London contains columns like tornadoes descending from the ceiling and attaches itself gracefully on to the neoclassical building of the gallery.

Other iconic buildings include the Guangzhou Opera House, The Heydar Aliyev Center in Baku, Azerbaijan, Daxing Airport in Beijing and the Morpheus Hotel in Macau.

Zaha Hadid died suddenly at the age of 65 having devoted herself entirely to her career. Amongst many prizes and tributes from the architectural world she had received the Gold Medal Architectural Design, British Architecture, and Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire. Professor Davies recalled meeting her on several occasions and described as 'nice

despite a reputation for being difficult'. She saw herself as an outsider in a man's professional world.

Reported by Jane Blandy

Art stopped at Customs. Rosalind Whyte. Tuesday 18 June 2019

Rosalind discussed the clash between the legal and artistic worlds when art is seized at customs. Referencing numerous examples, she explained the difficulties in identifying firstly what is art, and then, whose art is it? Two simple questions with very different conclusions, depending on the standpoint: literal or creative.

Constantin Brancusi (1876 – 1957) was born in Hobita Gorj, Romania, about 250 km west of Bucharest, a small town known for folk craft and wood carving. He studied sculpture at the Bucharest School of Fine Art and then, wishing to be closer to the centre of the art world, he walked to Paris, a 391 hour walk. After working closely with Rodin, he wanted to do something different, and he told himself that nothing can grow under big trees. Brancusi was interested in capturing the essence of a character, not the form. His sculpture, Bird In Space, created in the early 1920s, represented the abstract movement of a bird in flight. In fact, Brancusi made five versions using different materials in an effort to reveal something new about the form.

In 1926, the photographer Edward Steichen bought Bird in Space and shipped it to New York. The law in the United States permitted works of art to enter the country free of import taxes because American galleries were endeavouring to build collections, and European art was most influential at the time. Sculpture was defined as a reproduction by carving or casting; an imitation of natural objects or a directly human form. The customs appraiser classified Bird in Space as not sculpture therefore making it subject to 40% tax. He stated, If that's art, I'm a bricklayer. This sentiment was remembered many years later when Carl Andre's Equivalent VIII – 120 firebricks – was bought by the Tate in 1972.

So, the case was taken to court to ascertain whether the sculpture adequately resembled what it was supposed to represent. The judge decided that the object was beautifully symmetrical, and although difficult to associate with a bird, it was pleasing to look at. However, was Bird in Space an original piece, or simply an industrial process, similar to a kitchen utensil? And as mentioned, there were other versions of the sculpture. Brancusi poked fun at artists who did use Ready-Mades like Marcel Duchamp, who had made Fountain from a disused urinal. Eventually, after two years, the judge agreed that Bird in Space wasn't industrial work and therefore was entitled to free entry, thus establishing an important principle that art does not have to involve a realistic representation of nature and that Bird in Space represented the abstract concept of flight. Interestingly, the sculpture went from being viewed as a kitchen utensil in 1926 to being sold at Christie's in 2005 for \$27 million!

The definition of art has always been contentious. *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* (1875) by J.A.M. Whistler, was dismissed by John Ruskin, a leading art critic at the time, as flinging a pot of paint in the public's face. Whistler sued Ruskin and won the case, but was only awarded a farthing and subsequently went bankrupt after the court fees.

American Dan Flavin, specialised in conceptual minimalist art. Much of his work was constructed using fluorescent light bulbs, including *Monuments to Vladimir Tatlin* (1966-69), but the European import authorities argued that a monument is usually made of materials such as marble and that the piece was simply an electrical device, not sculpture.

Similarly, HMRC recently said they were not happy that video is art when the American video artist Bill Viola displayed works such as *Hall of Whispers* – videos of four people, mouths bound and eyes shut, as it lacks the three dimensional properties of a sculpture. A tribunal took expert evidence to expand the concept of sculpture to include video, but in 2010 the EU overturned the decision, saying it only becomes sculpture when it is working (not disassembled) when it comes into the country. The European Commission said that Flavin's work has characteristics of light fittings - not works of art -and therefore subject to the higher tax rate.

Customs has also been involved with whose work it is. *Portrait of Wally* (1912) by Egon Schiele was captured by the Nazis and in 1954 was bought by Rudolph Leopold. Schiele's heirs challenged the ownership of the work and it was seized at customs for ten years whilst it went through litigation. Eventually, the Leopold Museum paid \$19 million to the heirs and the painting remained in the museum.

A parcel sent from Belgium was intercepted in Newark by FedEx with a customs declaration value label of \$37. Inside, was a note; Happy Christmas, from Peter and the \$2.5 million missing Picasso *La Coiffeuse* (1911) from the Pompidou Centre in Paris. No one was ever found guilty, but the painting was returned to the Gallery.

An interesting example of conceptual art was made in 1973 by Michael Craig-Martin entitled *An Oak Tree*. It consisted of a glass of water, standing on a small glass shelf, mounted high above the ground and a label below stating that the oak tree is physically present but in the form of a glass of water. The work may reflect the importance of faith, or transubstantiation, in Catholicism - the belief that bread and wine is actually the body and blood of Christ. Craig-Martin was interested in suspending belief and willing faith in the viewer, saying, It's not only imperceptible but also inconceivable. Australian customs must have taken this on board when they banned the work from entering the country on the basis that the import of all vegetation into Australia is banned. The artist was forced to backtrack and clarify that it was not actually an oak tree.

The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living (1991) by Damien Hirst, better known as *The Shark*, was displayed at the Saatchi Gallery in 1992. A tiger shark bought for £6,000 from an Australian fisherman hangs in a tank of formaldehyde and sold for £50,000. In 1996, Hirst displayed *Mother and Child Divided*, two cows literally cut in half from head to tail

and displayed in separate tanks. At the time, the UK was consumed by Mad Cow disease and he ran into problems with US customs when taking the exhibition to New York.

Tracy Emin, a Royal Academician, has always produced thought provoking and varied work. A famous piece *My Bed* (1998), featured a double bed, unmade and littered with the detritus of her awful life. In order to ship the piece to Japan for an exhibition, all the sheets and loose items were packed into a suitcase, but the Japanese customs refused to believe that it was art. Emin had to provide witnesses from the art world to prove that she was an artist, and alive. The piece was sold in 2014 to Count Durkheim at Christie's for £2.5 million.

The installation *Thirty Pieces of Silver* (1988-9) by Cornelia Parker is a reference to the betrayal of Chris by Judas. It became a performance piece when over 1000 pieces of unwanted silver-plate – betrayed by previous owners - tankards, vases, trophies, trombones and such like from junk shops was laid out along a concrete road and flattened by a steam roller. The flattened silver was arranged into thirty groups and suspended in mid-air by thin metal threads. In 1995, Cornelia visited the Colt 45 gun factory in Connecticut. Struck by the chilling shapes of a gun in the bland metal elements of the initial manufacturing process, she made *Embryo Firearms* (1995). When the piece was exhibited, it not only appealed to the factory workers, all members of the National Rifle Association, but also the art world, who saw aborted guns and thus lives saved. After the exhibition, Cornelia took the work through JFK Airport and was arrested for carrying firearms. The incident inspired her to consider the role of customs, blocking objects on behalf of society. She visited HMRC in Cardiff, interested in obtaining seized objects for her work, and was given pornographic tapes, which she dissolved in solvent and used for the highly literal *Pornographic Drawings*.

When a philosophical question, such as what is art, comes under scrutiny from legal and artistic factions, the debate is likely to continue.

Tantrums and Tiaras: Behind Scenes at the Royal Opera House. Nigel Bates. Tuesday 17 September 2019

Nigel, formally the Section Principle Percussionist at Covent Garden, was appointed the Musical Administrator for the Royal Ballet in early 2013. He explained that a prestigious organisation like the Royal Opera House, which often runs up to fourteen projects simultaneously, requires a highly organised, competent and cooperative team to maintain the highest standards.

He paints a vivid picture of the concert hall, horseshoe-shaped and lavishly redecorated in 1858 with red velvet and gold, that intimately focuses the audience towards the stage and music. World-class singers and the Royal Opera House Orchestra performing say, Verdi's *La Traviata* create a truly immersive experience.

Bates then juxtaposes this with the experience backstage: completely rebuilt in 1997-99, as the stage was becoming unsafe. It is now purely functional. The staging of any performance is all about creating an illusion, using lighting and props and never spending money on something that the audience won't see, such as the back of the set. It is often unfinished, utilising crash mats to break the fall of a jumping singer acting out their despair. On more than one occasion, the lead got into character so convincingly that the stage crew swapped the crash mat for a trampoline in an effort to temper his tantrums! The illusion continues on stage with foam polystyrene instead of real rocks. There is a dedicated cleaning team removing the vast amounts of dust and dangerous objects such as nails, ensuring the safety of the singers at all times.

The deputy stage manager sits in a tiny cubicle off stage, often called Mission Control, surrounded by a conductor monitor, a stage monitor, microphones, controls and a high definition TV screen – as nowadays the action can be shown on a big screen. He or she must follow the score and be aware of every small component that makes up the total production.

The percussionists are at stage level and thus unable to see the audience and indeed, very little of the performance either. They are able to look up however to view the decorative roof dome of the auditorium. The rings edging the dome open inwards revealing the follow-spotlights in the roof. Operators thirty feet high must know the artist's movement by heart to enable the spots to light up and draw attention to the appropriate singer.

It is difficult to imagine how a singer copes with performing at the Royal Opera House. The fear, insecurity and isolation beforehand; the audience's eyes bearing down on you; lights shining from all angles; the modern high definition filming, up-close-and-personal; props letting you down; and supporting characters not being ready. No wonder singers sometimes behave like the king or queen they are portraying. The capacity to produce immense noise, also to act and navigate around the stage are needed. Pavarotti's acting skills were not fantastic, but his voice more than compensated. Soprano Maria Callas, dubbed Madame Callous, would shake like a small child before a performance, but at the first cue, she was transformed and fantastic. Sadly, not all audiences are forgiving, as happened at La Scala in Milan, when the tenor Roberto Alagna was booed off stage and the understudy had to continue in his place, all caught on film.

The dancers at the Royal Ballet train from a very young age and the company directors usually rule with a rod of iron. The company also runs an outreach program called 'Chance to Dance' offering those who have never danced before an opportunity to be part of the Royal Ballet. The risks are very great and nowadays there is a health care team on site also. Dancing the Nutcracker can be dangerous and in Cinderella, there are many props on stage such as steps, some held down with sticky tape.

Live animals on stage can be unpredictable as well. In La Fille Mal Gardee, a dancer is always at the ready with a brush behind the Shetland pony, and even a pair of pigeons require an understudy, in case one has a tantrum and flies off.

Today the Royal Opera House plays to an average 90% capacity as a result of sound planning and finances. Knowing their audience and getting people to come to performances is paramount. Some are very long and serious, others such as *La Fille du Regiment*, featuring Dawn French are humorous. In addition, a tea dance is held monthly in the Paul Hamlyn Hall, so many members of the general public can also claim that they have danced at Covent Garden! It has not, however, always been such a well-run company. In the 1990s, the BBC spent many days in there, producing six hours of gripping documentary entitled *The House*, which showed disgruntled personnel and a lack of planning and budgeting.

Offstage and into the orchestra pit is a dark, airless and noisy place. The conductor looks down towards the orchestra. The layout is similar to that of a concert hall, although in a concert hall the orchestra looks down to the conductor. The players can hear the singers, but cannot see the dancers and very rarely any of the performers, so the electric moment before curtain up, when everything is ready, can also be a leap of faith. Sometimes musicians have to dress up, and the Chorus are given a myriad of costumes, wigs and face paint, often with many changes required during the performance.

Conductors of the Royal Opera have all had their own style, some very dictatorial, such as one German conductor who was treated to an impromptu rendition of *The Great Escape* during rehearsals. The last 'Big Four' conductors of the Royal Opera have been the Hungarian Sir Georg Solti, whose intention was to make the Royal Opera 'simply the best opera in the world'. Colin Davis took over in 1971 then Bernard Haitink, who retired at 90. The current conductor is Antonio Pappano, who has the knack of being able to explain very complex ideas.

There are numerous considerations with any production: artistic; practical, props, scenery, special effects; and the financial management of those aspects. Much rehearsal is needed to ensure everyone's safety, indeed the theatre at the Royal Opera House was built in 1858 after the first two burnt down. Richard Wagner's *Twilight of the Gods*, a fourteen hour epic, first premiered in 1876, makes huge demands on the audience, the singers, finances and stage management, including special effects such as flames and flooding.

Utilisation of the many spaces at Covent Garden is managed by a school timetable. The main stage is in constant demand for rehearsals with up to fourteen productions in process at any one time. Rehearsals in the Pit are every day and evening for 48 weeks of the year. There are Chorus rehearsal rooms, ballet studios, set production and so on.

It takes many people and much tension to produce the very best performers, music, scenery and staging for the 2246 spectators and expectations are extraordinarily high, but it is a collaboration of people and processes that have made the Royal Opera House one of the world's flagship performance venues.

The Silk Road : Silk, Slaves and Stupas Dr Susan Whitfield Tues 15th October

Susan Whitfield, a scholar, writer, curator and traveller has explored and studied the Silk Road for over 30 years so she brought a wealth of knowledge and understanding to her talk. She showed how the name the Silk Road is really a misnomer as the trade route it encompasses had many different branches by land and sea; but it was an immediately recognisable term, vividly bringing to life the cultural and trading highway that was so significant across north Africa, central Europe and Asia for well over a thousand years. A large map clearly showed its many branches from Eastern China, through a variety of routes across central Asia to the Middle East, North Africa and Europe; as well as the routes taken by ships across the Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean and the rivers of Eurasia. These routes could change depending on external conditions such as weather and warfare. And just as the trade route was far more complex and extensive than just one Road, so too, objects traded were far more than just Silks, but slaves, furs, spices and luxury goods of all kinds.

Dr Whitfield stressed that though trade was the reason for the highways, the significant result was an enriching exchange of technologies, cultures, religions, languages and life styles. She chose to develop this by focussing on individual artefacts that had been traded or established along the Silk Road. She referred to the trade in slaves – people as a commodity - a common practice in most societies at the time; and spoke briefly about the prevalence of Buddhist Stupas – sacred memorial sites – scattered over a wide area, often in now deserted regions, revealing where busy trading posts must once have been. Travellers took their faiths along the Silk Road as they traded.

But Dr Whitfield's main focus was on 3 specific artefacts that showed how technologies were shared and sometimes modified as they are represented across the route. An image of a contemporary glass works in Lebanon, where the same skills have been practised for nearly two thousand years, was an introduction to a glass bowl made in that region in the first century AD but found buried in a grave in South Eastern China. What Dr Whitfield called an IKEA bowl of the time in the place it was made, was clearly seen as an exotic and costly object in China as it had been buried in the tomb of an important statesman. Shipwrecks have been found that show that such simple bowls were packed in their thousands in the holds of ships and transported across the Indian Ocean to China, as glass would have been considered too fragile to have been carried on camels. Made in the West for thousands of years, glass was the preferred tableware as metal containers tainted the taste of wine and food; whereas in China where non-tainting stoneware was used for hot food and drink, there was no such need. So glass was traded from the West to the East, and with time, its technology spread eastwards along the Silk Road; though the glass was used for different purposes and fashioned in varied ways in different cultures. In Egypt for instance, it was frequently coloured to imitate precious stones, such as blue glass to supplement lapis lazuli in the Funeral Mask of Tutankhamun; and in China, when it arrived there, glass was often made to emulate Jade, which was highly valued.

We were then shown an image of a magnificent silver-gilt ewer that had been made in the 6th Century in Bactria (now Northern Afghanistan), with a design reminiscent of the Mediterranean, but buried in a tomb in North Western China. Its decorative panels showed a version of a story much loved in Ancient Greece, that of the Judgement of Paris: a story that may have found its way to the Himalayas when Alexander of Macedon marched his army so far from home. A closer look at the ewer's beaded foot, a Sassanian motif, shows that the Bactrian craftsman was influenced by those from further north, in modern Uzbekistan. Other images of jewellery, silver and glass heightened our recognition that styles, stories, technical skills and usage were passed through many cultures, being modified or adopted as was found desirable or beneficial.

Finally Dr Whitfield considered Silk, the most prized and luxurious commodity that was carried from the East to the West. Many societies had taken and used cocoons from the wild silk moth but the Chinese had domesticated the moth about 5000 years ago, and by feeding it constantly on the leaves of the white mulberry tree it became vastly bigger than its wild cousin. Its correspondingly larger cocoon produced an average of a kilometre of fine but strong silk thread. Their knowledge enabled the Chinese to produce more silk more speedily than any rivals; and it was their precious produce that gave the trading route its name. Silk technology spread rapidly through Eastern and central Asia and later into Europe, with the Muslims of Spain in the 9th Century. Our speaker illustrated the wonderful variety of designs with examples of precious silk fragments that have survived for over a thousand years. One had been used to protect a holy relic in France, stressing the silk's almost other-worldly quality. The Sassanian roundel appears again in the patterned silk from China showing how the art and culture of one society influenced another. All the examples we saw showed how the Silk Road was far more than a trading route: more significantly it was a conduit for the exchange of ideas, beliefs, skills and culture. We also saw clearly that though Silk from China gave the route its name, many commodities were traded, and it was a two way exchange - to and from the East and West. In the words of Dr Whitfield "every object tells us something of the wonderful complexity of this Road."

Kate Siebert

OF MEISSEN MEN. Lars Tharp. Tuesday 19 November 2019

A packed session listened to a lecture by Lars Tharp, one of the most experienced experts on the BBC Antiques Roadshow, about the introduction of porcelain china in Meissen, near Dresden in the early 18th century. His story starts with a painting, The Feast of the Gods by Bellini from the early 16th century which depicts three large Chinese porcelain platters fit to serve food for the gods.

The Chinese were the only producers for over 1,000 years before the recipe and extremely high firing temperatures were mastered by the Meissen factory early in the 18th century. Until then the Portuguese were the first to import this highly prized porcelain from China and Japan, followed by other European countries, including The Dutch East India Company.

Augustus the Strong, King of Poland and Elector of Saxony, financed the development of porcelain at Albrechtsburg Castle, Meissen, firstly in 1708 with Böttger Ware, a hard, red stoneware which could be engraved through its glazed surface, and then in 1713 with the discovery of the recipe for white porcelain.

The signature underglaze "Meissen Blue" was introduced by Friedrich August Köttig. Minutely detailed landscapes and port scenes, animals, flowers, court and historical scenes, chinoiserie - fanciful Chinese-inspired decorations, and commedia dell'arte figures were highly valued. Johann Joachim Kändler was the genius behind life-size animal figures which were displayed in galleries in 1720s, while colour developed out of the existing manufacture of coloured enamelware.

By this time porcelain was also produced in other parts of Germany and Europe but Meissen porcelain excelled in its all round detail, ingenuity and intricacy. The Rococo period introduced mythology and Hogarth's engravings as sources of inspiration but Meissen, with its famous trademark of two crossed swords, maintained its monopoly by keeping production to Albrechtsburg Castle. Over time the craze for Meissen porcelain declined as the factory continued to reissue traditional designs. In 1945 Allied bombing destroyed most of the factory but today the company survives mostly on limited production of 18th century designs.

Written by Jane Blandy

A DICKENS OF A CHRISTMAS. Bertie Pearce Tuesday 17 December 2019

It was with delight and much anticipation that we welcomed back Bertie Pearce to our Christmas lecture where he enthralled us with "A Dickens of a Christmas." Bertie explained the significance of the author's childhood. Aged 12 he was forced to leave school and work long hungry hours at the Blacking factory sticking on labels, while his father rested in the Marshalsea Debtors' Prison. The memory haunted him all his life and infused his passion for reform. As a man of literary talent and "superfluous steam" or energy, he raged against the twin monsters Ignorance and Want. Just as Dickens' stories are alleviated by humour, so Bertie interacted amusingly with his audience performing three conjuring tricks. He even enticed the Programme Secretary onto the stage persuading her to hold an egg beater to her forehead! However the main focus was on his most famous story A Christmas Carol published in 1848. This tells of the transformation of the miserable skinflint Scrooge into a generous employer and community benefactor. While the Spirit of Christmas Past reminded him of the happy time he spent with Mr Fezziwig enjoying the food, dancing and games, he was also shown the future when Tiny Tim, the disabled son of his clerk Bob Cratchit clearly dies; his heart was touched and he changed. Dickens died in 1870 but his portrayal of the effects of those terrible times had impact; attitudes began to change. His books were wildly popular in the United States and one businessman was so moved by the

story that he gave his factory workers the day off on Christmas Day for the first time. Bertie ended his splendid lecture with Tiny Tim's immortal words "God bless us everyone."

Written by Jennifer Thorpe