

Book Review

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Waterfield, Giles, 2015. *The People's Galleries in the Victorian Era*. New Haven / London: Yale University Press, 370 pp., hbk, ISBN 978-0-300-20984-6.

The National Gallery and the South Kensington Museum, now called Victoria and Albert Museum, are found in the centre of most studies on the use of art museums in Britain. This book records the beginnings of art museums in Britain through to World War I, mostly focusing on galleries in cities other than London, such as Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester and Nottingham. The author Giles Waterfield is a distinguished curator and expert on the history of British art galleries and their collections, best known for his book *Palaces of Art: Art Galleries in Britain 1790-1990* (1991) and the exhibition he curated on *Art Treasures of England: The Regional Collections at the Royal Academy* in 1998.

Despite the challenge facing the author to distinguish himself within the broad literature and numerous museums that were created or existed in nineteenth century Britain, he does manage to formulate a differentiated intention. He does not seek to explore the entire history of British museums, the inspiration for and nature of these Victorian galleries in depth. Instead he sketches a style of a gallery that to this day is still controversial; and highlights the relationship of the art gallery to the temporary exhibition.

He also distances himself from previous studies, which have appeared since the 1980s inspired by so-called new museology, that have treated museums in a negative light and have presented them as instruments of authority and agents of social control of the low and uneducated classes by the higher echelons of cultured society. In contrast, he views them as monuments to Victorian beliefs in civic order. He concentrates on the motives that led to their foundation such as the private and public philanthropic movements that made the effort to transform and improve these regional cities, mostly through public education, even though those motives were complicated and not always pure.

The first part of the book addresses the role of the Crown, the national government, the Parliament Select Committees, the Royal Academy of Arts, the monarchy and aristocracy, the emergence of the art curator and the many private Societies established in cities in the late eighteenth century such as local art, antiquarian, literary, philosophical and archaeological Societies, that contributed to the formation and development of these art galleries. This part sets the ground for the second, by far the most extensive part, which examines the Victorian art museums, established in different towns in England and Scotland in the second half of the nineteenth century. Waterfield explores the impact of the industrial revolution on the formation of civic art galleries such as the museums in Manchester, the city where Friedrich Engels wrote his book *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845). He highlights the key role played by universal exhibitions, organised in London and Manchester, in understanding the function and formation of the late Victorian art museums. Other issues he addresses in this rich narrative range from the participation of the public and the popularity of galleries; the parallel development of museums with that of concert halls and parks; the significance of the different architectural styles of the galleries; the display of art; the role of temporary exhibitions and their connection to museums and art galleries; the development of British art; through to the different styles of collecting; the significant educational role the museums and galleries played for the best

of the public and finally also to the role of patrons, donors, councillors and curators during this period.

What makes this part interesting is the fact that Waterfield does not only concentrate on the major peripheral cities, but engages art museums in smaller towns such as Burry, Oldham and Warrington, the role of which today is far from central: Their very existence is under threat due to lack of funding and support. At the same time, he sets the history of the British museums in international context, comparing them with their equivalent in other countries such as Italy, Holland, Germany, France and the United States. However it would be particularly helpful for the reader if this wide-ranging study also offered examples in Nordic countries or the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The choice of illustrations reveals many underlying and understated details. Looking at the examples from the Harris Art Gallery and Museum in Preston, the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool and the Birmingham City Art Gallery, the reader recognises how ambitious and extraordinarily grand these museums were in terms of their size, architecture, location (in the heart of the city) and their aspiration to become a meeting point for the public to experience culture. Also compelling are the images showing the streets of Manchester deserted in 1851, as the Mancunians were away visiting the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace, and others showing the industrial character of the city at the time.

The last part, which is the shortest and serves as conclusion, deals with the development and actions of British art galleries between and after both World Wars and the change of their role in the twentieth century. Their power weakened as they lost their influence on the public and were no longer a pole of attraction, due to the increasing popularity of cinema, urban shopping and sport spectatorship. At the same time, they ceased to be innovative and did not develop with the success of their American equivalents, while the public became suspicious of the belief that art was used for the improvement of society, and in particular for the working-class.

This book is worth reading. It will interest students, art historians and museum professionals studying the development of British art in its connection to museums and institutions. Most importantly it touches upon issues that are currently the main aim of museums, as today many of them are focusing on the idea of the family gallery that relates to all levels of the community, echoing the legacy of the Victorian art galleries, an element that distinguishes them from their equivalents in other countries.

This indeed is also its contribution to the field of British museum studies: It situates artworks within the institutional context of their exhibition and use thereby providing a further link between museology and art history. Waterfield's book will offer curators not only another careful look into Victorian rigidity, but perhaps also insights as to how an exhibition can become a localized community event that still bears the mark of high culture.

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