



Tributes to Maria Shirley at the first Maria Shirley Lecture on 22nd November 2014

EXCERPT FROM THE INTRODUCTION TO THE FIRST MARIA SHIRLEY LECTURE

by Clare Ford-Wille, Vice-President

Maria Shirley was born in 1927 and trained as an artist at The Slade School of Art. She first taught on a part-time basis for the department of Extra-Mural Studies, University of London in 1953. In 1968 she was appointed as a full-time Lecturer, later Senior Lecturer but, when she was in her fifties she began a full-time degree in the history of art during the evenings at Birkbeck College. She built up the history of art programme to be the largest in the department and then when we became linked to Birkbeck, she developed the diploma, now named the Certificate.

Her vital contribution in the founding of ULEMHAS in 1981 and the implications of this for the continuance of art history generally for both lecturers and students alike is best explained by reading passages on the Founding of ULEMHAS from the [2003 ULEMHAS Review written by the late Claire Andrews](#).

ULEMHAS held its first proper meeting on 30th October 1981 in the Beveridge Hall, Senate House and the first lecture was given by Sir Michael Levey, the then Director of the National Gallery.

TRIBUTE TO MARIA SHIRLEY

by June Daventry

It was a long time ago, I think in September 1979, that I enrolled for YEAR ONE of the Extra Mural Art History Diploma. I did not know anyone concerned with the Course, but my interest had been stimulated by a degree with the Open University which I had finished previously. So on the first appointed Monday, I walked from Charing Cross up through the old Covent Garden to an unfamiliar City Lit. It was a good start.

The introductory lecture, called "The Spirit of Greece" delivered, with panache, by the head of the Department, a Miss Maria Shirley made a big impression on me. At the time, a compulsory part of this Diploma, was the art and architecture of classical times, providing a base for following periods. As a mature student, fortunately for me, I encountered in Maria Shirley an inspirational guide to the classical period and it was my privilege to be her pupil.

Obviously, the following tribute is a personal one but I believe that my glimpses of Miss Shirley would be recognized by many students from the past. Eventually, although I had moved from London, I seized another chance to learn from her, attending her post-diploma seminars at the National Gallery. This was not long before she retired. During this course, as usual, with her mastery of various topics, Miss Shirley, in her firm and inimitable way stimulated our thought. As a teacher *and* personality Miss Shirley, WAS/IS unforgettable.

I ask myself, can I explain why? Although I feel it is a little presumptuous to try to describe her. Certainly, Miss Shirley, (as we politely called her,) was guarded with people she did not know. But I could not help being intrigued by her history and character.

I began to appreciate, that Miss Shirley approached art as an artist as well as an historian: in her teaching this was a valuable dimension, and much must have stemmed from her early training at the Slade. Also, it was likely that her insights, aesthetic values and knowledge were rooted in her upbringing, her father, a younger son of an old family, being for a time a keeper at the Ashmolean. At any rate I knew that here was a person who had been long and deeply immersed in the subject, and could communicate her knowledge and values to her students.

Soon after the beginning of the classical course, there were visits to the British Museum with revelations such as the tucked-away Bassae frieze. At the time, it seemed to me that Sculpture was Miss Shirley's special love, whether free standing, high or low relief. I remember how, in the classroom, she introduced me to the Severe style, as in the Metopes of the Temple at Olympia, and to hear her speak in front of Antique masterpieces in this country or in Greece was, in every way, enlightening.

It is said, the way to know a person is to go on holiday with them, and much was apparent on the student journey Miss Shirley led to Greece the following summer, before the first year exam. It was my good fortune to be part of the group and for a fortnight we took in Miss Shirley's "must see" places, including Olympia, Aegina, the lonely and romantic Bassae, (as it was more than thirty years ago) even the long ferry ride from Northern Greece to Corfu. As anyone present could tell you, her *personality* coloured our visit to Greece. Undeniably, any student who encountered Miss Shirley knew that she was a formidable lady. But Miss Shirley's knowledge, teaching skills and personality came together as part of the same package. She was a person of integrity and as a tutor was extremely conscientious.

To illustrate these aspects of her, I will tell a short tale of our group visit to the Athens Museum.

Once, British academic tutors could take their students to Greece and lecture on the spot. But by 1980 Greek attitudes (bear in mind the Elgin Marbles) had hardened. The message was, it was Greek culture and they did not want the British lording it over them, they wanted their own guides to be employed. Whether she had heard of this or not, seeming confident in the Athens Archaeological Museum, Miss Shirley was in mid flow amidst the archaic figures. As usual, her interpretation was superb, when an official had the temerity to stop her.

I have to admit that generally, even observing Miss Shirley dealing with some perceived error of ways, *I* quailed, let alone the recipient. So we could only gasp, but even we were surprised by her reaction, when, furious at the interruption, this formidable lady announced that she would call the British Ambassador (no less) to her aid. There was a long stand-off while phone calls were made to the embassy, (no mobiles then, of course, so what was said was not public). But the outcome was that

she was able to lecture in museums and on sites for the rest of the trip. By her, nothing more was said, but in the Athens Museum it seemed to us that the British Empire was well and truly alive! By force of personality as well of course, as the *right* connections, Maria Shirley was among the few people who could have won this battle — if not the war.

Of course, to be stopped was an affront to her person and her country, but there was another reason for her reaction, to do the right thing by her students and give her all. If she could not lecture, that is, teach in the sight of the object or with the experience of the site, for her, the purpose of the visit would have been lost. Moreover, we, the students, knew there was no substitute for Miss Shirley.

After Maria Shirley died, untimely early in in 1992, I was glad that I had written to her at her retirement, expressing personal gratitude to her. Besides her teaching, I hope I have conveyed that I came to value her as a person. At times she could be fierce but more important she could be encouraging to her students, and I for one, treasure these encounters with her. These sentiments would have been shared by many, as witness the crowded Memorial Service in the University Church. A student, such as myself, cannot say more than, it was much to my regret not to be able to go on knowing her, in the more relaxed atmosphere of her retirement.

I am happy to say that I have good memories of the period in my life associated with this EXTRAORDINARY woman, and all the friends I made at this time, (some here today?)

Claire Andrews, the student who led the setting up of ULEMHAS, as Maria Shirley wished, was its first chairman. Both had been trained as artists deliver. My friendship with Claire, with shared interests including our memories of Maria Shirley, remained strong and rewarding, right up to her recent death.

Claire and all the original student committee would surely wish to salute the memory of Maria Shirley, God rest her soul, and all those in ULEMHAS to the present day who have furthered her love of art, interests and ideals.

Maria Shirley

by Professor Francis Ames-Lewis

I first encountered Maria when as a raw young lecturer I was called on to help with marking Extra-Mural exam scripts. I was somewhat daunted: Maria's reputation for energetic, trenchantly-voiced opinions had swept ahead of her. But, characteristically, as I later found, she was sensitive to my inexperience and patient in proffering her advice on how you assess the quality of material, thought and interpretation in an exam answer, or on how you make allowance for the pressures of time and nerves. This introduction was a great help in building my confidence in that particular aspect of the lecturer's work, and set the foundation for my growing respect for Maria, for her clear-sighted and definite views but also for her thoughtful recognition and understanding acceptance of others' opinions.

This respect was considerably enhanced when Maria joined Birkbeck's Department of History of Art as an undergraduate student. Peter and Linda Murray had insisted that she would not be safe and secure in her extra-mural teaching environment until she had a BA to put after her name; but Maria understandably had reservations as to how she would fit into, and be received by, the others in her year-group. At that stage, we had only fairly recently started to teach the syllabus of the Courtauld Institute's single-honours BA, and we recruited small numbers each year: Maria was, I think, one of only seven or eight in her group. We all had anxieties as to how this mix would pan out – not least Maria herself. But she was reticence itself, never proclaiming her superior knowledge – after all, she knew much more about Renaissance art and architecture than her young tutors did, let alone her peers: I for one learned a huge amount from her – never condescending to the other students, or voicing negative criticism. Before long, to my amazement, relief and delight, she was entirely accepted, and respected, by the others; and indeed, she became a firm friend to the group and in a sense the intellectual hub around whom the others revolved. Her highly-developed sensitivity towards the feelings and needs of her peers was complemented both by an acute intelligence and a superb visual perceptiveness that shone through her course-work essays and her taut, concise verbal contributions in seminar; and by an ease and clarity of handwriting that made her work positively a pleasure to read – even when written under the stress of the 3-hour examination. Little wonder that Maria swept through to achieve an accomplished first-class honours degree.

Chances for me to see and re-engage with Maria once she had completed her degree were only occasional, but were always welcome. Still very memorable are her good humour, expressed with contagious, rich laughter, and her readiness to exchange opinions, of current exhibitions perhaps, or of friends in common; memorable also is how she would preface her opinion with a slowly-delivered 'The fact of the matter is...'; as she collected her thoughts together. My last memory of Maria is of a contented, tranquil afternoon tea party on the lawn of my mother-in-law's house in Gloucestershire. Maria had retired to a village not far from her beloved Westonbirt, where she had run so many successful and happy summer schools. She came across from there to us for a relaxed, contented time of mulling over the past, and sharing memories of colleagues and former students in the Birkbeck History of Art Department, and in the art history section of the Department for Extra-Mural Studies of which Maria was for so many years both the corner-stone and the keystone.