London Art History Society

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Leon Battista Alberti
Walter Sickert
The Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration
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From the Editor

In this issue we recognise three significant anniversaries. Carel Fabritius was born four hundred years ago, and few attributable paintings survive from his short life, but Clare Ford-Wille concludes that he achieved greater fame than many contemporaries through one much-loped painting, *The Goldfinch*. Andrew Spira assesses the impact of the writings of the archetypal 'Renaissance' man, Leon Battista Alberti, who died five hundred and fifty years ago. And to mark the bicentenary of the birth of Victorian photographer Francis Frith, Simon Constantine looks at his studies of Egypt and Palestine.

One major exhibition this summer is a retrospective at Tate Britain of Walter Sickert: Nicola Moorby analyses his unique style and the ambiguities in his paintings.

Lindsey Glen, director of the House of Illustration, describes the plans for the new Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration.

The winner of this year's London Art History Society Prize for Best Modern Period Masters Dissertation at Birkbeck, Julia Eberhardt, discusses ribbon accessories in eighteenth-century feminine portraiture.

I would like to express my gratitude to Liz Newlands and Janet Ouston, who are standing down from the panel this year, for their invaluable contribution to the Review, and also my thanks to the contributors, our designer, and my fellow panel members.

Barrie MacDonald
Editor, London Art History Society Review

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FRONT COVER: *Carel Fabritius,* The Goldfinch*, 1654. Oil on panel, 33.4 x 22.3 cm. Mauritshuis, The Hague*

Carel Fabritius, 1622-1654 The painter of *The Goldfinch*: a commemoration of his brief life and career

Clare Ford-Wille

Fig. 1: Carel Fabritius, A View of Delft, with a Musical Instrument Seller's Stall*', 1652. Oil on canvas, 15.5 x 31.6 cm. National Gallery, London*

'Carel Fabritius, an excellent and outstanding painter who was so skilled and unerring in the matter of perspectives as well as naturalistic colouring and the handling of his paint that in the opinion of many connoisseurs of art he has never had an equal.' Dirck van Bleyswijck[1]

Carel Fabritius was born four hundred years ago in February 1622 and, despite his tragic early death at the age of thirty-two in 1654, he is better known and admired than many other painters who lived twice as long. There are fewer than twelve paintings attributed to Fabritius, but one above all has contributed to his reputation, which has gathered momentum since the later nineteenth century. It is of course *The Goldfinch* (Front Cover), which has gleamed from its prominent position on the wall in the Mauritshuis in The Hague since its acquisition in 1896 at a Paris sale by Abraham Bredius, the then director of the museum.

Despite much art historical detective work, two monographs, and an exhibition in 2005, little more has been discovered to explain the admiration of the 'many connoisseurs' described by van Bleyswijck. What can be discovered about this artist and his small body of work is that it shows his innovative and outstandingly fresh approach.

Carel Fabritius was the son of a teacher and amateur painter, Pieter Carelsz, who adopted the name 'Fabritius' from the Latin 'faber' meaning craftsman. Carel's two brothers, Barent and Johannes, were also painters. The family had originated from the Southern Netherlands, his grandfather, the Calvinist Carel Pietersz., having emigrated from Ghent to the Northern Netherlands in about 1585, where he was appointed a minister at Aartswoud, north of Hoorn. His eldest son, Pieter, was Fabritius' father who in 1619 became a schoolmaster in Midden-Beemster, near Hoorn, twenty-five miles north-east of Amsterdam, and two years later married Barbertje Barentsdr van der Maes, Fabritius' mother, who became the area's midwife.

Carel Fabritius, the eldest son of eleven children, was born in Midden-Beemster, and christened on February 27th, 1622. Little is known of Carel's early life, but it is assumed

that he was taught by his father together with his two brothers. No documents refer to apprenticeships with other painters in Midden-Beemster, and he probably started work as a carpenter. Carel married on 22nd September 1641 and for the first time he used the latinised 'Fabritius'. Shortly afterwards the couple must have moved to Amsterdam where Fabritius' wife, Aeltje, had a brother who had set up there as a successful draper and owned various houses. There is a record of the death of a child and the baptism of another (who also died later) in the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam on 29th March 1643. Aeltje died in 1643, probably in childbirth. The inventory of her possessions runs to 22 pages, suggesting that she was well off, but Fabritius does not seem to have derived any financial security for the remainder of his life.

At this point a frustrating question arises concerning the nature of Fabritius' involvement with Rembrandt during the year and a half that he was living in Amsterdam. Although there are no documents linking Fabritius with Rembrandt during this brief period, he is thought to have trained in Rembrandt's studio, where he was described as 'my fellow pupil' by Samuel van Hoogstraten, who was also an apprentice at the same time.[2] However, Fabritius was nineteen and this was older than usual for an apprentice, so could he have been more of an assistant? Rembrandt was at the height of his early fame after a decade in Amsterdam, had a large workshop, and was at the time undertaking the important commission of *The Company of Captain Frans Banning Cocq*, known as *The Night Watch* (1642).

There is one recently-discovered painting, which may provide an insight to Fabritius' early work and the influence of Rembrandt, and that is *The Raising of Lazarus* (c. 1643), now in the Muzeum Narodowe, Warsaw. A signature 'CARR. FABR.' was discovered when the painting was restored in 1935. Ten years before, Rembrandt and Jan Lievens, who were sharing a studio in Leiden, had both painted the subject, and Rembrandt had also produced the version in an early large etching. Fabritius is clearly influenced by these earlier examples in the warm colouring and composition, but there are important innovations. The hands and emotional facial expressions of the people in the crowd are more innovative and expressive here. Was Fabritius showing both what he had learnt from Rembrandt, but also an attempt to supersede his master? Who commissioned it?

Another lasting influence from Rembrandt is the fashion for the *tronie* or character study. Fabritius' three informal self-portraits are reminiscent of Rembrandt's use of himself as a model in similar early *tronies*. However, Fabritius' three examples, now in Munich,

Fig. 2: Carel Fabritius, A Young Man in a Fur Cap*, 1654. Oil on canvas, 70.5 x 61.5 cm. National Gallery, London.*

Fig. 3: Carel Fabritius, The Sentry, *1654. Oil on canvas, 68 x 58 cm. Staatliches Museum, Schwerin.*

Rotterdam, and London, are very innovative with their creamy light backgrounds, even more spontaneous brushwork, and the very direct gaze of the artist, which connects immediately with the viewer. Only the last self-portrait, in the National Gallery, London, entitled *A Young Man in a Fur Cap* (1654), is signed and dated (Fig. 2).

By June 1643 Fabritius, now a widower, had left Amsterdam, returned to Midden-Beemster with his surviving baby daughter, and had moved in with his parents, At the age of only 21 Fabritius had lost his wife and young children. Little is known of his life during this period. Did he return to his work as a carpenter as well as an artist? The rediscovery of *The Raising of Lazarus* has led to the attribution of four further paintings with mythological subjects and the mysterious *Portrait of a Family* (1648), formerly in Rotterdam but destroyed in a fire in 1864.

The Portrait of Abraham de Potter (signed and dated 1648/49), now in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Fabritius' only existing commissioned portrait, does survive from his return to Midden-Beemster. De Potter was a silk merchant of Amsterdam who also owned property in the Beemster polder but lived in Amsterdam. The Fabritius and de Potter families were friends and in 1636 Abraham de Potter and his wife acted as godparents at the baptism of Carel's younger brother. Fabritius had also borrowed money from de Potter's son, Jasper. Was this part of a repayment? Careful study of light values reveals – in contrast to Rembrandt – a change to a dark face on a light background and interestingly no cast shadows except for the realistic nail in the upper left corner.

In the summer of 1650 Fabritius married again, to Agatha van Pruyssen, a widow and resident of Amsterdam. Her family originated from Delft, which may have caused Fabritius and his new wife to move there. On October 29th, 1652, Fabritius' name appears in the register or *Meesterboek* of the Guild of St Luke in Delft. Why did he wait two years? Until a painter joined the guild, he could neither sell his paintings nor take on pupils. Only four paintings survive from this final period of Fabritius' life: one is dated 1652 and other three 1654, including the last self-portrait. And it is on the three extraordinary small paintings of everyday subjects painted in Delft that Fabritius' reputation rests today. All are so different from one another. They are *A View of Delft* (signed and dated 1652) (Fig. 1), in the National Gallery in London, *The Sentry* (signed and dated 1654) (Fig. 3), in the Staatliches Museum in Schwerin, and *The Goldfinch* (signed and dated 1654). All are flooded with that unmistakable warm, creamy golden light, veracity of subject and spontaneous brushwork, which are unique to Fabritius.

A View of Delft shows the east end of the Nieuwe Kerk, which housed the tomb of William

the Silent, with a musical instrument seller to the left-hand side, and it is thought that, because of the careful and extreme perspective distortion, the canvas formed part of a fashionable perspective box. Originally the canvas would have been glued to a curved support and x-rays have shown extremely detailed under-drawing. And evidence suggests that Fabritius was known for perspective paintings. For example, Samuel van Hoogstraten (with Fabritius in Rembrandt's workshop), and himself a skilled perspective artist, wrote: "Here, too, Fabritius has excited wonder and amazement (with illusionist wall paintings) …." [3]; and an inventory of the Danish Royal Collection of 1690 records a 'large optical piece standing on a pedestal', made by the renowned 'master Fabritius of Delft'.

The Sentry does not appear to have been part of a larger painting and the subject is so immediate, so much a slice of life. Despite its small size the viewer is drawn into the quiet and peaceful scene. The watchfulness of the dog is palpable, contrasted with the relaxed posture of the soldier. Is he cleaning his gun or is he asleep? Might either have added an additional note of symbolism, not unusual in Dutch painting, indicating prudence or sloth?

The Goldfinch, however, is the work for which Fabritius is best known. A goldfinch, kept as a pet, was known as a 'puttertje' which is derived from 'putten', meaning to draw water from a well, referring to the bird's ability to draw its own water by hauling up a thimble-sized bucket on a chain from a bowl or glass of water below the perch. There are other seventeenth-century paintings which illustrate the goldfinch's actions but always included as part of a larger still life or genre subject. No other paintings are quite like Fabritius' little goldfinch chained to its perch yet pulsating with suggestive flight. The bird is seen from below so how would the painting have been hung?

Lastly, what are the possible connections with Vermeer? The inventory of Vermeer's estate listed two works by Fabritius. Fabritius' most obvious influence upon Vermeer lies in his luminous light and suggestive technique. Was Fabritius known outside Delft? Within the city he was much praised posthumously in the 1660s as being, together with Vermeer, the most outstanding painter of his time. In 1667 a poem by Arnold Bon, published by Bleyswijck, likens Vermeer to a phoenix, rising from the ashes of the fire that had consumed the renowned Fabritius.[4] This gave rise to the misunderstanding that Fabritius was Vermeer's teacher. Certainly, it was not until the nineteenth century that there was renewed interest in his work when the French art critic Théophile Thoré, writing under the pen name Willem Bürger, rediscovered Fabritius, whose painting of *The Goldfinch* he owned.

By 1654 Carel Fabritius was dead, killed in an accidental gunpowder explosion at the town arsenal at just after 10am on Monday October 12th, which destroyed a third of Delft. At the time Fabritius was working on a portrait of Simon Decker, the sexton of the Oude Kerk. Fabritius was pulled out still alive from the ruins but died later in hospital. His studio and paintings were all destroyed.

Clare Ford-Wille *is an independent art historian and lecturer, who has lectured on European art, architecture, and sculpture for more than thirty years, primarily for the University of London, Morley College, The City Literary Institute, the V&A and other museums and art galleries. She leads study tours to Europe. Clare is an Associate Lecturer at Birkbeck and Vice-President of The London Art History Society.*

Notes

1. Dirck van Bleyswijck, *Beschryvinge der Stadt Delft*, (1667). Vol. 2, p. 852. (trans. *A description of the Town of Delft*)
2. Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Inleyding tot de Hooge Schoole der Schilderkonst* (Rotterdam, 1678). Book 1, pp. 11-12) (trans. *Introduction to the High School of Painting*)
3. Hoogstraten (1678), Book 7, p. 274.
4. Bleyswijck (1667), Vol. 2, p. 852

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Frederik J. Duparc, *Carel Fabritius 1622-1654*. The Hague: Royal Cabinet of Paintings; Schwerin: Staatliches Museum; Zwolle: Waanders Publishers, 2004.

Leon Battista Alberti 1404-1472

Andrew Spira

Surely one of the most ground-breaking texts in the entire history of art is Leon Battista Alberti's *De Pictura* (*On Painting*). The treatise was written in 1435 in a Tuscan dialect and was translated, the following year, into Latin. By putting such notions as 'linear perspective', 'the painter as a liberal artist' (rather than a mere craftsman) and 'classical revival' into words, Alberti's treatise identified the phenomena that would later be used to fix the notion of the Renaissance as a whole. Partly for this reason and partly because his abilities as a scholar, architect, lawyer, diplomat, poet, and cryptographer were so diverse, Alberti has been hailed as the archetypal 'Renaissance man'. Even more significantly, his ideas can be said to have crystallised a notion of individual selfhood that has formed the core of Western culture for five hundred years. It is fitting that what may be the first self-portrait (in the modern sense of the term) may be ascribed to him (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Leon Battista Alberti, Self-Portrait*, c. 1435. Bronze relief medallion, 20 x 13.6 cm. Cabinet des médailles, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. Photograph: I, Sailko. Creative Commons, GNU Free Documentation License.*

What exactly was it about Alberti's ideas about painting that made them so ground-breaking? The theory of linear perspective enabled painters to create convincing illusions of pictorial space for the first time since antiquity. Steps in this direction had been taken since the time of Giotto (1267-1337) but they had always been piecemeal and inconsistent; they were not underpinned and synthesised by a theory. Alberti's simple communication – that any lines that are intended to look parallel in a picture must in fact (on the picture) *converge*, on to a single 'vanishing point' – put an end to this improvisation. The clarity of his formula enabled painters such as Paolo Uccello (1397-1475) and Piero della Francesca (1415-92) to create their perfectly consistent, pristine interior spaces. Some sculptors also took advantage of the new discovery. Both Lorenzo Ghiberti (1378-1455) and Donatello (1386-1466) produced masterpieces of perspective in carved relief, working in two and three dimensions in the same work. What this development meant was that the space in a picture could be seen to be a continuation of the space in which the viewer was standing, and therefore that events seen to be happening in pictorial space could be seen to be happening in the viewer's space. For the first time, the viewer was implicitly present at the depicted scene rather than excluded from it; his or her responses could therefore be as authentic as responses to 'real' experiences. Medieval art, by contrast, had tended to focus on supernatural phenomena, rendered in an artificial way that elevated it above this world and therefore kept the viewer at a distance. It presented doctrines, or truths; the viewer's role was simply to surrender to them, without questioning.

The important point here is that viewers of medieval art were not just *distant* from the world that it visualised; they were – arguably – *non existent* for it. That is to say, a sense of themselves as discriminating individuals was not activated by it. By contrast, the realistic renderings of pictorial space that Alberti advocated did not simply include its viewers. It positively evoked them; it called them in to being as individuals and ascribed a cultural value to their experience of individuality. It required them to function as individual 'selves'.

The great paintings of this period – for instance, Masaccio's frescos in the Brancacci Chapel in Florence (1425-27) – are evidence that painters made this shift towards individuality and selfhood. But for this shift to be stable, their status had to change: they could no longer be 'mere' craftsmen, selflessly copying authorised precedents, albeit with skill; they had to be seen to be poets, using their imaginations. It was for this reason that, in *De Pictura*, Alberti stressed the importance of *education* among painters – to ensure that they could function at this new level. This elevation of the painter to the level of an 'artist' – and indeed the institutionalisation of that concept – was novel (and has remained central to western culture ever since). But it was not

Fig. 2: Leon Battista Alberti, Basilica Sant'Andrea, Mantua*. Source: Gustavo Strafforello,* La patria. Geografica dell' Italia *(Torino: Unione Tipografica-Editrice, 1899).*

only the painters that accomplished this shift. Of equal importance is the fact that they facilitated it among their viewers, also empowering them to function as individuals.

Besides linear perspective and the elevated status of artists, another issue that Alberti popularised is the revival of classical values in their myriad manifestations. While this issue is so central to the concept of the Renaissance that it is scarcely worth mentioning, what is less often considered is why this revival happened when it did. On the surface, it appears that just as the rationalism and realism that was applied to optical experience resulted in the inclusion of realistic details in paintings, so the same rationalism and realism, when applied to the past, resulted in new kinds of historical narrative. That is, this new approach revolutionised attitudes toward history. Medieval hagiographies (life stories of the saints) were just as stylised as medieval images; they were full of tropes such as miracles and the incorruptibility of the saints' bodies. The new 'realistic' history aspired to represent the past 'accurately', with reference to evidence rather than belief, tradition, and authority. From this objective point of view, pagan antiquity would inevitably come within its sights. But one can also explain the fifteenth-century interest in classical values from a completely different perspective: although it was certainly pursued in the name of 'historical truthfulness', it was also used as a legitimising precedent for new initiatives in the present. The revival of interest in classical architecture legitimised the emergence of a new rationalism in architecture; and the revival of interest in classical mythology unearthed a plethora of

new stories – not always very Christian in their sentiment – which legitimised a range of new sensations and emotions. In this context, the interest in history was something of a conceit. It was not only pursued for its own sake; it was also used to justify and ennoble the emergence of a sense of personal selfhood that arguably characterises the Renaissance as a whole.

Although many of Alberti's ideas epitomised Renaissance idealism, his own position was often ambiguous. He struggled to balance theory with practice. On the one hand, he was academic in his approach to classical sources, to the point of being pedantic; in his treatise on architecture (*De Re Aedificatoria – On Architecture*, 1452), he pores over the possible variations in the design of antique columns in exhaustive detail. On the other hand, he was relatively flexible in his application of classical features. The triumphal arch he used as the facade for the church of Sant'Andrea in Mantua (c.1460) is a case in point. Not only is its new function in a Christian context incongruous, but the deep horizontal 'attic' section that usually comprises the top of a triumphal arch has here been replaced by a shallow pediment in a thoroughly unclassical manner (Fig. 2).

Significantly, although Alberti pronounced so influentially on painting, no painted works by him survive. The record is better with his buildings, though all his major projects remained incomplete at his death. Best known are the Palazzo Rucellai in Florence (1446), and four imposing churches which he re-dressed: the Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini (1450), Santa Maria Novella in Florence (1456-70), and San Sebastiano (c.1460) and Sant'Andrea (c.1470) in Mantua. These buildings have several features in common. Above all, they are decorated in the new classical style. It is difficult for us to appreciate how radical this step was in its own time; to some viewers the buildings must scarcely have looked like churches. The word 'decorated', rather than 'built' is apt because, even though much of *De Re Aedificatoria* is dedicated to materials and structure, most of Alberti's realised designs were primarily concerned with facades and wall surfaces. The regulated facade of Palazzo Rucellai, the first to use classical orders in ascending degrees of refinement, as prescribed by the Roman author Vitruvius, covers a shallow suite of irregular rooms – not a grand palace as the facade suggests (Fig. 3). His work at Santa Maria Novella was also limited to surface decoration; his design for the upper part of the facade was intended both to blend in with the lower part, which had been built in the thirteenth century, and to lift the whole by introducing some classical elements (Fig. 4). Typically, the governing principle of the design, both here and on his other works, was geometrical. This suggests that Alberti was more interested in the organisation of the surface than the actual configuration of the interior spaces (though, in a treatise he wrote on extended families – *De Famiglia* – he did express some awareness of

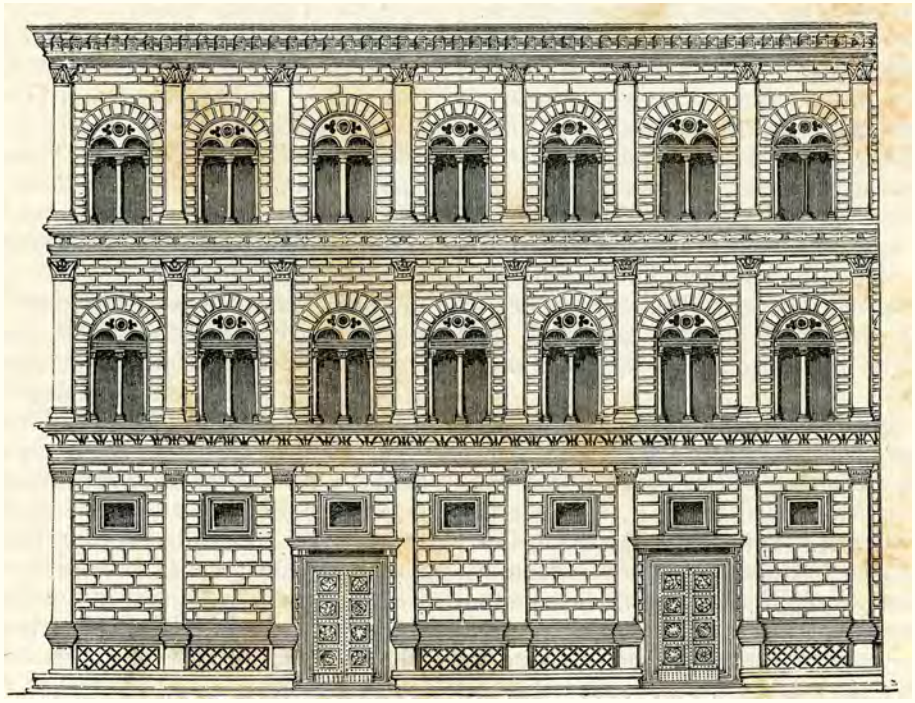

Fig. 3: Leon Battista Alberti, Palazzo Rucellai, Florence*. Source: Gustavo Strafforello,* La patria. Geografica dell' Italia *(Torino: Unione Tipografica-Editrice, 1899).*

Fig. 4: Leon Battista Alberti, Santa Maria Novella, Florence. *Photograph: Greg Wallis, Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic License.*

how interior spaces relate to family values). This predilection for surface appearances is further borne out by the fact that many of the designs were impeded by pre-existent limitations to their sites which necessarily compromised them. Palazzo Rucellai, for instance, was increased in size during construction but was then never finished; the project was largely cosmetic. Furthermore, while Alberti provided designs for several buildings, he was rarely on site to supervise construction; he communicated with his partners by writing detailed letters.

Alberti's interests were immensely diverse, rendering him difficult to pigeonhole. He initiated new trends before it was possible to categorise them. For instance, he is often referred to as an 'architect'. Given the scale and importance of his building projects – and the mere fact that they survive – this is not surprising; but the term 'architect' did not exist in the fifteenth century. As an author, it is also worth remembering that most of his written work was produced before the invention of the printing press and it was not widely known for many years. Thus, although it was many years before his achievements were synthesised into a 'reputation' and his significance was recognised, it is arguable that he had his finger on the pulse of his time, perhaps more than any of his contemporaries.

Further Reading

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Anthony Grafton, *Leon Battista Alberti* (London: Allen Lane, 2001).

Caspar Pearson, *Leon Battista Alberti: the chameleon's eye* (London: Reaktion Books, 2022).

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Still keeping us in the dark? The art of Walter Richard Sickert

Nicola Moorby

In 1902, a Dieppe hotelier, Monsieur Mantren, commissioned the artist Walter Richard Sickert (1860-1942) to paint a series of local scenes as decorations for the restaurant in his seafront establishment. As a long-time devotee and sporadic resident of the resort, Sickert was intimately familiar with the spirit of the place and had been mining its picturesque potential for years. He might reasonably have been expected to fulfill the brief with aplomb. Yet, on receipt of the finished canvases, the owner was bitterly disappointed. Despite the fact that the six large bespoke canvases featured views within immediate proximity of the space for which they were intended, Mantren refused to install them in his hotel and instead sought to dispose of them, almost immediately selling on four to a private buyer. Why did he reject the works? Looking at the paintings today, the answer isn't immediately obvious. At first glance they appear to be relatively straightforward, untroubling topographical prospects of Dieppe. However, on closer inspection the views become more problematic. Features that should ostensibly represent the main focal points – the cathedral, a public statue, quayside buildings and the harbour, as well as local inhabitants – are in fact shrouded in deep, obfuscating shadow, their salient features frustratingly obscured by Sickert's choice of *contre-jour* or oblique lighting. Meanwhile, other spurious corners with little apparent merit have been surprisingly spot-lit in bright golden patches of sun (Fig. 1). Mantren was clearly unnerved by this unexpected staging of his local surroundings. The pictures were, he complained, just too dark and low-toned. The Dieppe that Sickert had portrayed in his idiosyncratic way, was not the one the hotel owner expected or was comfortable with.

Fig. 1: Walter Richard Sickert, Le Grand Duquesne, Dieppe, 1902. *Oil on canvas, 131.6 x 104.8 cm. © Manchester Art Gallery/Bridgeman Images.*

This reaction sums up the enduring effect of Sickert's art in a nutshell. Simply put, it is so often difficult to see his works; to look at them and feel at ease with the evidence of your eyes. He is an artist who is greatly admired, but not, as a rule, beloved. Frequently he repels. Rarely do you find his work featured on merchandise or adorning private homes as posters and commercial reproductions because his paintings confound easy viewing and decorative complacency. Whether depicting figures, landscapes, portraits, or interiors, Sickert deliberately sought to challenge convention with his unexpected and thought-provoking approach to picture making and never permitted himself to lapse into routine. Eighty years after his death, two retrospective

Fig. 2: Walter Richard Sickert, Gallery of the Old Bedford, 1894-95*. Oil on canvas, 76.3 x 60.5 cm. © Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.*

Fig. 3: Walter Richard Sickert, The Horses of St Mark's, Venice*, c. 1901-6. Oil on canvas, 53 x 44 cm. © Bristol Museums and Art Gallery.*

exhibitions at the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool and London's Tate Britain, have revisited his sixty-year career, and reveal that Sickert's perplexing world view is worthy of becoming an adjective in its own right – 'Sickertian': pertaining to or reminiscent of the unsettling qualities of light and dark.

Sickert's art readily invites discussion whilst simultaneously resisting definitive interpretation and this is due to the distinctive visual appearance of his works. He was a masterly communicator, with a special facility for the written and spoken word (the complete and hefty volume of his published writings runs to nearly seven hundred, small-spaced pages),[1] yet he once wrote 'The real subject of a picture or a drawing is the plastic facts it succeeds in expressing. If the subject of a picture could be stated in words there had been no need to paint it.'[2] In other words, the value of the pictorial does not lie with its potential for narrative interpretation but in its ineffable qualities, not fully explicable in words. As a tacit reminder of this, an element of illegibility is hardwired into all of his images. Sometimes, as in his London music hall paintings of the 1880s and '90s, it is the compositions and figural arrangements which are confusing, featuring as they do unexpected viewpoints and bewildering mirrored reflections which disorientate our perception and make us question the substance of reality (Fig. 2). At other times it is the way he wields his materials which blurs the certainty of our response. His oil paintings are fleshy and painterly, but his drawings and etchings are sketchy and skeletal, so that his figures can appear in turn distended or emaciated depending on the media. Even the quality of the pigment can seem unpalatable, with his heavy reliance on blacks and browns, like the smudgy grime that appears engrained throughout his Edwardian interiors, and there never seems to be an acceptable amount of light available within a Sickert picture. There is either too much, or more commonly, not enough, so that the viewer is left squinting into a murky interior, struggling to read the forms amidst the gloom and forced to imagine what else might be lurking in the shadows.

Another Sickertian trait is to cast well-known themes in such an unfamiliar light that we struggle to accept the result. The Venetian views from the turn of the century, for example, depart so far from art historical precedent – the stately grandeur of Canaletto or the atmospheric enchantment of Turner and Monet – that it is as though we have never seen the city painted before. His Venice is a place of shadowy recesses, the elaborate stonework of palazzos and churches appear full of voids like empty eye sockets in a skull. The odd lighting playing across the façade of St Mark's Basilica (Fig. 3) meanwhile, seems to drain the building of its gravitas and somehow makes the rich gilded ornamentation look as tawdry as the cheap gold trappings

Fig. 4: Walter Richard Sickert, Self-Portrait*, c. 1896. Oil on canvas, 45.7 x 35.6 cm. © Leeds Museums and Galleries/ Bridgeman Images.*

that previously glinted in the dark of his Old Bedford Music Hall pictures. Later in life he used both modern photographs and Victorian engravings as the source material for unusual paintings featuring esoteric subjects or details, couched in unexpected colouring and lighting treatments. Similarly, his portraits regularly resemble the optical look of an afterimage, or an over-exposed photograph, converting the familiar contours of his sitter's faces into garish masks with heavy-lidded eyes and bizarre pallors. Nothing, Sickert is telling us, can necessarily be taken at face value, including himself. One aspect brought out by Tate's show in particular, is a series of ten self-portraits from across his lifetime which show him self-consciously adopting different personas, concealing his true appearance and personality as much as revealing it. For example, in his *Self-Portrait* of around 1896 (Fig. 4), Sickert's features seem to be hidden, rather than clarified, beneath thick brush strokes of colour, like excessively applied stage makeup or a kind of overt artistic war paint. Thirty years later, he enigmatically entitled another self-portrait, *The Servant of Abraham*, 1929 (Tate), a Biblical reference which is both suggestive of identity but also contradictory; a person who is named without being named.

Sickert is a difficult character to pin down. He has variously been described as exploitative, misogynistic and voyeuristic (and even put forward as a potential serial killer).[3] Yet he was also witty, popular and an inspirational collaborator. The exhibition at the Walker Art Gallery deftly pointed to his importance as a teacher and mentor, particularly of female artists. Sickert used his profile and resources to bring greater professional visibility to women, which adds yet another dimension to his remarkable and complex legacy but not one easily reconciled with the spirit of some of his pictures. Sickert's most well-known works are those where the unease of the viewer is at its most acute – his 'Camden Town' paintings dating from around 1905-1914. During this period he tackled everyday subjects which played upon the disquiet of ambiguity, seemingly as provocation to Edwardian probity. Certainly M. Mantren would never have dreamed of displaying Sickert's 'Camden Town' nudes in his hotel, with their uncompromising treatment of female bodies, devoid of idealisation, or the edginess of the 'Camden Town murder' series with the tense pairing of clothed men and vulnerably naked women. Sickert deliberately baited the prejudices of the viewer, shepherding them towards biased assumptions about the status of the protagonists, whilst at the same time withholding the

Fig. 5: Walter Richard Sickert, La Belle Gâtée *or* The Camden Town Murder*, 1908. Etching with aquatint on paper, 19 x 27 cm. © Victoria and Albert Museum.*

Fig. 6: Walter Richard Sickert, La Hollandaise*, c. 1906. Oil on canvas, 51.1 x 40.6 cm. © Tate.*

precise visual evidence required to confirm that reading. His etching, *La Belle Gâtée* [*The Spoilt Beauty*] (Fig. 5), also bears the interchangeable titles *The Camden Town Murder or Persuasion* and is a masterpiece of equivocation. Is the clothed man tenderly caressing the naked woman or preparing to strangle her? How quickly the scenario might tip from one of domestic affection towards domestic violence. Yet this flexibility wouldn't apply if the figures were dressed like the models in a John Singer Sargent drawing room. Sickert disingenuously liked to claim his nudes were painterly essays in the treatment of light and shade but deliberately muddied the waters by zoning in on the poorer sections of society, skewering middle-class anxieties about crime, anti-social behaviour and the immorality of economically disadvantaged women. The nameless, faceless woman in *La Hollandaise*, circa 1906, (Fig. 6) for example, has frequently been described as a 'prostitute', an interpretation which readily seems to fit the seedy, low-class aura of the room and the suggestive arrangement of her body. And yet, if her face is so difficult to read, how can we confidently caption her? The answer is, in the same way that the victims of Jack the Ripper murders have been traditionally and universally labelled as prostitutes, until a recent book by Hallie Rubenhold, unearthed a different truth of wives, mothers and legally employed workers – individuals caught in a precarious balance between survival and destitution.[4] Take a look at the accounts of the later 1906 Camden Town killing and you will find a similar underlying narrative about the murdered woman, Emily Dimmock, a 'part-time prostitute' who was unable to abstain from her 'previous calling'.[5] As if prostitution were a vocation, and violent death at the hands of a punter an unfortunate occupational hazard. Sickert knowingly bought into exactly this kind of misogynistic bias. He didn't necessarily paint sex workers, but he did paint women knowing full well that the prudish viewer might assume they were prostitutes. Even in the twenty-first century these scenes have lost none of their potency, and Sickert's tendency to wrongfoot the viewer is still as evident today as it was during his lifetime.

***Sickert: A Life in Art*, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, 18 September 2021-27 February 2022; and *Walter Sickert*, Tate Britain, London, 28 April-18 September 2022.**

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Notes

1 *See* Anna Gruetzner Robins (ed.), *Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings on Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000).

2 Walter Richard Sickert, 'The Language of Art', in *The New Age*, 28 July 1910, pp.300-1. For the full article see Helena Bonett, Ysanne Holt, Jennifer Mundy (eds.), *The Camden Town Group in Context*, Tate Research Publication, May 2012, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/camden-town-group/walter-richard-sickert-the-language-of-art-r1104300, accessed 21 March 2022.

3 There is a history of speculation about Sickert's involvement in the 1888 murders of 'Jack the Ripper'. For a discussion and rebuttal of the theory see 'Was Walter Sickert Jack the Ripper?', National Museums, Liverpool, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GMkdxAH1n7s, accessed April 2022.

4 Hallie Rubenhold, *The Five: The Untold Lives of the Women Killed by Jack the Ripper* (London: Transworld Publishers 2019).

5 See for example https://www.johnbarber.com/the-camden-town-murder/, accessed 4 April 2022.

From the House of Illustration to the Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration

Lindsey Glen

Wandering around Clerkenwell in central London, you may well glimpse an intriguing complex of buildings hiding in plain sight between Rosebery Avenue and Amwell Street. This is New River Head, a site dating all the way back to 1613, which embarked on a new chapter in its history when visual arts charity House of Illustration acquired it in 2019, ready to breathe new life into it as the Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration.

Founded by the much-loved artist and illustrator Sir Quentin Blake (Fig. 1), House of Illustration is the UK's first and only charity dedicated to examining the visual art that fills our everyday lives and supporting people to tell their stories visually. For six years from 2014 to 2020 we rented gallery space at Granary Square in Kings Cross, curating and touring exhibitions on subjects as rich and varied as North Korean and Cuban graphic design, the refugee crisis, shōjo manga, feminist comics and, of course, literary illustration. We established programmes to embed illustration across the primary school curriculum, to foster creativity within communities, and to support illustrators to develop their practice outside of the industry's commercial drivers.

Given the breadth and universality of illustration, it is hardly surprising that we quickly outgrew our first home. And, of course, we craved a *permanent* home: a centre designed *for illustration*, to meet the needs of artists and communities, where our programmes wouldn't be constrained by the need to meet monthly rental payments. By chance, we were introduced to a group of passionate activists who had long been fighting to save and open up a unique half-acre heritage site in Clerkenwell.

This was New River Head: the terminus of a human-made channel that transported clean water from springs in Hertfordshire to London (Fig. 2). From 1613 onwards, water from its ponds was piped to the City of London to supply London's growing population. Over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, buildings were constructed to house the different technologies needed to pump water in step with the capital's rising demands. From 1707 until 1720 a windmill attempted the task with little success. After its six sails were blown down in a dramatic 1720 storm, horsepower was deployed instead. The advent of new steam technologies opened up new possibilities. In 1768, the site's first engine house was constructed to a design by John Smeaton and later extended by architect and engineer Robert Mylne to house large steam engines. Mylne's son, William Chadwell Mylne, added a boiler house and coal store in 1848. Electricity replaced steam power in the 1950s. However, although the engines, ponds and 50ft chimney stack were removed, many of the site's extraordinary buildings remain, as do many clues about their history: soot-coated bricks, cobbles, iron cart tracks, a borehole and wall ties to help the buildings withstand the vibrations of the engines. Key contributors – entrepreneur Hugh Myddelton and the Mylnes – are commemorated in local street names and memorials. Sometimes you can still hear the water, rushing through 900mm underground pipes from the adjacent Thames Water Ring Main.

Illustration's value is more than aesthetic: it lies in its effectiveness in conveying stories, ideas, and information to different audiences. At New River Head, we discovered a range of spaces that could be converted for public use with relative ease, well-connected by transport links and in an area that is home to a huge number of creative businesses. But, moreover, we found a place that was full of stories, where we could evidence and utilise illustration's power to document the past, explore present-day perspectives and reimagine the future.

Fig. 1: Quentin Blake, The Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration. *© Quentin Blake.*

Fig. 2: The Engine House at the New River Head. © *Justin Piperger.*

Place was already a recurring theme in our work, especially for our resident artists. Most recently, Peony Gent's *Overlay* – the result of six months researching and documenting King's Cross – was shared in a free outdoor exhibition close to our former home. Previous resident David Lemm took an experimental approach to mapping the area, while Paddy Molloy's interactive installation *Crossing Time* took its inspiration from the camera obscura that sat within the 1830 King's Cross monument. In our galleries, Lucinda Rogers's 2017 exhibition *On Gentrification* explored the tension between communities and urban development at Dalston's Ridley Road market.

Since acquiring New River Head, we've been working with artists and local communities to delve into the site's history in new and exciting ways. Last year's resident artists, Laura Copsey and Philip Crewe, focused on working-class narratives that had been virtually ignored in the telling of the New River story, from the mole-catchers who protected the banks to the water carriers whose livelihoods were threatened by this new technology. Through artefacts crafted from real finds on site and New River water, they have created a playful route in to discovering the stories of the site. Their 'museum' will be on show in our Windmill Base this September. Likewise, graduate resident Sharpay (Chenyuè) Yuán's documentation of the site combines her observations of its current state and fragments drawn from archival research, creating a rich picture of its transformations over time.

Illustration is also providing a powerful medium to surface and share local people's recollections of the area. *Clerkenwell: Now & Then* is a map of the area, co-created by illustrator Siôn Ap Tomos and a group of older residents who attend The Peel Institute community hub. By illustrating together over cups of tea and visiting the nearby London Metropolitan Archives, the participants shared memories of eel stalls, bathhouses and long-gone prefabs. The resulting map is available in libraries and community centres across Islington, placing their voices firmly at the centre of our work to uncover and celebrate local heritage.

So, what will you experience at the Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration when it opens in 2024? The new centre will be a cultural and architectural landmark of local, national, and international significance. Its Coal Stores gallery will house major exhibitions exploring different aspects of illustration in social, political, and cultural

Fig. 3: The Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration: Prospective Gallery 3. © *Tim Ronalds Architects.*

Fig. 4: The Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration: Prospective Foyer and Café. © *Tim Ronalds Architects.*

contexts, presenting rarely-seen items from important British and international collections (Fig. 3). A second gallery, occupying the central floor of the Engine House, will offer deep dives into the work of individual artists and movements. At the top of the Engine House will be a permanent gallery sharing works from Quentin Blake's extraordinary 40,000-work archive. We'll continue to tour our exhibitions across the UK and we're about to launch a digital collection, enabling anyone, anywhere to access illustration collections and research.

Equally important will be a learning studio (with streaming capabilities) and project base, enabling us to grow participation, nurture skills and give space to experimental practice. There will also be a shop and café (Fig. 4), with a terrace looking out onto beautiful, landscaped gardens and a water feature that will reference the site's original ponds. The gardens are important: not only they will offer respite from the urban landscape (in the borough with the least green space per head in the UK) and improve local biodiversity; they will offer prompts for creative projects, connections to botanical illustration's rich heritage and outdoor display spaces.

The scheme is designed by Tim Ronalds Architects, whose successful portfolio includes Wilton's Music Hall, Hackney Empire, Circus Space and Grange Park Opera House. The practice is particularly adept at maintaining the unique fabric and stories of the buildings they convert and at New River Head they will be exposing brickwork, re-laying cobbles, and restoring historic features, while creating a world-class and fully accessible environment for exhibitions and projects. We'll commission illustrators to create permanent installations sharing the site's stories and anticipate that future residencies will explore related themes such as renewable technologies, utility ownership and the impact of infrastructure projects on communities.

Our founder Quentin Blake remains our inspiration. It was Quentin who sowed the seed, some twenty years ago, for a place where people could explore illustration in all its diversity. He has since bequeathed his archive to the gallery: seven decades of work for literary, gallery community and education settings, offering a unique insight into the work of illustrators. The empathy and inherent kindness of his work, along with his gestural line and warm humour, have made him one of the UK's most influential artists and he's a huge draw for families and schools. We're honoured to bear his name.

At King's Cross we were a *House* of Illustration. Now we will be a *home*: the national centre for an art form that permeates and enriches our everyday lives; a place where art-lovers, artists, students, and schoolchildren come to explore, examine, and take part; a catalyst for participation across the country. If you'd like to hear more, or support the project, then please visit www.houseofillustration.org.uk.

Lindsey Glen *is the Director of the Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration.*

Francis Frith (1822-1898): a Victorian photographer in Egypt and Palestine

Simon Constantine

This year marks the bicentenary of the photographer and photographic publisher Francis Frith's birth (Fig. 1). Born in Chesterfield, Derbyshire into a wealthy Quaker family, Frith took up photography in his early 30s after founding a successful wholesale grocery business in the port town of Liverpool. The profits from this business, which Frith sold in 1854 before relocating to Reigate, Surrey, allowed him to combine his interest in this new 'art science' with a long-standing passion for travel, resulting in the three photographic tours to Egypt, Palestine, and the surrounding region for which he is known today. The popularity and commercial success of the resulting photographs motivated him to found Francis Frith and Co., one of the first and most prominent publishers of photographic 'views' of the nineteenth century. Subsequently, he embarked on further photographic tours of the UK and Europe yet began to devote more time to his faith, becoming a prolific author of theological texts and, in 1872, a recorded Quaker minister. In the 1880s, the ownership of F. Frith and Co. was transferred over to his family who continued to run it after his death in 1898 until its closure in 1971.

A household name in his lifetime, Frith was granted a place in art history through the efforts of figures such as Helmut and Alison Gernsheim, who praised his works as early contributions to landscape photography. In doing so, the Gernsheims were at pains to distinguish Frith's photographs of the Middle East from topographic records and those of, to their mind, less 'technically and artistically' accomplished photographers.[1] While this connoisseurial approach has since been criticised as a symptom of photography's 'museumification' and assimilation into the art market, there can be little doubt that Frith, as an upwardly-mobile member of the bourgeoisie, sought to grant his practice a certain artistic prestige.[2] To this end, he penned an early essay on photography's aesthetic achievements for the prestigious *Art Journal*, which – in opposition to contemporaneous experiments with staged tableaux and combination printing – made a passionate case for its status as a realist art.[3] At the same time, like many early photographers, he used all of the tools at his disposal to emulate the conventions of romantic and picturesque landscape.[4] In *Dahshoor, the Pyramids from the East*, c. 1858 (Fig. 2) for example, Frith posed his entourage as staffage figures, punctuating the open desert with arresting details and producing a sense of recession into depth. He also framed the scene with the mannered asymmetry popularised by picturesque theorist William Gilpin.

In line with these artistic aspirations, Frith made some of his photographs at the then-gigantic scale of 16 x 20 inches to be displayed in the small exhibitions of the photographic societies. However, his work also circulated within Victorian visual culture in a range of formats, including as stereoscopic images (an early 3D technology), 'dissolving views' (glass transparencies which were projected on to screens), and in albums. These formats were not merely incidental to Frith's photographs but had immediate implications for their form. *Dahshoor, the Pyramids from the East*, c. 1858, for example, was likely composed so that the foreground would pop out and the pyramids recede into the background giving the viewer the impression of peering through a small window or proscenium into a distant, yet tangible, world. This effect is indicative of certain key functions which Frith's photographs had for nineteenth-century audiences: as a

Fig. 1: [Photographer unknown], Francis Frith *(1822-1898), c. 1854. © The Francis Frith Collection.*

Fig. 2: Francis Frith, Dahshoor, the Pyramids from the East, *c. 1858.*
© The Francis Frith Collection.

form of spectacular entertainment or vicarious tourism. In this capacity, Frith's 'views' were popular with a range of audiences, from those who couldn't read travel literature or afford to travel, to others who collected them as souvenirs, exotic curios, or to virtually extend their travel experience.

Frith's place within the nineteenth-century tourist industry was also cemented by the illustrated-travel-book-like albums which he produced from the late 1850s onwards.[5] Pairing his albumen prints with his writings and other texts, these albums demonstrate that the impact of Frith's work was not solely visual but intertextual. In *Egypt and Palestine Photographed and Described* (Fig. 3), for example, he included commentaries on the depicted sites, noting physical features and sensory experiences which were not evident from the photographs alone. He also reconstructed the embodied experience of travel by including a commentary on the weighty photographic rig that he had transported beyond the Nile's second cataract – further than any photographer before him. In addition to this, he offered an extensive commentary on the difficulties of working with the wet collodion process in the hot, dry climate: how the chemicals boiled on the plate, dust blemished the negative, and a tomb infested with 'fetid bats' doubled as an impromptu dark room. Working within a postmodernist problematic, the *October*-affiliated scholar Carol Armstrong has interpreted these comments as evidence of an odd 'self-reflexivity' present within early photography.[6] However, they can also be understood as an attempt to rhetorically embellish the images with a sense of wonder, technical achievement, and exploration, derived from the nineteenth-century rush to obtain images of the most exotic and hard-to-photograph sites. Ultimately, Frith gained an edge in this competition by commissioning or buying the negative stock of other photographers, amassing a globe-spanning archive which included an impressive and soon-to-be famous compendium of British topographical photographs, unique in its time, and which was sold under the F. Frith and Co. name.[7]

As Douglas R. Nickel argues in *Francis Frith in Egypt and Palestine: a Victorian photographer abroad*, there was also an important theological logic to what the *Atheneum*, in 1858, termed Frith's 'Art-crusade'.[8] A devout Quaker, Frith chose to visit the 'holy land' at a moment in which Christianity was under threat from everything between Charles Darwin's theories and Auguste Comte's positivist sociology, yet in which scientific instruments and methodologies were still routinely used to authenticate religious claims. As such, his project can be understood as an attempt to use photography's presumed objectivity to verify the events and locations mentioned in the bible. This is likely to account for the sense of dry, topographic description which some scholars have noted in photographs such as *Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives* (Fig. 4). However, the theological intentions of Frith's project are at their most transparent in the illustrated Bibles published during the 1860s, which paired his photographs with relevant passages. As Nickel notes, for an audience versed in scripture, these juxtapositions had the effect of transmuting the passages from 'the status of legend to that of history', while also granting them a contemporaneity and immediacy.[9] This was directly cognisant with Frith's Quakerism, which presupposed that a more rational and practical form of Christianity could be achieved by bypassing religious institutions in favour of the immediate, personal experience of religious revelation.

Frith's work has also been analysed by postcolonial scholars, such as Ali Behdad and James R. Ryan, as evidence of the role that photography played in the maintenance and visualisation of empire.[10] As these writers demonstrate, Frith helped to popularise an image of the Middle East which largely conformed to that described in Edward Said's famous definition of 'Orientalism': as an exotic, backward 'other', staged as a tool of Western self-definition.[11] As Nickel points out, Frith's tours occurred during a period of transition and modernisation brought about by the Anglo-French conflicts over the region and infrastructure projects such as the Suez Canal.[12] However, his photographs ignore these developments to construct a fantasy of a timeless, yet decaying Orient. Frith framed his images with a typically Orientalist mixture of disgust and fascination. Like many of his British contemporaries, his writings were punctuated with Western chauvinism, yet the first photograph of *Egypt and Palestine photographed and described* was a portrait of him posed in 'Turkish summer costume'. Frith's drive to exhaustively record the East's cultural heritage and his photographs' commanding viewpoints have also been read as expressions of the paternalistic assumption that the region belonged to Western Christendom and needed rescuing from its Arab 'occupiers'.[13] However, Frith also criticised the 'barbarous

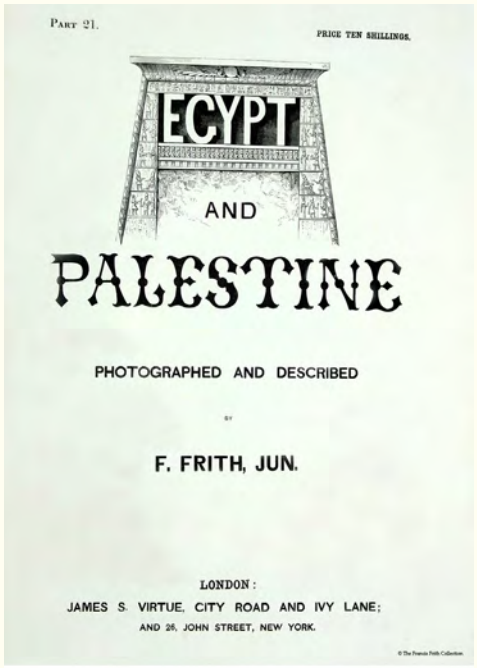

Fig. 3: Publisher's wrapper for Egypt and Palestine Photographed and Described*, c. 1858. © The Francis Frith Collection.*

Fig. 4: Francis Frith, Jerusalem, from the Mount of Olives*, 1857. © The Francis Frith Collection.*

carelessness' and vanity of 'travellers of all nations' who had pillaged Egypt's monuments for institutions such as the British Museum.[14] As Nickel argues, for Frith, photography allowed Egypt to be preserved as a 'museum in situ', to be accessed only by the most sensitive travellers or from the respectful distance of one's armchair.[15]

While it could be argued that F. Frith and Co. anticipated everything from Google Earth to stock photography, Frith's own photographs have an uncertain status in the twenty-first century in which travel is more accessible and artfully-composed travel photographs are easy to make and share. This may explain why the current owners of his archive have chosen to downplay its global nature and reframe it as a document recording Britain's history; one which allows us to travel, not to distant places, but back in time.[16] This reframing demonstrates the utility which Frith's photographs undoubtedly have for historians, as well as their ongoing use by local tourist industries. However, it also risks assuming a form of photographic transparency and mirroring the dubious narrowing of British history to a national 'island story'. The bicentenary of Frith's birth therefore offers an invaluable opportunity to reflect upon the economic structures and aesthetic, theological, and scientific discourses in which his photographs emerged, the legacies of which are by no means behind us.

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Notes

1 Helmut Gernsheim and Alison Gernsheim, *The history of photography from the camera obscura to the beginning of the modern era* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), p. 287.

2 Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'Calotypomania: The Gourmet Guide to Nineteenth-Century Photography', *in Photography at the dock: essays on photographic history, institutions, and practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp. 4-27.

3 Francis Frith, 'The Art of Photography', *Art Journal*, 5 (1859), pp. 71-72.

4 James S. Ackerman, 'The Photographic Picturesque', *Artibus et Historiae*, 24.48 (2003), pp. 73-94.

5 These included *Egypt and Palestine photographed and described* (1858-59), *Egypt, Palestine and Nubia* (1862), and the Gossiping Photographer series

6 Carol Armstrong, 'Photographed and Described: Travelling in the Footsteps of Francis Frith', in *Scenes in a library: reading the photograph in the book, 1843-1875* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 1998), pp. 277-359.

7 F. Frith and Co's travelling photographers included Robert Napper, Frank Mason Good, and Frederick William Sutton. The firm also purchased the negative stock of photographers such as Roger Fenton and Francis Bedford.

8 Douglas R. Nickel, *Francis Frith in Egypt and Palestine: a Victorian photographer abroad* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 134.

9 Ibid., p. 134.

10 Ali Behdad, *Camera Orientalis: reflections on photography in the Middle East* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016); and James R. Ryan, *Picturing Empire: photography and the visualisation of the British Empire* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997).

11 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1977).

12 Nickel, p. 147.

13 Ryan, p. 46 and Behdad, p. 32.

14 Francis Frith quoted in Nickel, p. 155.

15 Nickel, p. 155.

16 This rearticulation of Frith's archive was particularly evident in the recent BBC documentary *Britain's First Photo Album*, in which presenter John Sergeant used Frith's archive as the basis for a nostalgic tour of the British Isles.

Treasured Trimmings: ephemeral ribbons and the curation of sartorial likeness in feminine portraiture, 1750-1790

Julia Eberhardt

In September 1760, Julie Ployard, daughter of a wealthy banker from Marseille, would have opened her *corbeille*[1] to find glistening blue silk ribbons for the adornment of her wedding attire for her forthcoming marriage to Isaac Louis de Thellusson (Fig. 1). With the help of a dexterous milliner, these were moulded and arranged on Julie's wardrobe, physically marking her significant rite of passage into matrimony. Through Jean-Étienne Liotard's sensitive rendering, these ephemeral trimmings are visually preserved until today, vividly illustrating the sartorial formation of eighteenth-century women's biographical narratives that were captured in contemporary portraiture.

The second half of the eighteenth century saw the emergence of the modern liberal fashion industry in Europe, marking the end of legally-enforced sartorial hierarchies based on aristocratic privilege, which initiated a rapid increase in accessible goods and quickly changing novelty trends. Simultaneously, contemporary Enlightenment theory found itself embedded in debates on refined material self-fashioning that praised the cultivation of a woman's personal taste over the conspicuous consumption of luxury articles.[2] Specifically-chosen ribbon embellishments, incorporated into the personal outfit (and therefore immediate bodily experience), were thereby perceived as an aesthetic, emotional, and cultural sartorial currency of contemporary material literacy.

Promoted by social etiquette, the tasteful curation of a woman's personal wardrobe was understood as an intrinsic part of her genteel refinement and ribbon trimmings effectively extended this accomplishment onto the visual and sensual parameters of her distinct appearance, her sartorial likeness. Ephemeral ribbon adornments can thus be considerable material signifiers in analysing early modern portrait conventions that negotiated the sitter's subjectivity within societal norms. Only recent scholarship – such as Serena Dyer's study on 'material life writing'[3] – has started to explore and value eighteenth-century women's material culture as a defining agency in their individual biographical narratives. This research contextualised such material storytelling with pictorial strategies of formulating women's memorability and idealisation within the European portrait culture of the period. Sartorial contingencies and the probabilities of artistic intervention in the construction of a sartorial likeness are immanent challenges when analysing the correlation of emerging fashions and their staging in portraiture. Hence, a simultaneous examination of the case studies alongside corresponding visual and material objects, such as preserved clothing and fashion plates, was established in this project to holistically retrace how sitters and artists were firmly rooted within the sophisticated dynamics of contemporary material culture.

Fig. 1: Jean-Étienne Liotard, Julie de Thellusson-Ployard*, 1760. Pastel on vellum, 70 x 58 cm. © Museum Oskar Reinhart, Winterthur.*

Ribbons were ubiquitous adornments to be found on a variety of women's dress styles throughout the eighteenth century. However, the increasing pace of quickly replacing embellishment trends during the second half of the century rendered them as material manifestations of fashion's constant flux. Textile artisans, such as the *marchandes des modes* (female milliners who specialised in garment trimming), increasingly shaped the reception of sartorial trends and challenged the court's monopoly of dictating fashionable exclusivity (Fig. 2). Garment-structuring patterns of ribbon embellishments would be pinned and stitched, moved, and moulded over the day and body, and purposefully changed in their materiality, depending on the

Fig. 2: François Boucher, La marchande de modes *(detail), 1746. Oil on canvas, 64 x 53 cm. © Nationalmuseum, Stockholm.*

demands of the occasion. These varied routines of choosing, altering, and embellishing clothes were part of everyday life cycles that equipped women sartorially for the requirements of society and cultural integration to navigate through the seasonal calendar. Specific trimmings can therefore indicate the socio-cultural background of a portrait's signifying intention to present the sitter formal or informal, for a public or private audience, holding representative or emotional value for the commissioner.

These sophisticated processes of retrimming, in which garment and wearer were continuously transformed, stood in ambiguous contrast to the suggestively static and 'eternal' state of a painted likeness. The obvious challenges in artistically attending to fashion novelties' ephemerality in eighteenth-century portrait programmes predictably initiated an ongoing discourse on the disadvantages of rendering sitters in fashionable attire. In his *Discourse IV*, Sir Joshua Reynolds famously promoted the substitution of contemporary dress in feminine portrayals with generic 'timeless' drapery.[4] But that the demand of capturing trimming detail in commissions must have repeatedly collided with his programmatic approach of creating an antique-inspired simplicity is perceivable in portraits like that of Lady Taylor (Fig. 3). Here, we find a curiously picturesque amalgam of a studio garment and an elaborate hat design, flamboyantly garnished with white and blue ribbons, competing at eye level with the sitter's face for the viewer's attention. The meticulous depiction of these trimmings, so decidedly contradicting Reynolds's theoretical framework, might suggest Lady Taylor's active participation in the conceptional staging of her own sartorial likeness. At the time, it was not unusual for women to enjoy themselves in garnishing their own hats, which had been established as platforms for the display of quick-changing ribbon novelties since the 1770s. Lady Taylor's unique creation would probably have been regarded as a prestigious achievement, worth being included in this visual autobiographical narrative. Reynolds ensures Lady Taylor's memorability by including her recognisably ornamented accessory as a signifier of her polite, and thus socially-integrating, consumption while a complementary elevation is achieved through the composition's schematic simplicity. To achieve this, a portrait artist required material literacy[5]: the knowledge

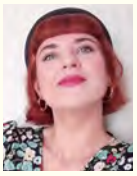
Fig. 3: Joshua Reynolds, Lady Taylor*, c. 1780. Oil on canvas, 127.3 x 102.2 cm. © The Frick Collection, New York.*

of how female dress was made, individualised, and worn, to successfully navigate a fashion's surprising effect within the composition. Such close attention to a sitter's recognisable style indicates how ambiguous the negotiation of wishes and expectations in an artistic conception of a likeness must have been. It further illustrates the significance of recognising contemporary sartorial customs as intrinsic to artistic progress and the negotiation of selfhood in eighteenth-century visual culture.

In this unprecedented climate of fashion liberalisation, ribbons became a medium to individually associate with political and cultural matters. They acted as physical markers of human emotional connections within eighteenth-century portrait culture and tell stories of love, kinship, historical commemoration, and even political allegiance – all tied up in a small tangible object. Where written or spoken public remarks on politics and culture were usually denied to women of all classes, curated trimmings could provide a strategy to express personal preferences and alliances through the immediate body. In the turbulent events of 1789, for instance, royalist women in revolutionary France 'wore enormous bouquets of lilies in their bosoms and on their heads [resembling the *fleur de lis* heraldry of the House of Bourbon], sometimes even bunches of white ribbon.'[6] Such an artfully-convincing ribbon bouquet is prominently placed on Madame de Genlis' *pouf* in her 1790 portrait by Adélaïde Labille-Guiard (Fig. 4). This possible material proximity to the historic events in the controversial writer's sartorial likeness could allude to her personal loyalties. Being a confidante to Philippe, Duke of Orléans, and governess to his children, her life circumstances were closely linked to the privileges and power of the French aristocracy and therefore ultimately threatened by the radical progress of revolutionary politics.

Ribbon trimmings initiated modes of *looking* at eighteenth-century women within an established culture of public visibility. They physically and visually structured women's clothing, and thus navigated the cognitive perception of their bodies. Despite the Enlightenment's often misogynistic rhetoric on female consumerism, which ambiguously judged trimming trends as superficial vanity, textile self-fashioning, as a personal creative process, provided women with rare prospects for self-expression. It required imagination and craftsmanship to transform ribbon products into unique ornaments, to heighten and display the effect of their material peculiarity or distinct colourisation, which ultimately created sartorial distinction – in short, it was a creative individual expression, even if only delegated to staff. Consequently, neglecting the textile presence of a sitter as a subsidiary element within a portrayal's analysis can result in the loss of valuable information on the artistically-negotiated memorability and indicated cultural embeddedness. This does hereby not only concern details within depicted fashionable attire, but also concepts of abstracted materiality in allegorical and idealised dress, as well as telling material choices that were not made by the sitter but by others for her. If such painted sartorial detail is not perceived as verisimilitude, but as a prism through which the Enlightenment culture of individualism was conveyed, a holistic viewing of eighteenth-century portraiture can be initiated that does not dissect painted content but enlarges the chances of retracing the contemporary nature of women's self-fashioning.

Fig. 4: Adélaide Labille-Guiard, Madame de Genlis*, 1790. Oil on canvas, 74 x 60 cm. © Los Angeles County Museum of Art.*



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Notes

1 A *corbeille* ('basket') was a container holding valuable accessories such as jewellery and textiles, given by the groom before the wedding; Chrisman-Campbell, Kimberly, *Fashion victims: dress at the court of Louis XV1 and Marie-Antoinette* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), p. 87.

2 Drawing on Rousseau's concepts regarding the principles of taste and *luxury in* Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, *Émile or education*, (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1921), p. 336.

3 Dyer, Serena, *Material lives: women makers and consumer culture in the eighteenth century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), p. 7.

4 Reynolds, Joshua, (and Gosse, Edmund, ed.), *The Discourses* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1884), p. 64.

5 See for further sources on the term and concept: Dyer, Serena and Wigston Smith, Chloe, *Material literacy in eighteenth-century Britain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

6 Chrisman-Campbell, p. 270.

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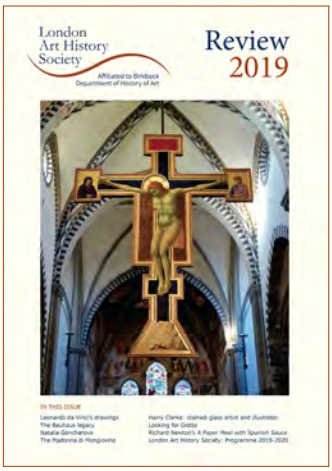

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