

The Interim Chair reflects on the importance of the Friends for the past and future of York Art Gallery



Carel Weight (1908-97), *The Betrayal of Christ*, acquired in 1985 for £5000, with a grant from the Friends of £2500

The Friends in Lockdown

As we all know, the art world, as well as the world of culture in general, has been hit particularly hard by the pandemic, and is facing a bleak and uncertain future. In Germany a rescue package of over 40 million euros has already been devised for the arts, but here in Britain the government has so far given no public indication of how in the longer term the arts are to be supported through this particular crisis. The Arts Council has an emergency fund for which museums and galleries can bid to help support them though the next few months. York Museums Trust has submitted such a bid, and, to increase its chances of success by demonstrating local support, the Committee of the Friends of York Art Gallery has made a donation of £6000 from its reserve funds, restricted to the Gallery, 'for the purpose of enabling the Gallery to re-open and continue to mount and promote exhibitions'.

The arts make a significant contribution to the economic wellbeing of the country, something of which many politicians seem curiously unaware. But their contribution to another sort of wellbeing is far more important. Works of visual art, like music, literature, and the like, provide solace, inspiration, recreation, refreshment, insight, and the experience of beauty for millions. Any loss or diminishment of this area of our national life would be an incalculable blow. However, as a result of the serious damage to the economy that Covid 19 will inflict, it is very likely that increased financial support for the arts, in a post-coronavirus world with so many calls on the nation's finances, will need to come from private patronage and charitable giving. It is worth recalling that in the Victorian period, when most of our galleries were founded, in the main they were paid for, not by public funds, but by private philanthropy. (Only in the 20th century were many of them taken over by the State or local authorities.) Sheffield would not have an Art Gallery were it not for the extraordinary generosity of John George Graves, a business man of humble origins, who made his fortune from the first mail order business; by the time of his death he was giving a remarkable proportion of his income to charitable causes in the City in gratitude - something our current super-rich might reflect on! It is a model that may have to be revived in the coming years of financial difficulty. It is the virtue of a Friends organization that, while few members may have large amounts of disposable income, collectively we can make a significant difference.

This, then, is a good moment to reflect more generally on the role of the Friends of York Art Gallery, as described in our constitution, and how we can help the Gallery face the challenges that undoubtedly lie ahead. A principal aim, according to the constitution, is 'to link together all friends of the Gallery and establish a circle of supporters' to aid it. This linkage is of course difficult to maintain during a period when the Gallery is closed, and its supporters cannot gather in person. For this reason your Committee, meeting virtually on Zoom, has launched the online project, of which the e-Bulletin is a part. So far responses have been positive, among them these:

Thank you all for this bulletin. I am off to Compton Verney right now!

An interesting selection of articles.

Thank you for the e-Bulletin. I find it wonderful and so informative.

So please keep telling us what you think, and do send us material we can use to help link you together: comments; letters; suggestions for topics; offers of items we might include.

According to the constitution, the purpose of this circle of supporters is to offer aid 'in the further development of the collection by subscription, gifts, bequests, or donations, and to sponsor activities in furtherance of the appreciation of the Fine Arts in York and the surrounding area'. Galleries ossify if they stand still. So it is important that, since 1948 when the organisation was formed, the Friends have given grants to assist with over a hundred acquisitions by the Gallery; these include such choice and well-loved works of art as Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, *Bust of Alfred Wolmark* (1956); Edward Burra, *Silver Dollar Bar* (1982); Algernon Newton, *Minster Court* (1991); Pompeo Batoni, *Portrait of John Smyth* (1996); David Hockney, *Egyptian Head Disappearing into Descending Clouds* (1999); Allan Ramsay, *Portrait of Jean Abercrombie* (2003); and William Etty, *Preparing for a Fancy Dress Ball* (2009). The Friends have also funded essential conservation work, including the recent restoration, in 2018, into full working order of the 18th-century automaton clock, attributed to James Cox (maker of the famous Silver Swan in the Bowes Museum), now installed in the Burton Gallery: for this see [York Press](#).

We further the appreciation of the arts by organizing gallery talks, lectures, visits, and other activities, and by co-funding, with the Department of History of Art at the University of York, an MA studentship for a young scholar who wants to combine his or her research with experience of working in the Gallery. Sadly most of these activities have necessarily ceased with the lockdown; however, the holder of the current studentship, Genevieve Stegner-Freitag, will in the autumn post an online exhibition of prints of York Minster, as described in the last e-Bulletin. She has also produced a video about Paul Sandby Munn's watercolour of the West Towers of the Minster (1810), and is working with Beatrice Bertram, the Senior Curator, on the postponed exhibition 'Views of Yorkshire'. (The Friends donated funds towards the conservation of works on paper for this exhibition.) Above all, as a circle of Friends, we demonstrate to the City and the country how committed we are to the future flourishing of our Gallery, for the benefit both of our fellow citizens and of visitors to York.

What, then, as individual Friends, can we now do to help? One thing is to persuade as many as possible of our own friends and acquaintance to join the organization; this will increase our income and enable us to achieve much more in future. Another is for each one of us to ask ourselves if we are in a position to support FYAG, by leaving a legacy in our will, or by donating money to the collection fund (as described by Richard Bailey in the last e-Bulletin) or the general fund. The collection fund provides us with a modest but growing resource that will allow us to make purchases of museum-quality works to enhance the collection: see [our website](#).

Just before the closure, with funds generously provided by a substantial legacy, your Committee completed the purchase of an important 20th-century painting, by a major British artist, which will be exhibited once the Gallery reopens, later in the year. So there is not long to wait before its identity is revealed to the world! The Committee has already approved a plan that, at some suitable point after the re-opening, the Friends start a fund-raising campaign to help refurbish the Burton Gallery (currently with poor lighting, along with other problematic features), which would allow a major rehang of the permanent collection. This would, in our view, be transformative for the Gallery, and could help to attract many more visitors in future. We hope that, when the time for the appeal comes, it will have your full support.

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