

## **President's Address to the Friends of York Art Gallery at the Annual General Meeting, 3rd April 2019**

I am happy to be able to report a full and successful year for the Gallery and the Friends. There have been a number of outstanding exhibitions, attendance has recently shown some improvement, membership numbers of the Friends have been maintained, and there has been a full programme of visits and events.

Three new members joined the Committee in 2018: Ron Clayton, Linda Downey, and Jim Sharpe; and each has settled in and is making significant contributions. The Committee under the able chairmanship of Peter Gibbard gives a huge amount of time and effort to the Friends and deserve our unstinting thanks. I would also like to convey a big thank-you to Michael White, Sue Rushton, and Madeline Bowden, who are leaving the Committee this year, for all their work for the Friends.

Events, tours, and excursions are organised by a separate Sub-Committee. During the last year, trips have been organised to Munich and Glyndebourne, as well as visits to Newcastle in May 2018 to see the David Bomberg exhibition, to Compton Verney last August to see the Folk Art Collection and Early Automata, to the Yorkshire Sculpture Park in September, to Edinburgh in October to see the fascinating *Rembrandt: Britain's Discovery of the Master*, and to Manchester Art Gallery in November to see an exhibition devoted to the work of Anne Swynnerton. I'd like to remind Friends of three up-and-coming visits in 2019 – to the Galleries and Country House Collections in Ireland in May, to the V&A, Dundee in September, and a return to Glyndebourne and Sussex country houses in October. The Events Sub-Committee deserves our heartfelt thanks for all this work on our behalf.

The Gallery talks have been ably organised by Charles Martindale, which he has re-named *Artwork of the Month*. These half-hour talks often contain original research by Friends and Gallery staff, and transcripts of some of the talks are beginning to appear on the Friends of York Art Gallery website. Many thanks to Charles for putting this programme together. The *Gallery Dines Out* continues successfully, meeting four times a year at

Bedern Hall, and thanks go to Louise Wheatley for coordinating these very successful events.

The *Hans Hess Chamber Music Concerts* are a new initiative devised by our Secretary, Judith Glover. There have been two concerts so far: a recital by prize-winning guitarist, Federico Pendenza, in November 2018, and a beguiling concert of Chinese traditional and modern music in March 2019. Judith organises these concerts with Celia Frisby from the Music Department of the University of York. Both are to be congratulated on this excellent initiative, and we look forward to its continued success. The *Gallery Dines Out*, the *Chamber Concerts*, and the Gallery talks are day-time events, and these suit many of our members.

If we turn to more direct ways that the Friends help the Gallery, the educational activities for children continue to be supported. An MA student from the History of Art Department at the University of York receives a grant from the Friends, and they are required to choose as their subject an original study of some aspect of the Gallery and its collections. This last year the student was Abigail Jubb, who has worked on the Tillitson-Hyde Collection of illustrative and decorative art. Her successor as MA Research Scholar is Lucy Booth, who comes from Warwick University and will be doing work on the Gallery's Old Master Print Collection. Both MA students have benefited from help provided by David Alexander, one of our Vice Presidents.

The Friends have helped with the conservation of a number of works in the Gallery's collection over the past year. These include 21 works on paper and three paintings to complement the forthcoming Poussin exhibition, the glazing of Henry Moore's *Calm before a Storm*, and two works by Peter Donnelly and Oliver Bevan from the 1960s which both needed conservation work. In addition, Turner's exquisite watercolour *Constance* was reframed for the current Ruskin and Turner exhibition, with the Friends support. In the ceramics collection, repair and conservation was required on a radical piece by Gillian Lowndes called *Hanging Loofah* from the 1990s. Repairs were made to two sets of display drawers in CoCA and the Burton Gallery, we agreed to underwrite the Annual CoCA Lecture, and, finally, grants were made through the Malden/Owen Bequest, to support the conservation and interpretation of

the Cox chinoiserie automata clock in the Burton Gallery, which has proved to be extremely popular with visitors.

Our major acquisition for the Gallery in 2018 was Mohammed Sami's *The British American Scarecrow*. This was featured in *The Sea is the Limit* exhibition at the Gallery last summer, and is a powerful critique of English and American post-colonialism, featuring a scarecrow against the backdrop of destruction caused by the conflict in Iraq. A Working Committee has been set up which is meeting with Gallery staff to see how the Bearpark Bequest could most usefully be spent on an important painting or artwork for the Gallery's Collection. Perhaps there will be more news to convey on this at next year's AGM.

I would like to pay a warm tribute to Reyahn King, as Chief Executive of the York Museums Trust, and to all the team at York Art Gallery who work so hard to present such an exciting programme of exhibitions and displays. Special thanks are due to Beatrice Bertram, our Senior Curator, and Jo Killeya, who heads the Public Engagement Team, for the programme of exhibitions at the Gallery. A warm thank-you is also due to Steve Herrity-Wells and the Visitor Experience Team who provide such a positive welcome for visitors to the Gallery.

The Gallery continues to operate in a tough financial environment. With the current cutbacks in funding to local government the money allocated by York City Council to run York Museums Trust has decreased from £1.6 million in 2012 to £300,000 in the current year. Within these constraints, the Gallery does a remarkable job in keeping the show on the road. But it needs to call on the Friends' resources to help with basic things such as education and conservation. We are of course here to support the Gallery, and I would encourage Friends to consider giving legacies and bequests either directly to the Gallery or through the Friends. We also have a system for regular donations and forms are available at the back of the hall. Thanks to Richard Bailey who has set up both of these schemes.

Dr Beatrice Bertram, the Senior Curator, who joined us last July, will be talking after me about the Exhibition Programme over the past year and looking forward to 2019. But I would like to end by saying a little about the current exhibition *Ruskin and Turner: The Dark Cloud* curated by Suzanne Fagence-Cooper, Richards Johns of the University of York, and

Beatrice. This is a superb show, one of the best held at the Gallery in recent years, and I would encourage everyone to go. Ruskin was a complex man, and the show would reward more than one viewing. Although it concentrates on Ruskin's espousal of Turner as the great landscape painter, it also looks at his social concerns and in particular at the Dark Cloud of environmental damage caused by the Industrial Revolution. Manchester was the world's first industrial city and was only 40 miles way from where Ruskin lived from 1870 at Brantwood overlooking Lake Coniston until his death in 1900. From there he could see the sun setting in the West and observe changes to the clouds and atmosphere caused by the smoke from thousands of chimneys in the northwest of England. He was subject to depression and periods of mania, and mental health is another theme explored in this fascinating exhibition. But above all, Ruskin was an observer and celebrator of nature and believed that by looking and drawing everyone could connect with the natural world. He believed in the interconnectedness of all things and that these insights were available to us all. His motto was *Today, Today, Today*, by which he wished to encourage us all to seize the moment and gain a closer understanding of our place in the order of things.

I think on that fundamentally optimistic note I will stop, and, as the old adage goes, say 'thank you for listening'.

**Peter Miller**

President of the Friends of York Art Gallery

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