



# Friends of York Art Gallery

## ANNUAL REPORT 2020

### FROM THE PRESIDENT SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE PAST YEAR

The Art Gallery, and with it the Friends, have been through an unprecedentedly difficult year. In this short piece I would like to look at some of these difficulties but also offer some more positive reflections.

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 meant that the Gallery has been closed for many months, and, when open, visits had to be booked. Because of the closure, the Gallery lost most of its revenue, and was only able to survive due to rescue packages from the Arts Council and the government. Desperate measures were required and forty-three personnel at the Gallery have had to be made redundant or take voluntary severance. Amidst what must have been extremely difficult days for the Gallery, Beatrice Bertram, the Senior Curator, managed to put on an exhibition, *Views of York & Yorkshire*, which the Friends supported by grants for conservation work. But in the present lockdown the Gallery remains closed, and will be for the foreseeable future.

Although this paints a rather gloomy picture, the Friends Committee has not been inactive. Under the able and resourceful leadership of the Acting Chair, Charles Martindale, various ways have been developed to keep in touch with the membership of the Friends. The

website has been redesigned under the watchful and experienced eye of Anne McLean, and the contents of the Bulletins and Newsletters have been commissioned and carefully edited by Jim Sharpe. In addition, the Committee granted £6000 to the Gallery to support their successful application for government funds. Various future initiatives between the Friends and the Gallery are being explored and it is hoped, for instance, that the Friends will be able to support the development of a fuller display of the permanent collection in the Burton Gallery and the stairwell. But in the meantime we are all starved of viewing the pictures in the Gallery and benefitting from the sustenance that they afford. The Gallery's closure has reminded us just what a vital contribution it plays in the cultural life of the city.

So what are we to do in order to refresh our visual senses? How are we to find pleasure in colour, line, form, and composition that a visit to a gallery offers? One way that I personally find reviving is in the act of walking. We were blessed in the first lockdown by a marvellous spring, and even in these dark days of winter there are many moments of sunshine and blue skies. We also have time – time has slowed down, and this gives up the opportunity 'to stop and stare'. I go walking every day and once a week for the whole day. Walking gives one a sense of purposeful activity and from time to time even a heightened sensibility. I remember a recent circular walk between Wharram Percy and Thixendale. There was snow on the higher ground that crunched under foot but also blue sky and a brilliant sun, which warmed the faces of myself and my companion as we stopped to have our sandwich lunch. As we returned to Wharram Percy, a magnificent bank of cumulus clouds was illuminated by the late afternoon sun, giving them a brilliant orange glow. It was gone in a minute as clouds and sun change so quickly

in our weather, but, for that moment, I was reminded of a sunset by Maxfield Parrish. How life imitates art!

Walking in the landscape offers many moments of observed changes to colour, form, and tone. It is like an outdoors art gallery or, in André Malraux's memorable phrase, 'a museum without walls'. In these days of restrictions to our activities we have to take our pleasure where we can, and walking, in my experience, is one of the most enjoyable and refreshing activities available to us.

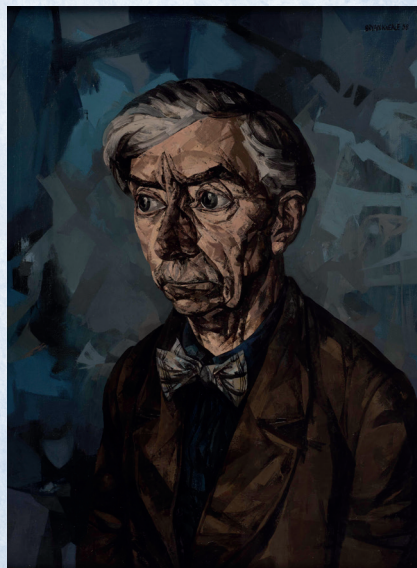
**PETER MILLER**

*President, The Friends of York Art Gallery*

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## AT THE GALLERY

In March 2020 the Gallery was forced to close due to the COVID 19 pandemic. Sadly, this meant that our planned summer exhibition *Bloom! Art in Nature* – which the Friends generously supported through grants for conservation, mounting, and framing – had to be postponed. Much of the remedial work had already been commissioned, and we look forward to presenting these newly vibrant artworks in future. During the first lockdown, we were grateful to be able to keep our *Michael Lyons*:



Bryan Kneale, *Sir Herbert Read*:  
York Museums Trust ©



John Atkinson Grimshaw, *Liverpool Docks at Night*: York Museums Trust ©

*Ancient and Modern sculpture* show open in the Artists Garden, allowing people free access to art outdoors. Meanwhile, we sought to share our collections through a variety of digital initiatives, one of which resulted in an exhibition staged to celebrate our reopening, *Your Art Gallery – Paintings Chosen by You* (20 August – 27 September 2020).

This display featured twenty paintings drawn from the stores, which were selected by our audiences and accompanied by labels they composed. We ran three online polls – for our communities, Friends, and Twitter followers – asking voters to pick their favourites and tell us why. Reading the variously heartfelt, humorous, and thought-provoking responses was both a joy and a privilege. Friends’ ‘winners’ included the nineteenth-century French artist

Henri Fantin-Latour's *Pink and Yellow Roses* and Bryan Kneale's charismatic portrayal of the Sir Herbert Read (1958), President of the Friends from the early 1950s onwards. These joined the ten highest scorers from the public vote, among which L.S. Lowry's *The Bandstand, Peel Park, Salford* (1931) evoked memories of crowds at live performances, and Barbara Hepworth's mask-wearing *Surgeon Waiting* (1948) resonated with the current crisis.



Part of the *Views of York and Yorkshire Exhibition*, showing several of the recently conserved nineteenth-century prints of York Minster: CC BY-SA York Museums Trust ©

Your Art Gallery highlighted a new attribution suggested by Art UK's Art Detective team, who identified our *St. John the Baptist* (1640-55) as being by the Flemish artist Hendrick de Somer (1607-55/56). Very few of De Somer's works are held in UK public collections, which makes this an exciting and welcome discovery. Moreover, several new Fine Art acquisitions were placed on display for the first time, including *Liverpool Docks at Night* (1870s) by the Leeds-born

artist John Atkinson Grimshaw, allocated to the Gallery in 2019 through the Acceptance in Lieu scheme. Through the Contemporary Art Society, we acquired nine intricate works on paper by the Scarborough-based artist Jade Montserrat, which collectively explore issues around the body, belonging, and movement. Lastly, the collection has recently been enriched by five paintings by prominent twentieth-century British women artists, including Prunella Clough and Daphne Fedarb.

A concurrent exhibition, *Views of York & Yorkshire*, brought together a selection of topographical paintings and works on paper – dating from 1763 to 2012 – illustrating York’s changing urban and rural landscape over the centuries. At the heart of this show, painted and engraved representations of York Minster and its environs offered shifting perspectives of the cathedral over time. A substantial grant from the Friends enabled us to conserve and mount ten never-before-shown nineteenth-century prints by artists including Thomas Shotter Boys and Henry Cave. These were expertly studied by Genevieve Stegner-Freitag, our 2019-20 Friends MA Research Scholar, who created a virtual exhibition to accompany the displays. We are indebted to the Friends for facilitating the restoration and research that helped illuminate this important aspect of the collection.

Fortunately we were able to extend both our popular exhibition *Gillian Lowndes: On the Edge* in CoCA 1 – which features the artist’s *Hanging Loofah*, conserved thanks to a grant from the Friends – and *Children Curate* in the Anthony Shaw space. There have also been some notable recent additions to our Decorative Arts collection, as we were invited by the Contemporary Art Society to be one of only three UK museums to select objects from the collection of Patricia

Barnes. An American collector and gallery owner who died in 2019, Barnes amassed the work of artists from the London art schools during the 1980s to the 2000s. We chose, and were awarded, thirty-three items, which include works by key artists not previously represented in our collection – such as Carol McNicoll, Ken Eastman, Carolein Smit, Bryan Illsley, and Quentin Bell – as well as important pieces by Alison Britton, Janice Tchalenko, Michael Cardew, and Hylton Nel.



*Carolein Smit, Dog, one of the ceramics recently acquired by the Gallery: York Museums Trust ©*

Looking forwards, we have a lively programme of exhibitions planned for the year ahead. *Mediale 2020: Human Nature* has been extended until May 2021, and will be followed by *Grayson Perry: The Pre-Therapy Years*, a touring exhibition from the Holburne Museum in Bath, and *Aesthetica Art Prize 2021*. Upstairs, the Upper North Gallery will be re-hung with a display showcasing elements of our Japanese print collection. This will feature Ukiyo-e prints by Utagawa Hiroshige, and draw attention to Japanese influences on Western art through paintings by such artists as Albert Moore, Walter Greaves, and Philip Wilson Steer. Visitors will be able to see a refreshed

‘Wall of Pots’, and a new installation entitled ‘Ton of Clay’ (2015) by the Leeds-born artist Ian McIntyre. A forthcoming display will concentrate on the life and work of the prolific collector W.A. Ismay – whose bequest was so fundamental to the development of CoCA – twenty years after his death.

Finally, we were delighted to win the Museums and Heritage–Partnership of the Year Award for our 2018-19 exhibition *When All is Quiet: Kaiser Chiefs in Conversation with York Art Gallery*. This was another Friends-supported show, with funding for the conservation of Oliver Bevan’s *Flickering Grid II* (1965) and Peter Donnelly’s *Red Plot* (1966). Both paintings can be seen in the Curation on Art UK, which we created to extend the reach of the displays to our online communities. Building on this success, we are currently collaborating with Royal Collection Trust, the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, and Nottingham Castle Museum on an exhibition about the young Thomas Gainsborough as a landscape artist. As can be seen, the Friends’ continued contribution to the Gallery is invaluable, enabling us to undertake a wide range of activities which help engage our audiences and develop our collections.

Thank you so much for your support during this challenging time.

**BEATRICE BERTRAM**

*Senior Curator*





Christopher Cook, *Memento mori*, 2019, graphite and oil on paper, 102 x 72cm, York Museums Trust ©;  
Jan van Os, *Still Life of Fruit and Flowers with Bird's Nest on a Marble Ledge*, about 1772-1780, oil on wood, 66 x 48cm, York Museums Trust ©

## NEW ACQUISITION

The generous support of the Friends of York Art Gallery enabled the acquisition in 2020 of Christopher Cook's graphite painting *Memento mori*. This striking addition to the Gallery's collection was commissioned for the exhibition *Making a Masterpiece: Bouts & Beyond c. 1450-2020* (11 October 2019 - 20 January 2020), and it responds to Jan van Os's *Still Life of Fruit and Flowers*, painted in the late eighteenth century.

Cook's recent works have investigated the dark underside of the so-called 'Golden Age' of Dutch still life painting: his modern representations of flowers, food, and tableware hint at the global inequalities and military power typically needed to sustain such accumulation of wealth. *Making a Masterpiece* opened in 2019

with a varied selection of five of Cook's recent works, and in the exhibition's final weeks in 2020 these were replaced by five new graphite creations, in which Cook responded to paintings from the Gallery's collection.

The composition of *Memento mori* closely parallels its source, on a slightly larger scale. Van Os's brightly colourful oil painting suggests a happy life of leisure through its juxtaposition of abundant flowers and exotic fruit with a sun-dappled garden. Cook's liquid graphite—a technique of his own invention—turns the cheerful scene into grayscale, as varying densities of graphite subtly shimmer against patches of white paper left bare. Cook added subtle iconographic critiques of capitalist impulses: a butterfly at the lower edge has been replaced with a Death's Head Hawk Moth, and the sunny garden has vanished to show instead a fortress-like building with flames bursting through the windows. We don't know what this building is or why it burns (Cook doesn't know either), but it encourages viewers to speculate about potential threats to prosperity, or what people will do to hold on to what they have.

Cook's approach to artmaking is experimental and instinctive. He plans by gathering ideas, but he only decides how to carry them out through the process of making. The liquid graphite dries quickly, although it is easily manipulated while still wet. Cook works on these paintings horizontally, using brushes and his fingers to generate, erase, and re-create forms as he experiments with the composition. You can watch his early stages of making *Memento mori* through two videos Cook generously shared with students at the University of York. Besides demonstrating his remarkable virtuosity, they reveal an early idea of replacing the pineapple with a grenade, though in the final version Cook decided to re-create the fruit instead.

The Friends had already supported *Making a Masterpiece* by funding conservation of five paintings from the Gallery's collection, and the Friends' MA studentship held by Lucy Booth enabled us to display ten prints that, prior to Lucy's research, had been languishing in their storeroom box since their acquisition in 1954. It is thus especially gratifying that the Friends rounded off the exhibition by ensuring one of Cook's paintings could remain permanently at the Gallery. At the time of the most recent closure, *Memento mori* was displayed in the Burton Gallery, alongside Jan van Os. It is, however, now resting in store - it is a work on paper and thus can only be displayed for around four weeks at a time. It will, of course, be on view in the future.

**JEANNE NUECHTERLEIN**

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## **WEBSITE AND ONLINE COMMUNICATIONS**

This year has seen an increase in our online activities. Some of these developments had been planned before March of last year, while others were made in response to the special circumstances of 2020.

Like other organisations, we had to adapt when lockdown was announced. To continue to support the Gallery and the aims of the Friends, we moved as many activities as possible online, starting with the transfer of Committee Meetings to Zoom, which was much more of a novelty then than it is for many of us now.

We were obliged to cancel our programme of events, including the Annual General Meeting, which in 2021 will be held via Zoom. Our series of Artwork of the Month talks, usually held in the Gallery, continued in written form, with articles posted on our website and links sent out to members by email. The same approach was taken with our new series of Q&A interviews, in which a variety

of artists let us into the secrets of their creative practice. Our new use of Twitter enabled these pieces (and the activities of the Friends) to reach a wider audience, especially in the museum and gallery community. The year also saw the launch of our e-Bulletin, a collection of essays and opinion pieces on art and artists, which was sent out by email and posted on the website. Altogether these publications provide a wealth of information about the artworks in the Gallery's collection. If you missed them, go to our website and explore the options under the About Art tab.

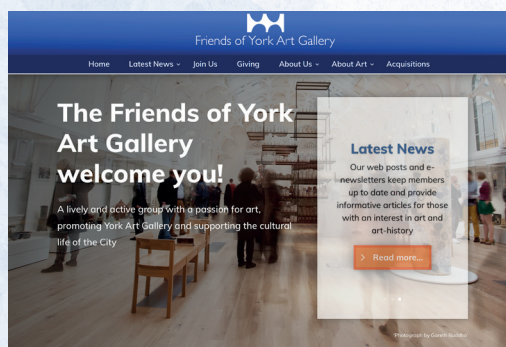
Our increased use of email also enabled us to keep members informed of developments at the Gallery during lockdown and, when the time came, we shared the Gallery's plans to reopen (temporarily, it turned out) with a priority online booking offer for members. If you would like to receive our emails and haven't yet provided your address, please contact [info@friendsofyorkartgallery.co.uk](mailto:info@friendsofyorkartgallery.co.uk).

We had been planning to re-design the Friends' website for some time. The project was completed during lockdown, and the newly designed site was launched in August 2020.

As well as a bright new look it provides an up-to-date technical platform for the future, and we have plans to build on the new functionality that it offers. Our priority will be to set up a facility to take donations and allow new members to join online.

**ANNE MCLEAN**

*Website and Online Communications Officer*



## PLEASE GIVE YOUR SURPLUS ART BOOKS TO SUPPORT THE GALLERY

**An appeal for whenever the Gallery is open again after the present lockdown.**

Friends of York Art Gallery are encouraged to look through their art books, and make donations of books that will be sold in the Gallery Shop to support the Gallery. 'Art Books' would include books on architecture as well as the fine and applied arts. This project will be coordinated by Peter Miller, the President of the Friends, who will support and maintain a second-hand art bookstall at the Gallery Shop, using his long experience of dealing in second hand and antiquarian books. All profits will go direct to the Gallery at a time when financial support for the Gallery is urgently needed.

If you have books to donate, please contact Peter Miller: you can email him at: [peter.miller30@btinternet.com](mailto:peter.miller30@btinternet.com), or telephone him on 01904 612751, or deliver them to his address at 10 St Oswald's Road, York YO10 4PF. Arrangements can also easily be made to collect them from you. Please DO NOT take them to the Gallery, as there is no room there to store unsorted books.

I look forward to hearing from you when the present lockdown is relaxed.

**PETER MILLER**

## ADJUSTING TO THE PANDEMIC – THE FYAG E-BULLETIN

As this *Annual Report* makes clear, York Art Gallery, along with the Friends of York Art Gallery as an organization, and individual Friends and their families, have just been through a very unusual year. When it became evident, back in March 2020, that normal Friends' activities were having to be suspended for a probably indefinite period, the FYAG Committee, as other contributors to this *Annual Report* comment, set about considering how some substitutes could be found to help replace what was now impossible.

One of the outcomes of these deliberations was to replace the FYAG *Newsletter* with an online *e-Bulletin*. To take the most basic point, it was now clearly medically undesirable, and against lockdown recommendations, for half a dozen or so Committee members to come together in a room in the Gallery, in the established fashion, to stuff envelopes with the paper *Newsletter* along with other documentation for distribution to the Friends by post.

As editor of the *Newsletter* over the previous two years I was tasked with, and happy to assume, the editorship of the new online publication, and to take on board the suggestions coming from the Committee (and from Friends outside it) that we might try to do something new with the *e-Bulletin*. Namely, that it should not merely convey news about what the Gallery or the Friends were doing, or reports on what they had done (topics which obviously shrank as the pandemic persisted), but rather encourage a greater participatory input.

To that end, we have tried with the *e-Bulletins* that have been produced in 2020 to provide opportunities for Friends to contribute short (normally 500 words, but that's negotiable) pieces on (for example) artists, living or dead, with York connections, favourite works of art in the Gallery's collection, or, more generally, works of art which have inspired them, or works of art they possess which have a special meaning for them (anonymity on the grounds of security, if requested, is assured to contributors in this last category). These contributions have allowed me to put together a series of (I hope) interesting *e-Bulletins* – I've certainly learned a lot, and I would like to thank all contributors, with special thanks to Dorothy Nott and Sue Greenhow for their assistance, and also Anne McLean for her technical input in producing the final product.

As things stand at present, we are aiming to produce two *e-Bulletins* in 2021, one in the summer, and one towards the end of the year. I would be delighted to hear from anybody who might be interested in contributing an article, even if they just want to float an idea past me. Do contact me at [jim.sharpe@york.ac.uk](mailto:jim.sharpe@york.ac.uk)

**JIM SHARPE**  
*e-Bulletin Editor*

*This Annual Report is edited by Jim Sharpe. Please send items for future FYAG publications to [jim.sharpe@york.ac.uk](mailto:jim.sharpe@york.ac.uk)*

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