Friends of York Art Gallery

e-Bulletin 6

December 2021

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EDITORIAL

Despite the arrival of the Omicron variant, art galleries throughout the UK are continuing to stay open, and people are still visiting them - I myself made my first visit for some time to the York Art Gallery last week. One hopes this situation will continue to hold.

The Friends of York Art Gallery, with an appropriate sense of caution, are also moving into a more positive mode. As our website demonstrates, a series of successful events has been organised over the past few months, while we have also re-introduced a series of monthly Gallery talks. One hopes that the early intimations of a return to something like normality thus indicated will continue and flourish.

It is against this background that I find myself editing the sixth of the FYAG e-Bulletins to appear since the pandemic hit us. As part of this process I am delighted to be able to introduce the new Friends MA student, Rhyann Arthur, who, with her specialism in ceramics, establishes further the diversity of interest shown by the students the Friends have helped fund; we wish her every success for her year at York.

Two of the contributors to this e-Bulletin discuss individual works of art. Anne McLean provides a well-focussed essay on *The Grove Quartet* by the relatively unknown artist Ann Beaumont. This work was the subject of a recent 'Artwork of the Month' essay by Peter Gibbard, but here the story is taken further, and Anne's piece is especially welcome to me by explaining why a painting thus titled has five figures in it. Dorothy Nott introduces us to the French artist Philippe Mercier, a long-term resident in England, and examines in detail his *The Careless Husband*.

A rather different subject is covered by Margaret May, who provides a very welcome report on a lecture delivered to the Friends in November of this year by Lady Hale of Richmond, and adds as a 'Footnote' to this report an introduction to the rivalry between Joshua Reynolds and Thomas Gainsborough.

There are two other matters I would like to raise in this 'Editorial'. First, a reminder for those among you who may be having trouble settling on Christmas presents for friends or relatives that it is possible to buy Membership for the Friends of York Art Gallery as a gift. All memberships are currently being completed online, and accessing the Friends' website is all that is needed to inform you about the current prices and benefits of

membership. Secondly, our President, Peter Miller, has asked me to remind Friends of his project to sell unwanted art books to raise funds for the Gallery. He has been so successful in this that he needs more books to sell. If you have any you wish to pass on to him, he can be contacted on 01904 612751 or peter.miller30@btinternet.com – he is happy to take deliveries at 10 St. Oswald's Road, Fulford, York YO10.

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FRIENDS BURSARY HOLDER 2021/22

An introduction to this years' holder of our MA bursary, Rhyann Arthur.

My name is Rhyann Arthur, and I am holder of the 2021/22 Friends' MA scholarship. My background is as a maker of ceramic art; I completed my Bachelors degree in Ceramics from Cardiff School of Art and Design earlier this year. I have since exhibited as part of the British Ceramics Biennial, exploring the historic Spode Works. Despite my love of clay, the consequences of the past few years have ultimately pushed me towards academia, and I have discovered a love for exploring, researching, and writing about art.

Through my artistic practice I have a deep appreciation of modern and contemporary ceramics, and through the research for my undergraduate dissertation I have in-depth knowledge of the Arts and Crafts movement. All these facets of material understanding have developed in me an intense interest in material culture: the origins, collection, and consumption of craft objects.

For my research project I will be working with the recently donated ceramics collection of Patricia Barnes, featuring pottery by the likes of Alison Britton, Carol McNicoll, Jacqueline Poncelet, and more. The focus

of my research will be on women ceramic artists, as well as Barnes herself, and the wider culture of collection.

I wish to explore the broader art-historical context of postmodernism, and to analyse how pottery - a medium still widely associated with a Leachian aesthetic - could play a part in the deconstruction of art and form in this era. Female artists had to break down barriers to be heard in the art world, but the space for ceramic artists and potters was a different environment. Despite archaeology pointing to women as the main producers of pottery throughout human history, the twentieth-century world of clay became very male-dominated as the quest for mastery began. During my research project I aim to unpick the ways women potters in the 1970s and 1980s were physically deconstructing the pot, in order to interrogate the culture around pottery by studying the objects as works of fine art.

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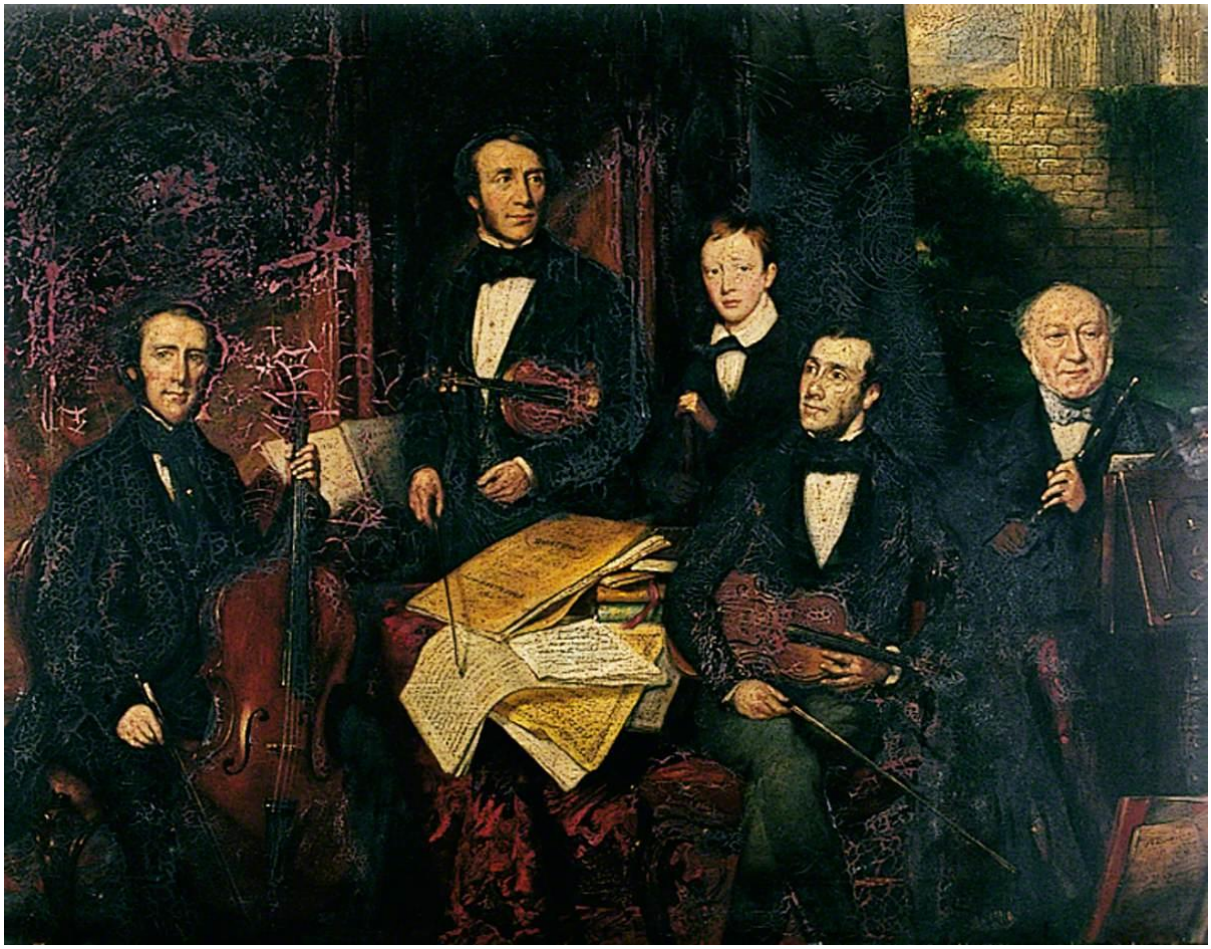
Anne McLean, our Website and Online Communications Officer, explores the lives of the five citizens of York portrayed in Ann Beaumont's painting of 1854, 'The Groves Quartet', complementing the research presented by Peter Gibbard in a recent Artwork of the Month article, about the life of the artist.

BENJAMIN SHAW AND THE GROVES QUARTET



Ann Beaumont, *The Groves Quartet*, 1854, oil on canvas, 86.4 x 111.8 cm, YORAG: 568
Photo credit: York Museums Trust

This picture, entitled *The Groves Quartet*, was painted in 1854 by a little-known London artist, Ann Beaumont (1798-1866), and dedicated to a York music teacher, Benjamin Shaw, who is shown seated with his cello on the far left of the picture. It was donated to York Art Gallery in 1951 by Mrs Groves and Miss King, and featured as the Friends' Artwork of the Month in September 2021. Peter Gibbard, who wrote the piece, identified the other sitters as, from Shaw's left, Mr Hunt (violin), an unnamed young man, Mr Groves (viola), and Dr Thomas Simpson (flute).

Peter's interesting article prompted me to wonder whether any more information could be found about these five citizens of York. A search of online resources uncovered evidence of a family link between Benjamin Shaw and Ann Beaumont, and revealed that the Groves were a prodigiously musical family. Their connection by marriage to the King family helps to identify the two ladies who donated the painting. Of the other sitters, Mr Hunt's life was tragically cut short, while Dr Thomas Simpson was one of the Victorian visionaries who contributed so much to the cultural life of York in the nineteenth century.

Benjamin Shaw taught music in York for at least twenty-five years, advertising himself as a teacher of music, piano, organ, violin, harp, and singing. He is known to have been the organist at Centenary Chapel (now the Central Methodist Chapel) and St Olave's Church. The latter detail gives added significance to the background of the picture, which, in addition to a distant view of the Minster, is thought to show a location close to Museum Gardens. The painting is in a poor state of conservation and not on public display, so it is difficult to be certain, but might the setting be St Olave's Church, which stands next to the Marygate entrance to the Gardens?

A possible family link between Benjamin Shaw and the artist, Ann Beaumont, can be traced through his baptismal record. He was born on 20 December 1813 and baptised on 24 January 1814, with his twin brother, Joseph, at All Hallows Church, Almondbury, near Huddersfield. His parents were listed on the baptism register as John Shaw, a clothier (dealer in cloth), and Ann, 'formerly Beaumont'. She was the widow of a local man, John Beaumont, with whom she had several children, half-siblings of Benjamin Shaw. That members of Shaw's extended family were named Beaumont, raises the possibility of a link with the family of the artist, Ann Beaumont. Unfortunately, Beaumont was a common surname in the Huddersfield area, making the link difficult (or impossible) to prove. However, Peter Gibbard has identified other paintings by the artist of Yorkshire subjects, re-enforcing the theory that she had connections with the County.

For much of his time in York, Shaw lived in Gillygate, but also practiced in Chapter House Street and Coney Street. From the mid-1860s he taught in both York and Scarborough, before settling into retirement at 6 West Square, Scarborough, where he died on 6 July 1890.

Dean Road & Manor Road Cemetery, Scarborough

The sitter to the left of Benjamin Shaw, with the violin, was Mr Hunt. This is very likely to be Henry Hunt, a hop and seed merchant, who, in 1851, was living in Clarence Street. In 1858 he took over his uncle's business in Aldwark, but died of pneumonia three years later at the age of 37. It was his son, John Joseph Hunt, who developed the business into the well-known John J Hunt Ebor Brewery, a landmark in York until it was acquired by J.W. Cameron & Co. in 1953. He became a prominent local figure, receiving a knighthood and other honours, and living in a country house outside York that he had commissioned Walter Brierley to design. He died a wealthy man in 1933, having outlived his father by seventy years.

St. Augustine's Churchyard, Kirkby-in-Cleveland

To Hunt's left is Mr Groves, after whom the ensemble is likely to have been named. John Groves (1807-1881) was a linen draper, with a shop in Parliament Street. Remarkably, at least ten of his descendants were musicians, including his daughters, Rebecca and Elizabeth, who both taught music in York, and his son, John (1839-1901), who was fifteen years old in 1854. This makes him a good candidate to be the anxious-looking young man in the painting.

At the start of his career, John Groves junior worked in the family linen shop in Parliament Street, but by the time of the 1891 census he was a music teacher, living at 21 St Mary's with his large family. Of his ten children, six became professional musicians or music teachers, including his son, also called John (1876-1938), who was a music teacher and cellist, and his daughter Grace Caroline (1885-1963), who was a professional singer. In 1921, Grace Caroline married Henry Alfred King, a widower who worked for the North Eastern Railway in York, and became step-mother to his two daughters, Marjorie and Doris. When John Groves died in 1938, Mr King was the executor of his will. His widow survived him until 1954, so it is a plausible suggestion that she donated the painting, with either Marjorie or Doris King. Whether the Groves family had received it from the estate of Benjamin Shaw, is open to speculation: it was, after all, dedicated to him.

The last in the line of Groves music teachers appears to have been Esther, the daughter of the youngest John Groves, who died in Rawcliffe in 1977.

The life story of the fifth sitter in the painting, Dr Thomas Simpson (1788-1863), is better documented than those of his companions. He lived at Gray's Court in Minster Yard and was active in the Yorkshire Philosophical Society, as well as being a founder member of York Medical Society. That he played the flute and studied music is an indication of the full life that he must have led. His image and biography were included in the exhibition of calotypes curated by YPS in 2019.

The information above has been gleaned from online resources. No doubt there is more to be found in other repositories, especially the archive of York Art Gallery, when this becomes available once more, which will shed further light on the lives of the five citizens of York portrayed in this interesting painting.

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With thanks to Peter Gibbard whose article about the artist Ann Beaumont prompted this research.
Sources: Census Records; British Newspaper Archive; Probate Registers; Parish Records; GRO; https://www.findagrave.com/ (https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/230570486/benjamin-shaw : accessed 10 October 2021)
(https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/183295192/henry-hunt : accessed 03 October 2021)

Here Dorothy Nott, former Chair of the Friends, explores one of the six paintings by Philippe Mercier, at one time resident in York, held by York Art Gallery

PHILIPPE MERCIER AND *THE CARELESS HUSBAND* (1738)

Philippe Mercier (1689-1760), *A scene from 'The Careless Husband'*, 1738, oil on canvas.
YORAG : 1179 © York Museums Trust

A French artist born in Germany, Philippe Mercier (1689-1760) lived primarily in England, making his home in York for ten years. Before moving to London in 1716, he studied painting in Berlin, where he painted a portrait of the young Frederick, grandson of George I, which he prudently took with him to London. Thanks to this and a recommendation from the court of Hanover, he was appointed principal painter and subsequently librarian to the Prince and Princess of Wales in 1729, which appointment led to many royal portraits. By 1736, however, he had lost favour with the court, and in 1739 he moved to York. However, during his association with the Prince, Mercier was able to pursue his interest in the theatre, and collaborated with the Prince on a theatrical production of Thomas Doggett's play, *Hob*, at Richmond. He was also a shareholder in Rich's theatre in Covent Garden.

Mercier's early work was much influenced by the French artist, Jean-Antoine Watteau, a near contemporary, some of whose paintings Mercier etched. As well as portraits, Mercier specialised in representations of *fêtes champêtre*s, a popular eighteenth-century form of pastoral entertainment, profiling either *commedia dell'arte* or English family groups of solidly Hanoverian courtiers.[1] According to John Ingamells, it was these groups which 'launched the conversation piece in British painting'.[2]

York Art Gallery holds six paintings by Mercier, the Mansion House one, and Fairfax House a further two, including the delightful *Anne Fairfax as Shepherdess*. Five of York's paintings are portraits, but in the sixth, *The Careless Husband*, Mercier reverts to his love of the theatre.

Considered the best play of Poet Laureate, Colley Cibber, *The Careless Husband* (1704) is a typical Restoration comedy. Sir Charles Easy, a philanderer and married to a virtuous wife, is assisting his friend, Lord Morelove, in his pursuit of Lady Betty Modish. At a party designed to promote Lord Morelove's ambitions, Lady Easy catches her husband in a compromising situation with his maid. Rather than upbraid her sleeping spouse, Lady Easy removes a 'steinkirk' (a type of scarf) from around her neck and places it on her husband's head. When he awakes, Sir Charles finds the steinkirk, recognises the virtue of his wife, and is immediately full of remorse. Mercier's painting shows the point at which Lady Easy finds her husband asleep with the maid. He is leaning forward, eyes closed and with his wig long gone, his clothes in a state of disarray, while his wife is delicately placing the steinkirk on his head. There is no sign of anger or vengeance in the wife's expression. Rather, she has a look of tenderness replicated in her gentle movements. All this while the maid leans back in her chair oblivious, her dress only just covering her breasts, one hand hovering suggestively over Sir Charles' trouser waist. Mercier has given great attention to the fabric of the lovers' clothing, Sir Charles in deep rose satin with gold buttons and trim, the maid in a golden silk bodice. By contrast, we are only shown the arms and neck of the innocent wife, and she is dressed in pure white.

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[1] Commedia dell'arte was a masked form of entertainment with stock characters originating in Italy.

[2] J. Ingamells, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004). Ingamells was Senior Curator at York Art Gallery from 1967 to 1977.

Mercier was not alone in his portrayal of a man and two women in intimate circumstances. Francis Hayman used the conceit in both his *The Man with Two Wives*, with one wife pulling out grey hairs, the other, black, and *Stealing a Kiss*. In *The Careless Husband* the innocent wife's gentle rebuke and the husband's remorse might indicate a happy ending, were it not for John Vanbrugh's *The Relapse*, a cynical riposte to Cibber's earlier play *Love's Last Shift.* Mercier never painted a sequel, leaving the viewer to decide the outcome.

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Margaret May, a member of the Friends' Committee, reports on a talk given to the Friends by Lady Hale of Richmond on 'The Art and Architecture of the Supreme Court', and uses two of the paintings on display in the Court to examine the rivalry between two of the greatest English painters of the eighteenth century

TALK BY LADY HALE OF RICHMOND

On Tuesday 16 November, Lady Hale of Richmond talked to those Friends who were lucky enough to get places, on *The Art and Architecture of the Supreme Court* in the York Medical Society Rooms in Stonegate.

Exterior of Supreme Court

New three-storey library

Supreme Court courtroom

Photos © The Supreme Court of the United Kingdom

On 16 October 2009, the Queen officially opened the newly created Supreme Court of the United Kingdom. In the years before the opening, Lady Hale was a member of a small committee of the Law Lords overseeing the conversion of Middlesex Guildhall in Parliament Square into the new home for the Supreme Court. As Lady Hale told it, she might have been invited to join the committee because she was a woman, but what mattered was that she cared about their new home. This became very apparent as she shared her experiences with her audience.

Middlesex Guildhall, designed by Scottish architect James Gibson (1864-1951), was described by Nicholas Pevsner as a very free interpretation of Gothic with an art nouveau flavour. Lady Hale's view is that its style is both eclectic and exuberant. What is not in doubt is that its conversion presented a number of challenges. Its basement still contained cells for prisoners awaiting trial, which as we learned, in common with all courtroom cells, had a distinctive odour. One of the original light wells had

been used for a lift. More fundamentally, several of her fellow judges were very resistant to leaving the House of Lords!

The converted building needed to reflect the values of the newly created Supreme Court. Unlike the courtrooms of the old building, the new court rooms were to be designed so that the judges, barristers, and members of the public sat on the same level. Space had also to be found for a library for the Justices and their assistants to contemplate and study case law, as well as storage space for the many legal documents needed by the barristers.

Lady Hale made clear that the Supreme Court served as the highest court for all parts of the United Kingdom. Yvonne Holton, Herald Painter at the Court of Lord Lyon of Scotland, designed a new emblem to reflect this, using traditional symbolism: the Tudor rose, the Northern Irish flax flower, the Scottish thistle, and the Welsh leek.

Emblem

The emblem displayed in Courtroom 2

Photos © The Supreme Court of the United Kingdom

Most of all, it was stressed, the Supreme Court building is there to serve the cause of justice. On the glass screen in the public entrance to the building are inscribed the words of the Judicial Oath taken by all the Justices:

‘I will do right to all manner of people after the laws and usages of this Realm, without fear or favour, affection or ill-will.’

As the planning authority, Westminster Council had required the Supreme Court to have an arts strategy. The Court had inherited from the Middlesex Guildhall some fine paintings. Lady Hale speculated that the Supreme Court may be unique in having on display full-length portraits of the same person by two of the finest English artists of the eighteenth century. Hugh Percy was painted as Earl of Northumberland by Sir Joshua Reynolds, and as Duke of Northumberland by Thomas Gainsborough.

Earl of Northumberland by Reynolds
© Middlesex Guildhall Art Collection,
Catalogue no. 747

Duke of Northumberland by Gainsborough
© Middlesex Guildhall Art Collection
Catalogue no. 746

Since, however, all the portraits were as Lady Hale put it 'of dead white men', the Supreme Court Justices set out to redress the balance. Since 2019 the artwork *Legacy* hangs in Courtroom 2. Created by Catherine Yass, it features portraits of three legal pioneers: Cornelia Sorabji, the first woman to sit the Bachelor of Civil Laws exam at Oxford University, Dame Rose Heilbron, one of the first two women to gain a first-class honours degree in law in 1935, and Lady Hale herself, President of the Supreme Court from October 2017 to January 2020. The fourth image is an unnamed student representing the future potential of the next generation of women lawyers.

Lady Hale was an excellent speaker with a charming manner which her listeners warmed to. This was particularly apparent during the 20 minutes which had been set aside for questions, which ranged from winning round the Justices resistant to leaving the House of Lords, to concerns over maintaining the cherished independence of the UK judiciary.

She had been introduced by our Chairman, Charles Martindale, and was presented with gifts and thanked by our President, Peter Miller. Tea and a particularly wide selection of cakes were then served by members of the FYAG Committee to round off a most successful afternoon, which has also contributed significantly to much-needed FYAG funds.

Footnote
Lady Hale spoke of the unusual circumstances through which the Supreme Court owns portraits of Hugh Percy, by Joshua Reynolds and Thomas Gainsborough – distinguished and rival artists of eighteenth-century England.

Born in 1723, Joshua Reynolds was four years Gainsborough's senior. Gainsborough predeceased him by four years, dying in 1788. Both were founder members of the Royal Academy, established in 1768. Reynolds became its first President, and held that post until his death in 1792.

In portraiture, Reynolds favoured painting his female sitters in generalised drapery deliberately intended to give a timeless look to the pictures, a task also suited to a drapery painter. Gainsborough, on the other hand, aided only by his one assistant (and nephew) Gainsborough Dupont, spent many hours creating on canvas the rustle of a contemporary satin dress, wanting to portray the sitter's individuality and likeness. Nevertheless, Reynolds was able to command much higher prices for his portraits – in 1782, 200 guineas for a full-length compared to Gainsborough's 100 guineas.

Both received royal patronage. In 1748, when Allan Ramsay died, Gainsborough had good reason to think that he would be appointed as Principal Portrait Painter to the King, but Reynolds was determined to secure this prestigious job, causing Gainsborough to write in a letter to the Earl of Sandwich dated 29 November 1784: 'say it was painted by G – who was very near being King's Painter only Reynolds' friends stood in the way'.

However, as Gainsborough lay dying in July 1789, he wrote to Reynolds begging 'a last favour which is (to) come under my roof and look at my things, my Woodman* you never saw'. Reynolds said afterwards 'If any jealousies had subsisted between us, they were forgotten, in those moments of sincerity; and he turned towards me as one who was engrossed by the same pursuits'. A few months later, Reynolds delivered his memorable and generous Discourse (lecture) devoted to Gainsborough's art.

* 'The Woodman', regarded by Gainsborough as his greatest work, was purchased by the Earl of Gainsborough for 500 guineas in 1789, but destroyed in a fire in 1810. Only engravings exist, such as one in the Royal Academy collection.

Source: *The Letters of Thomas Gainsborough*, *e*dited by John Hayes, (Paul Mellon Centre for British Art, Yale University Press 2001).