

**The Public Catalogue Foundation:  
A National Collection of Oil Paintings and its Interpretation**

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The Public Catalogue Foundation and its Partners

The PCF was founded in 2003 with a mission to make more accessible the oil paintings in national public collections. It was the inspiration of a single individual, the PCF's Chairman, Fred Hohler. The rationale can be summarised as follows. An estimated 80% of the oil paintings in public ownership in the United Kingdom are inaccessible to the public. In absolute terms, this means upwards of 150,000 paintings, which are presently out of sight, due to lack of space and other resources for their display, and in very many cases also due to an inability to conserve the pictures. A symbolic instance of this is a painting in the Art Gallery at Wolverhampton, in the English Midlands, by Richard Wilson (1). This picture of *Niagara Falls* was recently rediscovered being used to jam open a door. Folded eight times, it was not in good condition. At the same time, many collections lack a complete catalogue of the pictures they own. So what is publicly owned is not publicly accessible. The aim of the PCF is to complete a national inventory of all public collections of oil paintings by the year 2012. Today, its small team has completed listings for about 25% of the total.

The initial programme was to produce hard copy catalogues for each region surveyed, and this is the format in which PCF lists have so far been made available (2). With 22 catalogues already printed, and half a dozen more currently in process of publication, the project is on course to complete some 90 catalogues by 2012. The listing has been based on minimal criteria. A photographic record is made of every picture (in oil, acrylic or tempera; regardless of condition), and basic cataloguing information only is appended to this visual record (3). More an inventory than a catalogue as it is understood in the art historical profession, the PCF list thus far is not directly answering the questions of researchers, so much as providing an extraordinary tool for the opening up of new avenues for public interest and scholarly study.

While the publication of the catalogue volumes continues, it has been clear from the start of the project that the mission to enhance access to these images would be infinitely extended by the creation of an electronic database and an on-line version of the Public Catalogue Foundation inventories. This on-line cumulative catalogue of all oil paintings in public collections in the United Kingdom is now in course of development. It is to be called Your Paintings, and it will eventually provide instant access to the enormous collective resources of these diverse and scattered collections. A mock-up shows some of the intended functions of the website (4). In all, it will contain some 200,000 pictures dating from between the fifteenth and the twenty-first centuries. One intended function of the on-line site is to generate an income stream, particularly through sales of reproductions, which will help local museums to conserve and better to display the pictures themselves. It is also the intention, by publicising the visual treasures of the various collections, to encourage visitors to see the original paintings *in situ*.

In order to realise the on-line catalogue project, and to make it effective at a range of levels of both scholarly and non-professional users, a partnership is in process of formation around the Director of Your Paintings, Andrew Ellis. The initial academic partner of Your Paintings is the University of Oxford's Department of the History of Art, and a complementary academic partner in Scotland is likely to be the Art History Department of the University of Glasgow. Further potential partners at this stage include the Collections Trust, funded by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council to assist the management of public collections. Another is Culture 24, a government funded website promoting public awareness of museums and galleries. Finally, discussions are presently at a good stage with the BBC, which may eventually host the entire collection within its website. So this is a project still in process of definition; but the New Year should see the creation of an Advisory Council for Your Paintings which will formalise the association of these partners. It is also a project in quest of funding. The necessary financial support for the regional catalogues has been raised largely from local and other private sponsors and grants, with some 20% of support from public funding, and this continues to be the mechanism used to sustain the recording process. Now more substantial funds are needed, both to support the necessary intellectual input to ensure that the eventual content of the database makes

it fully usable by its variety of publics, and to pay for the technical construction of the website. So this is work in progress; but much has already been achieved, and momentum is gathering behind the vision of Your Paintings.

### A National Collection of Oil Paintings and its Interpretation

The PCF enterprise is a national project at more than one level. The issue of its national scope and identity is a very rich one, the implications of which are only just beginning to emerge as its cataloguing work proceeds. What follow are some initial reflections on the collection and its implications for the history of ideas about national identity.

Its scope embraces all collections currently in receipt of UK public funding. This includes civic museums and galleries, county council collections, and the holdings of other publicly funded institutions such as public libraries, police stations and fire brigades. Within the frame also are university collections, such as the Barber Institute of Fine Arts at Birmingham University and the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge (the list of which collection is the most recent PCF catalogue to appear). Another university collection is that of University College London, which incorporates the holdings of the Slade School of Art. The scope is thus national in that it proposes to make accessible to the British taxpayer those collections of paintings of which he or she is a part owner. This is one sense in which this vast and highly miscellaneous accumulation of images may be thought of as having a common identity: that of its collective ownership by the British public. The presentation of the works on-line will make a particular point of the fact that this is the people's national collection of oil paintings. While the original pictures will of course remain in their respective homes, the website will realise a virtual national gallery of oil paintings. There have been, and there are currently in preparation, other web-based galleries of images; but this one is of particular interest for its scale (it is probably the largest in the world) and for its conception as a national project.

The prototype national gallery, the example of which has influenced all of its successors, is the Louvre in Paris. Between the Louvre and Your Paintings there is one significant and resonant parallel: that the premise of both is a perceived need to

give the nation's public free access to art treasures of which it is the rightful owner, but from which it has been kept apart. The reasons for that separation are of course different in the two cases; but the motives for overcoming it are profoundly similar. By contrast with 1789, the rhetoric of popular access to the nation's cultural heritage is nowadays voiced as much by government as it is by others, and indeed it is to be hoped that government resources will in due course assist the realisation of this virtual national museum of oil paintings, thereby also helping to generate means to conserve the pictures themselves in their under-resourced local collections.

The artists of the works in these collections were (and are) themselves of diverse origins. A significant proportion of the pictures were made abroad by foreign artists. This sub-group of oil paintings in British collections was recently inventoried by the National Inventory Project as Continental Paintings in British Collections. A further group – one which is more substantial than many might suppose – comprises pictures made in Britain by foreign-born artists. The study of the fortunes of such artists in a British context, both in their lifetimes and in their posthumous reception, will be greatly facilitated by the inclusive PCF catalogue. At a more local level, the PCF lists encourage new work on regional schools of artists still relatively little known. The Norwich School enjoys international status; but the regional catalogues of the PCF are beginning to identify local groups of artists which have hitherto had no more than the most shadowy identity. The ability to search the entire collection for works by a given artist will permit the scattered outliers of a given *oeuvre* to be reassembled in a virtual mini-gallery at the push of a button, and will equally allow them to be juxtaposed for comparison with the works of potentially related painters. During the past six centuries, the period of production of the paintings in the PCF lists, regional cultural and artistic traditions have regularly been expressed in conscious relation to wider, national identities. The history of provincial schools is one aspect of the evolving idea of national culture.

At the same time, the motif of national identity runs through the PCF collections in other ways. A significant number of the public institutions in possession of oil paintings either commissioned or acquired these works with the purpose of defining and expressing the particular relationship of a given locality with the wider nation. Many of the richest provincial collections were built up between the mid-nineteenth

and the early twentieth centuries by town councils which, by the act of collecting or commissioning art works, sought to define their civic identity and to place it within the frame of a larger image, either of the English nation or of the British Empire. They were earlier attempts to ‘picture the nation’. These collections therefore offer a wealth of evidence for the evolution of ideas about national identity, particularly in that period of provincial urban industrialisation and commercial expansion. A relatively celebrated case in point, which indicates a much wider field for future study, is the series of murals commissioned for the new Town Hall in Manchester from the painter Ford Madox Brown in 1879. Together with sculpture, large scale oil paintings of historical and moral subjects were favoured as the means to propagate at once both civic and national values. In the case of Manchester, fierce debate about which subjects to include in the cycle contributed to the length of the project, which was only completed in 1893, the year of the artist’s death. The lack of agreement on suitable subjects and on how they should be treated is typical of such debates, and a reminder that the representation of national identity has never been a simple matter. Through scenes of Christianity, commerce and the textile industry, the city of Manchester is celebrated in the murals as a distillation of national values. In the depiction of *The Trial of John Wyclif*, the perceived first founder of English Protestantism, prominence is given to Wyclif’s patron and protector, John of Gaunt, who as Duke of Lancaster was appropriated by Mancunians as a local hero (5).

In other cases it was through a policy of acquisition that town councils developed the image of themselves as cultural leaders. In the hall of the Birmingham City Art Gallery is a plaque commemorating its opening in 1885. It reads: ‘By the gains of industry, we promote Art.’ This referred specifically to the profits of the council-owned Gas Department, which had funded the Museum’s construction and the related acquisition of its founding collection of oil paintings. Over the years which followed at the end of the nineteenth century, the Birmingham Gallery was to build up through purchase and gifts, as a deliberate celebration of local achievement, a collection of Pre-Raphaelite paintings which was promoted as a national treasure. In 1891 the city bought Ford Madox Brown’s *The Last of England*, painted much earlier in 1855 and already seen as an iconic image of national and imperial experience and identity (6). Two years later the gallery received as a gift the painting of *The Blind Girl*, painted almost forty years earlier by the now ageing and nationally celebrated John Everett

Millais (7). At the time the image was made, Millais had recently founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood with Rossetti and Holman Hunt; at the time of its accession to the municipal gallery in Birmingham, he had become the most celebrated painter in the country and President of the Royal Academy. These aspects, no less than the social subject-matter of the painting, lent national connotations to the image in the Birmingham collection.

Other paintings have found their way into diverse particular collections, where their presence is easily overlooked. Those wishing to explore the iconography of Victorian society will have, through the medium of Your Paintings, far readier access than at present to relevant material. Such a modern and specialist museum as the National Railway Museum in York turns out to house significant oil paintings of thematic relevance to the main collection, which is concentrated on railway engines. The PCF catalogues are rich in such hidden gems of local collections. The pictures in this instance include Abraham Solomon's optimistic pair of images showing what the railway could do for the Victorian provincial lad in search of his fortune. The first represents the departure from home by second-class railway ticket of the young boy who is the hope of his family (8). The second shows the same young man's return, after making good, in the comfort and social ease of a first-class compartment (9). The ability to create a personalised web gallery of a single artist will also facilitate work on more celebrated painters whose work is scattered in many collections, such as William Powell Frith. Famous for the success of *The Derby Day* (1856-8), the first picture shown at the Royal Academy which had to be protected from excited crowds by a barrier, and for such similar panoramas of Victorian society as *The Railway Station*, now at Royal Holloway, Frith produced, partly on commission, a long series of social studies which were given to or acquired for municipal art galleries during the later nineteenth century (10 a and b). Characteristic of these was *At the Opera, Preston*, a celebration of provincial culture commissioned by a Preston lawyer who subsequently, by the gift of his collection, in 1883 founded the local city art gallery (11 a). *The New Frock*, which the artist showed first at the Royal Academy, originally carried the title, *Vanity of Vanities, All is Vanity*, and thus engaged with a moral theme close to the heart of Victorian Christian culture (11 b). Yet the image was quickly appropriated by the Pears Soap company for a product advertisement, quite transforming the meaning of the image – to Frith's impotent

rage. Such ambivalence in a single image underlines once again the absence of any simple relation between painting and national culture.

There is infinite material here for future research on local and comparative images of civic culture, often refracting a wider vision of nationhood. Whether they were commissioned as new works or deliberately acquired to form public collections, topographical views, history painting, social commentary and religious works all fed the construction of deliberately articulated representations of collective identity.

A further dimension of this collection which opens itself up for study in relation to the theme of national identity is its particular concentration of twentieth-century works. When the website goes live, the wealth of British oil painting since 1900 will be one of the most impressive features of the whole collection. The sheer diversity of this material is one aspect, from the cosmopolitan sophistication of a Ben Nicholson to the naïve paintings of an Alfred Wallis, both of whom share space in Cornwall's County Council Collection (12, 13). Both are associated with that region of England, but *Your Paintings* will enable researchers to reassemble the dispersed *oeuvres* of modestly famous artists such as Wallis at the touch of a button. For example, works by Wallis also turn up in the collection of Essex University (14).

A field which deserves special attention is the output of the years between the two World Wars, by a range of artists who reflected explicitly in that period on the nature of Englishness. There is a neoromantic critique of modernity running through much of this work, which deserves to be considered, more seriously than it has been so far, as part of a wider cultural movement. Some of these artists are relatively well-known, such as Michael Ayrton (15) and Paul Nash (16). But others are not, and not least because their work has been literally invisible. Similar things could be said of other artists in the collections, whose work engaged more positively with twentieth-century European Modernism. One such artist was Wyndham Lewis, whose portrait of the poet Stephen Spender is not only a fine image in itself, but also a useful reminder of the need always to place the work of art in the wider cultural context within which the painter was operating (17). There is, in particular, a constant risk of falling into the rhetorical trap of perpetuating a narrowly parochial vision of art's history, if we choose to talk of cultural trends in narrowly national terms. The way to problematise

and question the dominant grand narrative of modern painting, which gives the palm first to Paris, then to New York, is arguably not to whinge about the under-representation of other national artistic traditions such as the British. However, there is at least sufficient material in the PCF catalogues to allow for a very much fuller review than has yet been attempted of the place of British art in the wider history of Modernism.

A remarkable window is opened onto English painting of the twentieth century by the PCF catalogue of the collections of University College London, which include prize paintings and other works by young artists at the Slade School of Art. Some of these are now household names, such as Stanley Spencer. Spencer learned at the Slade the importance of drawing, whether after casts or live models. He developed in his period of study there his close relationship with earlier English artists, especially the Pre-Raphaelites. Yet already in his *Nativity* of 1912, one of the pictures still to be found in the Slade School collection, one can see what his teacher, the great Henry Tonks, meant when he accused Spencer of having been corrupted by the first Post-Impressionist exhibition of 1910 (18). In fact, Spencer's work was shown in the second Post-Impressionist exhibition of 1912, the year of this painting. The blocks of colour, simplified figures and bold composition are redolent of modernism, while they also recall the painting of the early Italian Renaissance. Sometimes seen, both on account of the studied simplicity of his technique and because of his close attachment to the village of Cookham which inspired most of his better known paintings, as a provincial artist, Spencer reveals in this early work an awareness of modern art across the Channel which again throws into question certain assumptions about the insularity of English art in the first half of the twentieth century.

The Slade holdings are also rich in the work of less familiar painters, including many women artists who, having studied at the school, enjoyed little notice thereafter. Whereas Paula Rego, represented in the Slade collection by *Under Milkwood*, painted in the year that Dylan Thomas's radio play was first broadcast (19), now enjoys considerable fame and status, Winifred Knights is one of these unsung heroes of twentieth-century British art – figures whose proper inclusion in the overall picture must lead to a significant reassessment of what British art in the twentieth century really *was*. Having gained entry to the Slade, Knights won a Summer Prize and a

Rome Scholarship, producing some fine works still to be found in the Slade collection. In her own way, Knights too worked on the borders of modernism (20).

To conclude: the PCF project thus offers up a UK-wide art collection, re-presented to the public with a deliberately national emphasis. This is an image of British identity which takes account not only of the issue of gender, but also of the presence of a much wider range of artists than ever before who were born outside Britain, and who now contribute to making up the nation. Francis Newton Souza was born in Goa and studied at the Bombay School of Art until expelled in 1945 for his left-wing views and support of the Quit India Movement. He emigrated to England where he became a significant Asian artist working in Britain. In this sadly reflective picture of 1957, *Negro in Mourning*, Souza commented on the race riots of that year (21). He observed a good deal of racial prejudice at that time, but noticed that black people received the worst treatment at the hands of English whites. Birmingham City Art Gallery decided to acquire the picture for its public collection in 1997, as part of a conscious engagement with the continuing issue of racial coexistence in Britain. From whichever angle we scrutinise the collection, it throws back complexities and inconsistencies, refusing to yield any simple or coherent portrait of national culture. Perhaps, in the end, this fragmented and unstable picture of national identity is a faithful portrait of its subject.