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## **The art trade and the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum: history and biography**

by Hugo Chapman, keeper of prints and drawings at the British Museum, London

As a specialist in Italian drawings I am very honoured to be talking at a Codart conference, but I have to admit I have some misgivings about being on this podium. Firstly my pronunciation of any Dutch and Flemish artist's name is so poor that whenever I speak to my colleague An Van Camp, who looks after this area in the Department of Prints and Drawings, I am met with a look of total incomprehension whenever I speak of them. Secondly, and much more seriously, my move from working at Christie's to taking the post of curator of Italian drawings at the British Museum occurred twenty years ago in 1995 so it is very old news. I suggested a number of alternatives such as Taco Dibbits who rose to far greater heights than I did at Christie's and in his subsequent museum career in Amsterdam but my attempts to avoid appearing before you were rebuffed. I suspect there is a unwritten Codart rule that each conference has to feature a dull British speaker to make the other Codart contributors seem even more sparkling and brilliant.

If so this year those that follow on from have really hit the jackpot.

I worked at Christie's for ten years after joining them weeks after completing a BA art history degree at London university in 1985, one that had introduced me to drawings thanks to Caroline Elam and Pat Rubin's insistence in their Raphael course that we visited the Ashmolean and the BM to look at his drawings. This revived in me an interest in graphic art that had begun when as a scruffy schoolboy in a boarding school outside Oxford I had been allowed to come and look at Rembrandt prints in the Study Room of the Ashmolean. While my passion for Raphael drawings helped win me a job at Christie's as a junior cataloguer in the Old Master drawings department, my knowledge did not extend much beyond his work. As Raphael studies are not a staple of Old Master Drawings sales I therefore had to undergo a crash course to make me a more useful cataloguer of Old Master drawings of all kinds. I owe a huge debt to the vast amount that my much more knowledgeable colleagues Noël Annesley and Francis Russell in London and later Johan Bosch van Rosenthal in Amsterdam shared with me over the course of my time there. In addition to the time spent learning on the job I spent most of my salary in St George's Gallery Bookshop in Duke Street presided over by Agatha Sadler who allowed me to buy, often on credit, anything I could find on drawings.

My evenings were spent reading these books, my long days cataloguing and researching the diverse drawings that were sold in 3 London sales plus one in New York and another in Amsterdam, and every Saturday I would spend the mornings in the BM Study Room and the afternoon in the V&A looking at drawings. Such obsessive study and exposure to drawings of all kinds from masterpieces from Chatsworth to worthless fakes was invaluable, and while this inevitably developed my ability to recognise the graphic mannerisms of certain individual artists perhaps more importantly it allowed over time for me to build up an sense of the qualities of line, touch and sensibility that help distinguish the work of a talented draftsman from a less capable one, an original from a copy. While I loved working at Christie's, the long hours and travelling in search of lots to sell were not well suited to marriage and being father of two small boys, not to mention the relentless rhythm and insatiability of the auction room

where surrounded by the hard-won fruits of a sale one was frequently asked what had been secured for the next one. So when Nicholas Turner, the curator of Italian drawings at the BM, left to go to the Getty in 1995 I thought it worth applying for his old job although I felt I had little chance of success without a doctorate and a just single *Burlington Magazine* article to my name.

But I was in luck as Nicholas Turner has left just at the point when the BM's campaign to catalogue on computer its entire collection had reached the Italian drawings in P&D, and as only a small percentage of the 8000 or so of them had been catalogued before Antony Griffiths, the then Keeper of the department, required someone with a wide-ranging knowledge of Italian drawings to oversee the project. To that end the main focus of the interview was the identification of a tall pile of Italian drawings from the Museum's collection spanning the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. While I would contend that a curatorial interview should always involve some first-hand investigation and discussion of the kinds of works that the advertised role will be responsible for, in retrospect the set-up of my interview, where identification of the artists responsible for the drawings was given such a high premium, was one unwittingly stacked in my favour. Not only was I unfazed by the task as identifying drawings at the front counter of Christie's was something I did on a daily basis, but I was so sure that I was simply making up the numbers that I could afford to be relaxed if I got some of them wrong. I was therefore stunned when I was subsequently offered the job. My future colleagues at the Museum were no less surprised as few of them knew who I was. Whether Antony Griffiths and the interview board (which included the then Director of the BM, Robert Anderson, and Nick Penny) made the right call on the appointment is not me for answer, but I'm sure it is one that could only have happened in the UK where hands-on experience can sometimes trump academic qualifications. Now that I have been at the BM almost twenty years, I also realise that the Department of Prints and Drawings historic links with the art trade made the appointment of an auction house-trained curator much less out of keeping than I had imagined.

It could be argued that the Prints and Drawings Department (or P&D) owes its very existence to the art trade since it was the dealer Samuel Woodburn in 1806 who alerted the Museum to the systematic pillaging of Cracherode's great collection of Rembrandt prints bequeathed in 1799. The prints and drawings were in the early 1800s a sub-section of the printed book department and the caricaturist Robert Dighton, the artist responsible for the caricature of James Christie we have just seen, befriended the librarian looking after it and was unwisely left unsupervised to study the collection. The result was that Dighton acquired a magnificent collection of Rembrandt prints which he boldly stamped with his own collector's mark, a 'D' in a palette, and frequently he added false marks and inscriptions, as An Van Camp has shown in a recent article in the *Burlington Magazine*, in an attempt to mask their stolen provenance. He overreached himself when he tried to sell to the pre-eminent print dealer of the day Samuel Woodburn an impression of a print then believed to be one of the great Rembrandt print rarities. Cracherode had spent the enormous sum of £19 acquiring it at the John Barnard sale in 1798, and Woodburn clearly remembered such a high-priced item. He duly went off to the BM to see how it compared to the Cracherode example, only to find that it could not be found. Dighton was unmasked as a thief and handed back as many of the prints he could locate but he was never prosecuted. The Museum's embarrassment of its incompetence, including the lack of an inventory to check how many prints had been stolen, was just too great to prosecute Dighton, but it did result in the Trustees setting up Prints and

Drawings as a separate section of the Museum with a Keeper tasked with ensuring its security.

The Trustees back in 1808 were not spoiled for choice in their selection of the Keeper of the new department as those with some knowledge of the graphic arts were either artists or those in the art trade. They elected for the former with the appointment of the artist William Alexander, whose skills as a draftsman had led to his being taken to record Lord Macartney's diplomatic mission to the Emperor of China in 1792-4 and his adoption of a pirate-like patch over one eye in his self-portrait dates from his voyage there or back from this trip. As Keeper Alexander was kept busy making drawings of classical sculptures which meant he had little time to look after the collection and the Trustees therefore called for outside expertise in the shape of the auctioneer and dealer Thomas Philipe to rearrange the Museum's collection of prints into new albums, a project that sadly erased much of the distinctions between the various bequests that made up the collection. But Philipe's temporary employment signalled that the Trustees recognised that the Keeper of P&D needed to have wide-ranging knowledge above all of prints as they constituted the largest portion of the collection, and their subsequent appointments recognised that it was the art trade that provided such experience. The indolent John Thomas Smith, the son of a print dealer, proved a poor pick, and the short-lived appointment of the brilliant connoisseur and trail blazing collector William Young Ottley came too late as he was too ill and worn down for the Museum to benefit from his long experience as a *marchand amateur* of prints, drawings and pictures (such as Botticelli's *Mystic Nativity* and Raphael's *Dream of a Knight* hanging upstairs).

The Trustees' choice as Ottley's replacement in 1836 of the 34 year old Henry Josi, the son of the Utrecht-born art dealer Christian who had settled with his family in London in 1819, proved to be an enlightened one for in Antony Griffith's words in the 'Landmarks in Prints collecting' he was the 'founder of the modern Department of Prints and Drawings'. Key to that transformation of its collection through the purchase of a string of major print collections was the friendship and alliance that Josi, along with his successor as Keeper, William Hookham Carpenter, maintained with the pre-eminent London print seller William Smith. What William and his brother George did for the Museum was to buy major print collections, tailor them for the Department's needs by removing works that were already there, and wait patiently for payment while Josi and Carpenter put together the money from soliciting Trustees and the government. This alliance between museum and an art dealer, which of course benefitted Smith's business too, was felt within months of Josi's arrival with the purchase in 1836 for £5,000 of John Sheepshanks' collection of Dutch and Flemish prints and drawings

The package of 7,666 prints and 812 drawings from Sheepshanks collection that the BM acquired from William Smith changed the course of the department because it showed an ambition to extend the collection rather than relying on bequests and donations as it had done so from its foundation in 1753. The dealing with Smith was so productive because it coincided with a rare period when the Treasury was willing to back the BM's graphic acquisitions, perhaps chastened by the failure to buy en bloc Sir Thomas Lawrence's amazing drawing collection after his death in 1830. From Josi's appointment in 1836 to Carpenter's death in 1866 well over £50,000 had been spent on purchases, the majority via Smith. Indeed the BM's extraordinary collection charting the beginning of printmaking north and south of the Alps is due in large part to the two collections of early prints that Smith assembled and sold to the Museum in 1845 when he closed his print business. Such as the

Schongauer 'Adoration'; the hand coloured Master AIM of Zwolle in the middle; and a unique impression of a print regarded as being by Leonardo on the right. While other dealers must surely have grumbled at Smith's close ties with Prints and Drawings, it was a relationship that was hugely positive to the Museum especially as Smith donated his annotated auction catalogues in 1850 and his collection of satire prints the next year which remain the core of the BM's remarkable holdings.

While it is unlikely that such a monopolistic relationship with a single dealer would ever be replicated in the modern era, there are more recent examples of what can be achieved by a friendship between a public-minded dealer and a museum curator: for example the quality of drawings that Karl Parker acquired for the Ashmolean Museum from James Byam Shaw at Colnaghi's from the 1930s to the 1960s.

While I was the first auction-trained curator to join the British Museum there had been moves in the other direction in the Department's history. A.E. Popham, the recently retired Keeper of prints and Drawings, was employed by Christie's to write the auction catalogue of the eighteenth-century Old master Drawing collection of John Skippe in 1958; and more seriously the great connoisseur of Italian paintings and drawings, Philip Pouncey was lured to Sotheby's in 1966 although he continued to work with Jon Gere on the catalogue of Roman Mannerist drawings. My movement of little over a mile from King Street to Bloomsbury meant that I went from a poorly paid job in the private sector to an worse paid as a civil servant, but the hardest element in the transition was to remain unaffected by the change in status I gained from that small geographical shift. When I gave an opinion on a drawing, or wrote about it in a catalogue note, at Christie's my view did not on the whole carry great weight, but the moment that I became Hugo Chapman of the British Museum suddenly I found that I had a spurious authority. I say spurious because my knowledge of Italian drawings unfortunately had not magnified just because I was inhabiting a post once filled by titans such as Popham, Pouncey and Gere. As I was all too aware of my frailties as a specialist in the field I elected from the outset that while I was ready to give my opinion on attributions to dealers and auction houses, I never wanted my name to be mentioned. That was an easy enough decision since at Christie's my proudest discoveries were always similarly anonymous, such as my working out from a very dim photocopy sent by a Scandinavian dealer that the drawing he had was a development of a Rembrandt drawing in the BM.

Giving opinions anonymously can sometimes be frustrating when that knowledge potentially makes someone a lot of money with no benefit to the Museum, but I can think of no alternative aside from never giving an opinion on anything apart from works in public collections. Personally I don't feel a need to have my name quoted in an auction catalogue because my curatorial obligation to stand up and be counted only extends to works under my care. So while I think it would be justified for me to express my views on say a Michelangelo drawing in the BM's collection I don't feel there is any compunction to do so for a drawing by him, or not by him, elsewhere. The hold that art dealers and auction houses used to have on specialists to express their views was in large part through the preciousness of reproductions. (Pouncey's letters in the BM are full, for example, of requests to dealers of a black and white photograph for his fototeca). But that has surely now gone since in a digital world such images are easily obtainable, moreover the ease of communication now makes it much easier for an owner of a work of art to find the relevant museum or university based expert without the need for a dealer or auction house. In the litigious world we now inhabit I

think there is a strong case for museum-based specialist avoiding expressing their opinions in auction and dealer catalogues, and I think it is open to question whether the public duties of a curator require it. I certainly would dissuade any P&D curator from doing so, although off the record discussion and consultations with the art trade will, I hope, always remain a part of what we do. I realise that boundaries are hard to maintain since an opinion given on a work in a private collection is often passed on when it is offered for sale, but the request that any opinion given never be quoted is usually respected.

While I am happy to be asked, I will very occasionally tell the owner that the work is something that the Museum would like to have in the collection and that I will keep silent as to who I think it is by. As most dealers and auctioneers are very knowledgeable they usually work it out. Sometimes another approach is more productive for the Museum, as when I recognised that a lively drawing in a New York auction called 'North Italian School, 16<sup>th</sup> century' was by the deeply obscure late 16<sup>th</sup>-century painter from Forli Francesco Menzocchi. As I had hoped a saleroom notice reporting this attribution and the connection with a painting by the artist turned an intriguing anonymous work that might perhaps turn out to be by someone important to a secure work by a provincial artist no-one had ever heard of. It went unsold and we bought it for a modest sum after the sale.

There are clearly major ethical issues involved with curatorial interaction with the art trade, especially in areas such as Antiquities and indigenous art where questions of sourcing and provenance are so delicate as well as in the high rolling sphere of contemporary art where an exhibition of an artist's work can have major financial implications. With common sense and transparency (such as stating where newly acquired works were purchased from) there is much less of a danger in the world we inhabit. However, I am mindful that I say this from the perspective of the head of a department with a tiny acquisition budget and a great historical collection so our engagement with the art world will always be as peripheral figures. That said the majority of our supporters who do provide funds for us to participate in a modest way to add to our collection are art dealers, and they do so for disinterested reasons because there is no fiscal advantage to be gained from helping us. Curators and reputable auctioneers and dealer are natural allies when they share a common passion for works of art, and they are often generous in giving back to the museum collections that nourished their interests and whose sharing of knowledge, as in the BM's vast database, helps their work. For our part we curators need to understand and be aware of the art market in our respective fields because we are less likely to repeat the disaster such as the British Museum's rejection in 1984 of the offer of £5 million as too expensive of a group of 70 drawings that sold for over 21 million pounds.

The adaptability and breadth of knowledge, the writing and presentation skills and the ability to work under extreme time pressures that I picked up from my training in Christie's are, I believe, ones that are perhaps even more useful as a grounding for a museum curator especially in the UK where shrinking budgets will likely result in fewer curators looking after wider swathes of the collection. And as some of you may know our most recent curatorial addition last year Sarah Vowles, who is now responsible for looking after our Italian and French prints and drawings, also came from Christie's Old Master Drawings department. Her appointment is the latest chapter in the long and largely beneficial engagement that the Prints and Drawings department has had with the art trade – thank you