

Looking for Civilisation, Discovering Clark

Review of:

'Kenneth Clark – Looking for Civilisation', An Exhibition at Tate Britain,
20 May – 10 August 2014

Matthew C Potter

As the push for blockbuster shows and record-breaking audiences exerts ever greater pressure upon the London art world I must admit that I had certain misgivings as to what an exhibition like this could hope to achieve. There was no promise of high-profile masterpieces, of an innovative spin in juxtaposing familiar works in a new light, or of a revolutionary subtext armed with 'sound bites' appropriate for the digital cultural age in which we live. In fact the exhibition has been rather dismissively described as the latest in a recent run of niche exhibitions held at Tate Britain addressing a narrow 'intellectual' elite which fail to deliver.¹ Yet such a view is really quite mean-spirited and counter-productive. The modern high-profile art gallery is required to be all things to all people: catering to the full spectrum of audiences, from the art expert to the general public, including diverse social groups, and offering a variety of formats for their shows. Responding to this remit art galleries may provide exhibitions with mass appeal, or a tranche of speciality shows, or both. Art historians and those interested in the discipline of art history equally deserve attention as audience members, and the recent *Kenneth Clark – Looking for Civilisation* was a welcome departure from the tried and tested approaches of the past in doing so. In a modest and unpretentious way, this exhibition attempted a refreshingly innovative, if understated, strategy which aimed at capturing and synthesizing the holistic nature of what it meant to be an art historian in the twentieth century. I pause before deploying 'modern era' because whilst many of Clark's innovative activities are visible in the current skill set of art historians (scholarly publications, curatorial practice, press interventions, etc.), new developments in terms of blogging, tweeting, and virtual curating have further extended the *métier* of the art historian in its physical extent if not truly in its intellectual scope.

Art historians as exhibition subjects

Some may believe it an overstatement that *Kenneth Clark – Looking for Civilisation* was ground-breaking but it must be remembered that the choice of an art historian as historical subject matter for an exhibition is rare. However a recent example of this was afforded by the special display on *Antiquity Unleashed: Aby Warburg, Dürer and Mantegna* which took place at the Courtauld Institute Gallery (17 October 2013 to 12 January 2014) and now serves to demonstrate aptly its contrasting ambitions to

¹ L.L.B., 'Kenneth Clark at Tate Britain: A civilising force', *The Economist*, 5 June 2014, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2014/06/kenneth-clark-tate-britain>, accessed 7.10.2014.

those of the Clark exhibition. *Antiquity Unleashed* reconstructed the visual materials from the Hamburger Kunsthalle collection employed by Warburg in his 1905 lecture to an audience of around 300 people. Many thousands presumably saw the modern display, enlarging the impact of this art historical artefact in its recreation.² Yet recreating a specific art historical 'moment' or 'happening' represents a much more modest ambition, further qualified within its Courtauld Gallery context, for it was an adjunct display to the main feature exhibition of *The Young Dürer: Drawing the Figure* (running for the same period) which it accompanied.

This 'partial view' format is perhaps the natural medium for exhibitions connected to art historians. It is more manageable and conforms to the periodic research interests of the art historian in his or her carousel of research (in response to topicality, the chain reaction of ideas, etc.). The Warburg recreation thus posthumously reproduced the 'live' effects of art historical speculation (albeit in an ossified form through the restaging) which might be seen in other 'art historical' displays of the past, for example, Sir Ernst Gombrich's contribution (display, lecture/video and book) on *Shadows: The Depiction of Cast Shadows in Western Art* at the National Gallery, London (1995).³ The benefits such exhibitions afford in the realm of self-reflection are great. Museologists have contemplated the existential repercussions of such reckonings. As Debora J. Meijers has argued, historians, art historians, and curators reflect such thought-processes in their practices through blurring the boundaries between their disciplines for 'An exhibition designer who regards his activity as art is not essentially different from the historian who becomes increasingly aware of the literary dimension of his historical account'.⁴ *Kenneth Clark – Looking for Civilisation* invokes similar questions. Certainly an exhibition which is essentially 'about' an art historian needs to be reviewed in a different way from an exhibition of work by an individual artist or group of artists. Indeed this disconnect in expectations has caused problems for the reception of the exhibition, with the 'indigestible' academic ingredients and the varied visual smorgasbord causing frustration for some critics.⁵ The lack of first-rate works was a common cause of complaint, and *Apollo's* Peter Crack clearly flagged up the potential dangers involved in the balancing act between intellectual and crowd-pleasing elements in the design of any exhibition: 'The wider public may not warm to this rather niche exhibition. The eclectic display and lack of major "masterpieces" may well drive the crowds elsewhere. But those who venture in will be rewarded with an absorbing portrait of a man who profoundly shaped the British art establishment as we know

² <http://www.courtauldassociation.com/news/73214/Toulouse-Lautrec-exhibition-breaks-gallery-attendance-records.htm> accessed 7.10.2014.

³ *Gombrich on Shadows*, VHS video: London, National Gallery, 1995; E.H. Gombrich, *Shadows: the Depiction of Cast Shadows in Western art*, London and New Haven: National Gallery Publications and Yale University Press, 1995.

⁴ Debora J. Meijers, 'The Museum and the "Ahistorical" Exhibition', in Bruce W. Ferguson, Reesa Greenberg, and Sandy Nairne (eds.), *Thinking About Exhibitions*, London: Routledge, 2005, 13.

⁵ Jackie Wullschlager, 'Kenneth Clark: Looking for Civilisation, Tate Britain', *Financial Times*, 23 May 2014: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/1ae8da2c-e026-11e3-9534-00144feabdc0.html#slide0> accessed 7.10.2014.

it'.⁶ For as the text panel in the first room of the exhibition states, it 'tells the story of Clark's vital role in describing, promoting and preserving those works of art that, for him, stood at the heart of civilised life'.⁷ Matthew Wilson extrapolated this line to couch a larger complaint regarding the coherency of the exhibition's design, arguing that 'the exhibition also lacked a strong, continuous line of argument: we are presented with Clark's career as collector, patron and popularizer of culture – but none of these threads came to conclusions'.⁸

Yet whatever the validity of such observations regarding visitor numbers and the like, these judgments are also open to the charge of myopia on the specific plane of intellectual ambition. To represent the full range of Clark's activities holistically is a risk worth taking and to provide an overarching thesis to reconcile all the constituent parts perhaps would be a herculean task for any curator. As Jackie Wullschlager notes this exhibition displayed many paradoxes, but perhaps this is fitting for a show dedicated to a man whose interests were so varied and seemingly counter-intuitive for in a key observation on Clark, she notes it is a 'very English paradox that a revolution in how high culture was delivered to mass audiences was achieved by such a patrician figure'.⁹ To recast the show's remit in a way that flows counter to its eventual unpretentious character, it might be argued that in *Kenneth Clark – Looking for Civilisation* Chris Stephens and John-Paul Stonard were in the business of representing the art of being an art historian through the medium of an exhibition; a process which invokes exactly the kind of self-reflective questions raised earlier in terms of the ambitions of range, message and narrative structure.

The organization of the exhibition

The decision by the curators to allow the material to speak for itself obviously tended to encourage subscription to the 'no thesis' perspective. The organization of the exhibition followed a roughly-chronological framework, with the titles and contents of the first three rooms biographical (Room 1 'Kenneth Clark' or 'From Childhood to the "Great Clark Boom"'; Room 2 'Collector'; Room 3 'Patron'), and the final three largely thematic (Room 4 'New Romantics', Room 5 'Wartime', and Room 6 'Post-War').¹⁰ Reviewers unsurprisingly chose to emphasize the biographical details of the patrician-demagogue. The first room played up to these

⁶ Matthew Wilson, 'Review of Kenneth Clark, Looking for Civilisation, Tate Britain', *Aesthetica blog*: <http://www.aestheticamagazine.com/blog/review-kenneth-clark-looking-civilisation-tate-britain/#sthash.15XzTrYf.dpuf> accessed 7.10.2014; Fisun Güner, 'Kenneth Clark: Looking for Civilisation, Tate Britain', *The Arts desk.com*, 1 June 2014: <http://www.theartsdesk.com/visual-arts/kenneth-clark-looking-civilisation-tate-britain> accessed 7.10.2014; Peter Crack, 'Review: Kenneth Clark at Tate Britain', *Apollo*, 11 June 2014: <http://www.apollo-magazine.com/review-kenneth-clark-tate-britain/> accessed 7.10.2014.

⁷ Exhibition main display panel, Room 1: 'From Childhood to the "Great Clark Boom"'.

⁸ Wilson, *Aesthetica blog*.

⁹ Wullschlager, *Financial Times*.

¹⁰ Chris Stephens and John-Paul Stonard (eds.), *Kenneth Clark – Looking for Civilisation*, London: Tate, 2014, 144.

narratives by presenting the privileged position Clark enjoyed from his birth into, as he put it, an 'idle rich' family. This was compounded by his father's interest in the arts – collecting and commissioning Victorian and Edwardian works (cats. 3 and 4), buying thought-provoking works for his son and encouraging his interest in others (such as Japanese prints (cats.10-15), Charles Keene drawings (cat.7), Aubrey Beardsley (cat.8) – a rich visual lattice that is captured 'biographically' in the portraits displayed of the exhibition's subject by John Lavery (cat.5: c.1910), Charles Sims (cat.6: c.1911), Graham Sutherland (cat.2: 1963-4: [click to view](#))* and Duncan Grant (cat.27: c.1932) study portraits, as well as the fashionable photographs by Hugh Cecil and Man Ray of Clark and his wife, Jane, in the 1930s (cats.28-9).¹¹ The exhibition contains contemporary cuttings that demonstrate how Kenneth and Jane Clark were feted around Europe in the 1930s during the 'Clark boom years' as he put it.¹² His independent means allowed him to preside over soirees at his London house attended by royalty and the cream of artistic society. These photographs and cuttings provide an intimate glimpse which broadens our emotional contact with the young Clark. Sims' portrait of the nine-year old is quietly echoed in a nearby display case which contained a family photograph album (private collection; item number 204435), in which one image captures the scene depicted by Sims of Clark playing with a model yacht on the bank of the River Alde close to their home of Sudbourne Hall in Suffolk.¹³ We rarely glimpse the impact of this aesthetically-rich environment on the young Clark but in Room 1 just such an opportunity affords itself. In the central cabinet Clark's own *Japonisme Design* in ink on paper (Tate Archive TGA 8812/5/1/76; item 204454) explains the creativity and experimentation triggered by such objects.

These privileged beginnings have been foregrounded not only by the media but also the establishment which during the late twentieth century bristled under the tensions between aristocracy and meritocracy: as reflected in Bernard Berenson's misgivings over his relative status as a 'self-made' outsider compared to the effortless achievements and recognition of his erstwhile acolyte; or David Cast's suggestion that Clark's legacy has been disrupted by 'Simple envy [which] may have led many members of his own profession to deny him the recognition he deserved'.¹⁴ Yet within the cultural contexts of the present age – with the post-1980s rise of Neo-Liberalism, the creation of the 'classless' society, and the current shift to the centre-right in politics – perhaps now provides the perfect opportunity to rescue Clark from the jealousies of his colleagues. Nevertheless Clark himself was aware that he was not a member of the hereditary landed aristocracy; his family's money

¹¹ John-Paul Stonard, 'Looking for Civilisation', in Stephens and Stonard (eds.), *Kenneth Clark – Looking for Civilisation*, 13-15; see also Chris Stephens, 'Patron and Collector', in Stephens and Stonard (eds.), *Kenneth Clark – Looking for Civilisation*, 79-99.

* In this and subsequent captions [[source](#)] and ([click to view](#)) connect to the image's location on a remote webpage, accessed 9.11.2014. Readers will appreciate that such links may be unstable.

¹² Kenneth Clark, *Another Part of the Wood: A Self-Portrait*, London: Murray [1974], 211.

¹³ Meryle Secrest, *Kenneth Clark: A Biography*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984, 28.

¹⁴ David Cast, 'Clark, Kenneth (MacKenzie)', in Jane Turner (ed.), *The Dictionary of Art*, London: Grove/Macmillan 1996: 34 Vols., vol. 10, 376.

was made more recently and mundanely from sewing threads and cotton reels. Some of this family history comes out in the textile-displays and a cotton reel in one of the small display cases.

Not only did the exhibition provide 'a flavour of the man', but it demonstrated 'Clark's contribution to British art' as a cultural statesman.¹⁵ Speaking to *The Guardian*, Tate Britain's director, Penelope Curtis, explained that the exhibition was designed to trace the enormous cultural phenomenon of Clark, especially his 'huge legacy' on British collections, while Chris Stephens hoped the exhibition would be celebratory without entering into hagiography.¹⁶ Whether or not the Tate Britain team consciously contemplated the ideological implications of such an approach, it is clear that any exhibition on Clark would inevitably invoke such discussion. The above-noted paradox of Clark as the democratic patrician was echoed in his efforts to open up the National Gallery to new audiences, be it with late night and FA Cup-day openings, the introduction of electric lighting, and so on.¹⁷ The compromise involved in being a democratic patrician was clearly brought out in Clark's 1958 Television documentary *Can Art Be Democratic?*¹⁸

The politics of Civilisation

In his major televisual legacy, *Civilisation* (BBC 2: 1969), Clark presented a 'classic' humanistic abhorrence of iconoclasm but also did more than this in introducing the programme's starting point. Clark deployed a subtle but clever psychological device to provide a frame of reference for his approach. Speculating on the effect of a dragon-headed Viking prow upon a ninth-century Parisienne 'as menacing to her civilization as a periscope of a nuclear submarine', Clark was employing a combination of universalism and relativism in order to suggest that the 'abstracting' effects of art history were potentially hazardous in removing the real dangers – social, economic or political – which are encoded both in the past and in the way the past is treated by subsequent ages.¹⁹ For Clark the message was simple:

¹⁵ Güner, *The Arts desk.com*; Crack, *Apollo*.

¹⁶ Mark Brown, 'Kenneth Clark: Tate Britain examines Civilisation presenter's legacy', *The Guardian*, 19 May 2014: <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2014/may/19/kenneth-clark-tate-britain-civilisation-british-art> accessed 7.10.2014; Penelope Curtis further outlined her vision for the exhibition in Penelope Curtis, 'Director's Foreword', in Stephens and Stonard (eds.), *Kenneth Clark – Looking for Civilisation*, 7.

¹⁷ Wullschlager, *Financial Times*; Güner, *The Arts desk.com*; Nicholas Serota, 'The revolution will be civilised: celebrating the art historian Kenneth Clark', *New Statesman*, May 29 2014: <http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2014/05/revolution-will-be-civilised-celebrating-art-historian-kenneth-clark> accessed 7.10.2014; Brown, *The Guardian*; Richard Dorment, 'Kenneth Clark: Looking for Civilisation, review: 'makes Clark fallible but more likeable'', *The Telegraph*, 19 May 2014: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-reviews/10841255/Kenneth-Clark-Looking-for-Civilisation-a-lifetimes-understanding.html> accessed 7.10.2014.

¹⁸ John Wyver, 'Television', in Stephen and Stonard (eds.), *Kenneth Clark – Looking for Civilisation*, 128.

¹⁹ Kenneth Clark, *Civilisation*, 1969: part 1 of 13: 'The Skin of Our Teeth': <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ElcYjCzj8oA> at 04:17 - 04:42 mins, accessed 18.10.2014.

complacency not barbarism was the real enemy hammering at the gate. Even before his media outings of the 1960s, Clark represented a bastion of conservative values.²⁰ His contemplated collaboration with Berenson on revising *The Drawings of the Florentine Painters* in 1926, his work on the catalogue of Leonardo's drawings in the Royal Collection (1929), and his early lectures on Italian Renaissance artists (1930), surely set the standards for his understanding of the history of art as a celebration of individual geniuses, and the forces of order over those of chaos and entropy.

The adjective 'conservative' litters the various reviews of the exhibition in describing the cultural outlook of Kenneth Clark.²¹ The parameters of this ideological battleground are perhaps most fittingly represented in the 1969 television series due to its Cold War context and the fact that we can re-experience it in a manner close to its original conditions. The Director of the Tate, Nicholas Serota, provides a useful turn of phrase in the *New Statesman*, articulating Clark's hope to civilize the revolution in a manner that invokes Edmund Burke and Friedrich Schiller as much as the Capitalist-Communist face-off of the 1960s. Ben Luke in the *London Evening Standard* not only quoted the concluding remarks from the final episode of *Civilisation* (speaking of 'the moral and intellectual failure of Marxism') in order to suggest that Clark was wilfully ignoring the events in Paris, but also referred to John Berger's Marxist *Ways of Seeing* (1972) as a just 'riposte' to Clark's obstructing conservatism.²² Yet such a reading is perhaps overly simplistic and unfair to Clark. In quoting from W.B. Yeats' *The Second Coming* (1919) Clark makes it clear that the crisis of Western civilization is not to be blamed upon outsiders (ancient Barbarians, modern students, or Communists) but the failings of that patrician class he represented, whose cultural 'centre cannot hold', for 'the moral and intellectual failure of Marxism has left us with no alternative to heroic materialism and that isn't enough'.²³ Clark damns humanistic complacency more strongly than its opponents: although to reinforce rather than reduce its potency. There was in fact no real sense of threat from Marxism, for the appearance of a Soviet 'nuclear submarine' would be, after all, a symptom not a cause of the collapse of the West.

Clark continued this critique in his written work. In his 1956 preface to *The Nude*, Clark drew attention to Wilhelm Hausenstein's *Der Nackte Mensch in der Kunst Aller Zeiten* (1913) 'in which much useful material is cooked into a Marxist stew'.²⁴ Ideology did not prevent utility (as was the case in Clark's similar attack on Josef Strzygowski).²⁵ During 1968, it would have been impossible for Clark to have

²⁰ Wilson, *Aesthetica* blog.

²¹ Wullschlager, *Financial Times*; Crack, *Apollo*.

²² Ben Luke, 'Civilisation: the passions and prejudices of Kenneth Clark', *London Evening Standard*, 20 May 2014: <http://www.standard.co.uk/goingout/exhibitions/civilisation-the-passions-and-prejudices-of-kenneth-clark-9401507.html> accessed 7.10.2014.

²³ Clark, *Civilisation*, 1969: part 13 of 13: 'Heroic Materialism': http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=waoEyjE_dtU at 46:15 - 46:48 mins, accessed 18.10.2014.

²⁴ Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study of Ideal Art*, London: J. Murray, 1956, xxi.

²⁵ See Matthew C. Potter, 'Breaking the shell of the Humanist egg: Kenneth Clark's University of London Lectures on German Art Historians', *Journal of Art Historiography*, vol. 11, December 2014, 17.

ignored the Student Rising in Paris as his producer, Michael Gill, recollected that whilst they avoided capturing the riot police on film he did not escape the effects of their tear gas.²⁶ David Cast's reference to Clark's professional ostracization, referred to above, has more perhaps to do with the Leftist position of the New Art History of the 1970s than the incompatibility of Clark's manner with art history itself. While the appointment of the Neo-Marxist T.J. Clark as professor of art history at Harvard University in 1980 was swiftly judged as paradigm-shifting, marking the power change from New Leftist 'outsiders' to a position at the centre of the academic establishment, it is clear that this situation of ascendancy was short-lived.²⁷ During subsequent re-adjustments of the landscape of art history, even the erstwhile opponents of Kenneth Clark warmed to his views a little. Peter Fuller shifted away from his former allegiances with Berger to embrace a Ruskinian aesthetic position not only memorialized in the journal *Modern Painters*, which he founded in 1988, but also compatible with Clark's own Ruskinian vision and advocacy of artists like J.M.W. Turner, John Constable (Sketch for 'Hadleigh Castle': (cat. 25: c.1828-90) illustrated as Fig.13 on p. 24 of the catalogue), Graham Sutherland and Henry Moore (the last two are richly represented in the exhibition; see cats: 1-2, 135-146, 154-164, 174-181, 185-7, 194-6, 222, and 229).²⁸ Peter Fuller's public debate with Berger in fact provided a middle-ground for Clark's traditional art history. The anti-aesthetic materialism of Berger's Marxism was for Fuller closer to the Neo-Liberalism of the Thatcher government (which coincidentally included Clark's eldest son Alan as a junior minister) than Clark's Classical Liberalism.²⁹ In the decades that followed a new centre-left position would emerge in art history that could accommodate the lessons of both sides of the debate and synthesize them to produce an arguably more competent understanding of art in society. The work of an art historian like Tim Barringer perhaps best represents this current *status quo* capable of drawing upon Marxist traditions to undertake a historicist reading of Victorian art and labour, whilst recognising the importance of Clark as a patron of art and practitioner of art history.³⁰ Political objections may still remain but these are generally less potent and restricted to left-wing journalism where, for example,

²⁶ Rosemary Hill, 'At Tate Britain (2)', *London Review of Books*, vol. 36, no. 13, 3 July 2014, 26.

²⁷ Hilton Kramer, 'T.J. Clark and the Marxist critique of modern painting', *The New Criterion*, March 1985, 1.

²⁸ Mark A. Cheetham, *Artwriting, Nation, and Cosmopolitanism in Britain: The 'Englishness' of English Art Theory Since the Eighteenth Century*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2012, 127.

²⁹ Richard Howells and Joaquim Negreiros, *Visual Culture*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011, 92-4; Peter Fuller, *Seeing Berger: A Revaluation of Ways of Seeing*, London: Writers and Readers, 1981; Peter Fuller, *Seeing Through Berger*, London: The Claridge Press, 1988, 7; Peter Fuller, 'The Wrong Perspective on Art', *Daily Telegraph*, Weekend Telegraph Section, 13 January 1990, xv.

³⁰ Tim Barringer, *Men at Work: Art and Labour in Victorian Britain*, New Haven and London: Yale, 2005, 14; Julie F. Codell, 'Review: Men at Work: Art and Labour in Victorian Britain by Tim Barringer', *Victorian Studies*, vol. 47, no. 4, Summer 2005, 611; Tony Pinkney, 'Review: Men at Work: Art and Labour in Victorian Britain by Tim Barringer', *The Journal of William Morris Studies*, Summer 2006, 123; Tim Barringer, "'I am a native, rooted here": Benjamin Britten, Samuel Palmer and the Neo-Romantic Pastoral', *Art History*, vol. 34, no. 1, February 2011, 134.

Mark Brown in *The Guardian* opines that 'Kenneth Clark was hardly a man of the people: he was born into an obscenely rich family, lived in a castle, and mostly came across as grand, aloof and chilly'.³¹

Connoisseurship

By this time also the previously problematic schism between art history and connoisseurship had been healed and this development likewise has fostered a better environment for the rehabilitation of Clark.³² An important service rendered by this exhibition was the opportunity it afforded for an assessment of Clark's connoisseurial eye. The combination of his commitment to the principles of aesthetic pleasure and detailed analysis of imagery allowed him to make an important dual contribution to connoisseurship and scholarship with the Leonardo catalogue, but it is clear that his reputation also decreased as the status of connoisseurship declined in the late twentieth century.³³ Some of this was due to the reputation of connoisseurship generally but more perhaps to the mistakes he made because of the distraction of important political undertakings within the art world or through dependence upon unreliable colleagues like Joseph Duveen and Berenson.³⁴ As Curtis has suggested, regardless of individual incidents of failure, an understanding of the motivation for Clark's collecting provides art historians with an important insight into the institutional practices of the mid-twentieth century.³⁵ It is nevertheless unsurprising that the most connoisseurial of art historical publications, *Apollo*, provided the greatest criticism of the exhibition in its commentary regarding the absence of Clark's best acquisitions for public galleries amongst the works displayed.³⁶ In the formation of public taste the 'almost total absence of abstraction in the exhibition' was also remarkable.³⁷ Such an observation should be taken less as a criticism of the show than an observation of historical fact however. Clark's opposition to abstract art emerged in the 1930s alongside an evaluation of the relative merits of national schools which identified the positive pre-1914 French modernism against the 'Protestant' ethos of post-1918 'Germanic' modern art.³⁸

³¹ Brown, *The Guardian*.

³² David Carrier, 'In Praise of Connoisseurship', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 61, no. 2, Spring 2003, 159-69.

³³ Hill, *London Review of Books*; Wullschlager, *Financial Times*: 'the copy shaded "the wrong way"' (Leonardo was left-handed), demonstrates his acute eye. But he was already more than an art historian'; Angeria Rigamonti di Cutò, 'Kenneth Clark: Looking for Civilisation', *Studio International*, 1 July 2014: <http://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/kenneth-clark-looking-for-civilisation> accessed 7.10.2014.

³⁴ Dorment, *The Telegraph*; Güner, *The Arts desk.com*; Secrest, *Kenneth Clark*, 137-8.

³⁵ L.L.B., *The Economist*.

³⁶ Crack, *Apollo*.

³⁷ di Cutò, *Studio International*.

³⁸ Stephens, 'Patron and Collector', 84; Matthew C. Potter, *The Inspirational Genius of Germany: British Art and Germanism, 1850-1939*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012, 261-4, 278-9: interestingly there was a Franco-German dichotomy drawn up within the

Clark's disliking of the most abstract work of contemporary artists is well known – and his public debate with Herbert Read in the pages of *The Listener* in October 1935 on the values of these particular artists is well documented.³⁹ Whatever his views he was nevertheless a very generous patron for young artists like John Piper and Graham Sutherland even when he did not personally believe in the most extreme (i.e. abstract) manifestations of their aesthetic principles.⁴⁰ Room 5 showed the close relationship Clark formed with contemporary artists and the work he was able to commission from them via the War Artists Advisory Committee which represented a particular instance of Clark adopting a compromise in his patronage practice. On that occasion he overcame his aversion to abstraction based on more important principles of largesse. On entering this room we heard in the background a recording of the contemporary pianist Dame Myra Hess playing Beethoven's *Appassionata*, just as she did at Clark's instigation to raise morale through lunchtime concerts at the National Gallery during the 1940s. This may have partly been an attempt by Clark to offset the removal of the valuable original art works and supplement the photographic replicas placed in their stead with authentic high culture in a different format. However, Clark's choice of a musician with a German surname and a German composer during the war years also speaks of his humanist belief in the universal values of internationalism and culture.

The importance of figurative work to the WAAC was part of Clark's concern for visual legibility and this is evident in the 'panoramic war landscapes' of John Piper's *Seaton Delaval* (cat.148: 1941 ([click to view](#))) or *The Quadrangle from Engine Court, Windsor Castle* (cat.150: 1941-2) as well as the 'classical heroism' of Eric Kennington's hyper-idealized illusionism (examples of the latter were not shown in the exhibition).⁴¹ Yet it is clear in this that Clark failed to completely conform to the 'bogey-man' status. His innate affinity for fair-play came through when he fought a rearguard action against the ultra-conservatism of the Royal Academy and *The Times* consortium, and displayed modern art during the war at the National Gallery.⁴² The works in Room 4 and 5 by Henry Moore, David Piper, Graham Sutherland, Paul Nash and Eric Ravilious provide only a partial answer to the criticisms of Clark's unprogressive taste – representative of the kind of compromised modernism of the 1930s and 1940s that – compared to America and continental Europe – was 'conservative' in its adherence to figurative frames of reference. Paraphrasing his later declared preference – that 'order is better than chaos' – and Serota's suggestion that Clark wished to civilize the revolution, he

battleground of contemporary debates on modernism. Herbert Read and Anthony Blunt were on the other side to Clark in their pro-German and anti-French stances.

³⁹ Martin Hammer, 'Kenneth Clark and the Death of Painting', *Tate Papers*, vol. 20, 19 November 2013.

⁴⁰ Dorment, 'Kenneth Clark: Looking for Civilisation "makes Clark fallible but more likeable"', *The Telegraph*; Secret, *Kenneth Clark*, 111; Chris Stephens and John-Paul Stonard, 'Introduction', in Stephens and Stonard (eds.), *Kenneth Clark – Looking for Civilisation*, 9; Stephens, 'Patron and Collector', 84, 87, 89-96.

⁴¹ David Alan Mellor, 'Second World War', in Stephens and Stonard (eds.), *Kenneth Clark – Looking for Civilisation*, 101.

⁴² Mellor, 'Second World War', 108.

described the liberal conservative programme of State sponsorship of contemporary artists to which he contributed as a revolutionary act he hoped would outlive the Second World War.⁴³ Interestingly Crack's identification of Vanessa Bell's plates and portraits (cats. 93-96 (1932), 110-11) and Sydney Nolan's *Central Australia* ([\[click to view\]](#) 1950) and *Convict and Billabong* ([\[click to view\]](#) c.1960) (cats 225-6) as the 'best works here' conforms to these parameters and helps to define Clark's attitude to modernism perfectly.⁴⁴ Despite his status as one of Australia's first 'native' talents, for some at least, Nolan's abstract Australian landscapes are imbued with a sense of figuration and narrative that prohibits an ultra-abstraction or artistic innovation beyond the 'regional' in a canonical sense.⁴⁵ The same charges that were made at Philip Guston's abandonment of 'pure abstraction' for 'neo-expressionism' might neatly be transferred to explain why Clark liked Nolan's work – especially given Clark's interest in expressionistic artistic values. Similarly, Bell's *Portrait of Angelica as a Russian Princess* (1928: plate 27 in catalogue) represents the continuation of her subscription to the Bloomsbury formalism of an earlier Edwardian era.

Television

The 'Post-War' subject matter in Room 6 connects with another important theme of the exhibition worth isolating - Clark's television work. The Reithian values Clark subscribed to are arguably best represented by *Civilisation*. Clark's contributions to art history on television are amply demonstrated by the selective yet extensive filmography (with 90 programmes in total between 1937 and 1979) contained in the catalogue.⁴⁶ The research undertaken by Tate staff in preparation for this show presents much useful material to fill out the role played by art history in modern British broadcasting – demonstrating the advances made in the technical processes

⁴³ Mellor, 'Second World War', 108.

⁴⁴ Crack, *Apollo*.

⁴⁵ Robert Hughes, *The Art of Australia*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966 [1970], 165-6, 221-7; Terry Smith, *Transformations in Australian Art*, Sydney: Craftsman House, 2002: 2 Vols., vol. 2, 93, 95, 115-6: reprinted from 'The Provincialism Problem', *Artforum*, vol. XIII, no. 1, September 1974: 'The cultural transmission is one-way: whereas both Jackson Pollock and Sidney Nolan are seen as "great artists" by the art audience in Australia, it is inconceivable that Nolan should be so regarded in New York. And in Australia, Nolan's "greatness" is of a different order from Pollock's. Nolan is admired as a great *Australian* artist, while Pollock is taken to be a great artist—his Americanness accepted as a secondary aspect of his achievement qua artist'; Andrew Sayers, *Australian Art*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, 166-9; Simon Pierse, 'Sir Kenneth Clark: deus ex machina of Australian art', *Melbourne Art Journal*, 11-12, 2009, 104-19; a longer version features in Simon Pierse, *Australian Art and Artists in London, 1950-1965: An Antipodean Summer*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2012, 1-16; Deborah Hart, 'Australian Landscape: Pathways into the Modern World 1920-50', in Royal Academy of Arts, *Australia*, London: Royal Academy of the Arts, 2013, 190-1: see also 299.

⁴⁶ John Wyver, 'Kenneth Clark Selected Filmography', in Stephens and Stonard (eds.), *Kenneth Clark: Looking for Civilisation*, 141-3; see also John Wyver, 'Television', in Stephens and Stonard (eds.), *Kenneth Clark: Looking for Civilisation*, 123-31.

of filming as well as presenting.⁴⁷ Whatever the qualities and values of these programmes, some of which have already been discussed above, Clark's work for television was innovative and also provocative.⁴⁸ Despite the Whiggish teleology adopted in *Civilisation*, the appearance of this documentary on public network television in both the United Kingdom and United States also introduced innovations such as the single-point-of-view position familiar in recent televisual history and art history.⁴⁹ *The Economist* critic felt that it was a shame that *Civilisation* was left until the final room as this missed out on its potential to act as an important bridging device between the different issues raised in the exhibition.⁵⁰ Another reviewer also felt that the objectives of this exhibition would have been better served by a television documentary.⁵¹ An hour-long programme on *Sir Kenneth Clark: Portrait Of A Civilised Man* was in fact broadcast (Saturday 31 May 2014, BBC 2) but such a limited timeframe was insufficient to match the ambitions and range of an exhibition.

Art history

The impact of this exhibition on art history has already been considered but the role played by the discipline in the show is also worth examining further. Interestingly the lack of previous engagements with the art historical dimensions of Clark has been noted. Caroline Elam criticized Meryl Secrest's authorized biography for 'she had nothing authoritative to say about Clark as an art historian, but dwelt in gruesome detail on the troubles of his first marriage'.⁵² Individual works within the show represented the interests fostered within Clark by his time spent reading and working with Roger Fry, most of all Cézanne's pencil, graphite and watercolour studies (cats. 41-7) and the late oils *Bathers* (c.1900-2: cat 48) and *Turning Road* (c.1905: cat 49).⁵³ The interest Clark took in collecting works by modern masters which were executed in dialogue with their forebears is also worth noting. The complexity of the relationship between new and old artists has become an important part of art-historical inquiry subsequent to Griselda Pollock's reference to Paul Gauguin's avant-garde gambit of 'reference, deference, and difference'.⁵⁴ In the

⁴⁷ Nick Clark, 'Tate unearths trove of Kenneth Clark documentaries', *The Independent*, Monday 19 May 2014: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/tate-unearths-trove-of-kenneth-clark-documentaries-9399323.html> accessed 7.10.2014.

⁴⁸ di Cutò, *Studio International*.

⁴⁹ Anne Morey, 'Civilisation: A Personal View', in Horace Newcomb (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Television*, Abingdon: Routledge, 1997 [2014]: 4 Vols., vol.1, 527-8; Jeremy Black and Donald M. MacRaild, *Studying History*, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997 [2007], 25.

⁵⁰ L.L.B., *The Economist*.

⁵¹ Matthew Wilson, *Aesthetica Magazine*.

⁵² Caroline Elam, 'Kenneth Clark at Tate Britain', *Burlington Magazine*, vol. CLVI, no. 1337, August 2014, 503.

⁵³ di Cutò, *Studio International*; Stonard, 'Looking for Civilisation', 16-18.

⁵⁴ Griselda Pollock, *Avant-garde gambits 1888-1893: Gender and the Colour of Art History*, London: Pandora Books, 1992, 12-14. See also Matthew C. Potter, 'Learning from the

exhibition this process was represented by Paul Cézanne's *The Entombment, after the painting by Delacroix in Saint-Denis du Sacrement, Paris* (cat: 46, c.1866-72), Edgar Degas' *Two Heads of Men, after Giovanni Cariani (formerly attributed to Gentile Bellini)* (cat.51: c.1854: illustrated on p. 69 of the catalogue), and Duncan Grant's *After Zurbaran* (cat. 109: c.1928, reproduced as Fig. 32 on p. 96 of the catalogue).⁵⁵ Degas' *Two Heads of Men* shows how a twenty-or-so year old artist undertook the usual nineteenth-century student activity of copying and studying from the masterpieces in the Parisian public collections, preserving the composition and tonal structures, but articulating the idiosyncratic touches (in the combination of blunt large brushstrokes on the fur stoles and hair of the men with more delicate etched paint marks denoting the contours of the faces) which would later become tell-tale features of his mature practice, and are in stark contrast to the manner and facture of the original (see Figure 1). Clark also made interesting departures from his otherwise canonical art historical activities in collecting the work of lesser-known artists like Charles Catton (cats. 37-40). The potential charge of incoherency in the hang of the exhibition is also an apt echo of Clark's own practice for he rejected historically organized displays in his home at Saltwood. It is also in sympathy with the serendipitous visual discoveries cultivated by Clark in making such juxtapositions. The total effect created by the display of the works of art privately collected by him is akin to the historic manner of the 'cabinet of curiosity', and furthermore this gives an impression of Saltwood as influenced by Berenson's Italian villa *I Tatti* and the Renaissance interiors on which that was based.⁵⁶



Fig. 1: Giovanni Cariani, *Portrait of Two Young Men* (c.1500-50), oil on canvas, 45 x 63 cm, Louvre Museum [\[source\]](#)

Masters: An Introduction', in Matthew C. Potter (ed.), *The Concept of the 'Master' in Art Education in Britain and Ireland, 1770 to the Present*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2013, 20-22.

⁵⁵ Stephens, 'Patron and Collector', 95.

⁵⁶ Peter T. J. Rumley, 'Saltwood', in Stephens and Stonard (eds.), *Kenneth Clark: Looking for Civilisation*, 118-121.

One associated aspect of the exhibition which should be considered is the catalogue. As usual, the Tate have produced a handsome publication which is sumptuously illustrated and offers some stimulating scholarly essays. However, this is essentially an adjunct to the exhibition not, strictly speaking, a full record of the exhibited objects. While there is good reason to provide illustrations of works not contained in the show (e.g. the Eric Kennington illustrations reproduced on pp.100-1) the arguments made around these objects take place almost exclusively within the catalogue and not the display itself. This type of catalogue has become more popular in recent years, for as Martin Postle observes of the similar situation with the Hunterian Art Gallery's *Allan Ramsay. Portraits of the Enlightenment* exhibition in Glasgow (13 September 2013 - 5 January 2014), publishers rightly see a 'stand-alone' format as commercially more viable, 'the publication, rather than serving to enrich and amplify the immediate experience of the exhibition becomes just another collection of essays, divorced from its moment in place and time'.⁵⁷ In the present case, an edited collection gathering together new thinking and research on Kenneth Clark is sorely needed so may be forgiven to a certain extent, however, in accordance with the art historical perspective of this current review, it must be recognized that a useful record of the exhibition and the thinking behind it is compromised if not sacrificed by such a decision. The curators (Chris Stephens and John Paul Stonard, with John Wyver, Jenny Powell, Benjamin Angwin, and Inga Fraser) and the other contributors (David Alan Mellor and Peter T.J. Rumley) are no doubt to be absolved of blame for this, given Postle's apposite assessment of the current catalogue-publishing conditions. The chapter headings ('Looking for Civilisation'; 'Selected Works from the Collection of Kenneth Clark'; 'Patron and Collector'; 'Second World War'; 'Saltwood'; and 'Television') provide a slight revision to the six room layout of the show (with exhibited objects listed by room on pp.144-51 of the catalogue). Obviously a catalogue cannot recreate exactly the experience of the 'place and time', however any reimagining risks losing something of the original design and purpose – and future art historians assessing this show will have to be wary of this in making their judgements.

The selection of objects has so far been considered on its curatorial merits. However, before concluding this review I would like to comment on a few choice works of art which the exhibition gave those attending an opportunity to appreciate. The scale of the works forced the audience to explore objects in proximity and the intimate viewing of The Master of the Fiesole Epiphany's *Head of an Angel* (cat.33; late 15th century), 29 x 20.5 cm, or Paul Cézanne's *The Back of a Chair* (cat. 41: 1879-82; illustrated as Fig. 8 in the catalogue), 17.5 x 11.5 cm, helped to simulate the kind of viewing process in which Clark himself would have indulged. The Neo-Romanticism on display in Room 4 re-tells a familiar tale yet rarely do we get the opportunity to see a display that captures the essence of this part of the contemporary art scene. The aesthetic chorus created by seeing these works together helped to affect a totalizing sum in excess of its parts. Likewise the wartime art of

⁵⁷ Martin Postle, 'Review: Allan Ramsay. Portraits of the Enlightenment. By Mungo Campbell', *Burlington Magazine*, vol. CLVI, no. 1337, August 2014, 539.

Room 5 brought with it familiar imagery yet the new comparisons and contrasts it allowed were valuable experiences. While Caroline Elam has some justification for concluding that the catalogue underplays the impact of this particular display, David Alan Mellor's chapter on the war years does explore other interesting connections and images.⁵⁸ Not only did the immensity of Paul Nash's *Battle of Britain* (Fig. 39: 1941) impress but within the context of the other exhibited works its propagandist and epic qualities were brought back into line as one voice amongst many in terms of artistic responses to the war. Mary Kessell's Belsen Camp images (cats. 208-9) remain moving and aesthetically effective works. Sutherland's industrial and mining pictures (cats. 190-6) aptly displayed the war effort on the home front. The three British war artists who died during the Second World War were all represented: Albert Richards (cat. 207: [click to view](#)), Eric Ravilious (cats. 205: [click to view](#); and cat. 206: [click to view](#)) and Thomas Hennell (cat. 204: [click to view](#)), and the chosen works paid fitting tribute to their personal visions of the war. Finally this room also provided an authentic vision of the devastation of the war at home, be it through Piper's images of bomb-damaged buildings (cats. 182-4), Sutherland's 'public' works like *Devastation: City, Twisted Girders* (cat. 186: 1941) or the more 'private' *Kenneth Clark's House in Gray's Inn Square, after bombing* (cat. 187: c.1942) with its personal trauma. It is worth emphasizing that the diachronic display method throughout the exhibition meant works like the marble sculpture of the *Madonna and child* from the Circle of Giusto le Corte (cat. 214, c.1660: private collection) can, as at Saltwood Castle, engage in visual dialogues with modern works and reveal their formal affinities.

Conclusion

Taken on its own terms *Kenneth Clark – Looking for Civilisation* made an excellent job of bringing together the diverse attributes of Kenneth Clark and in so-doing further raised his profile as a titanic figure within the twentieth-century British art world. Whilst it may not have provided an exhaustive account of Clark's acquisition practice at the National Gallery, or his public lecturing on the arts, it did bring within the frame his work at other institutions such as the Ashmolean Museum, his omnivorous aesthetic appetite, and his liberal agenda as a man who believed art should be a central organ for creating a modern civic renaissance. The exhibition not only allowed us to broaden our horizons on the art historical perspective offered by Clark but provided the modern visitor with opportunities to encounter several 'eureka' moments for themselves without the need for a forced narrative 'educating' them on the virtues of Clark. Rather than criticizing Tate Britain and its curators, the more negative reviewers might perhaps have whole-heartedly congratulated them on addressing their audience in an intelligent and intelligible manner. To paraphrase the subtitle to Clark's television series, the exhibition allowed us a 'personal view' on its lead protagonist, and personally I left the exhibition feeling that I not only knew Clark better for attending but that I could appreciate and even admire him more for his approach to art. For me *Kenneth Clark – Looking for*

⁵⁸ Elam, 'Kenneth Clark at Tate Britain', 503.

Civilisation was singularly successful in its self-appointed and difficult task of exploring Clark's particular 'art' of being an art historian through the medium of a thought-provoking yet 'popular' exhibition.

Matthew C. Potter is Reader in Art and Design History at Northumbria University. His research focuses on the role played by visual culture in the construction of national identity and wider issues of international exchange. He is the author of *The Inspirational Genius of Germany: British Art and Germanism, 1850-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), and editor of and contributor to *The Concept of the 'Master' in Art Education in Britain and Ireland, 1770 to the present* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

matthew.potter@northumbria.ac.uk