

*'The arduous and responsible duty of arranging, classifying, and hanging...':* William Borthwick Johnstone and the nascent Scottish National Gallery

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Figure 1: John Philip, *William Borthwick Johnstone (1804-1868)*, National Galleries of Scotland

In June 1868, the Board Room Minutes of the meeting of the Trustees of the Board of Manufactures recorded with sadness the death of William Borthwick Johnstone, the Scottish National Gallery's first Curator, and praised Johnstone for his work at the newly-formed institution.<sup>1</sup> The report described in some detail what that work had involved:

<sup>1</sup> The Board of Manufactures was a body constituted in the aftermath of the political union of 1707 to administer a £2,000 annuity set up as compensation for Scotland's increased taxation under the union, for the promotion of fisheries and manufactures. Over time this body had developed a wider remit of promoting manufacturing through good design based on artistic training. The Scottish National Gallery was placed under the control of the Board when it was founded in 1850. An excellent account of the establishment of the Board of Trustees can be found in a footnote to *Sir John Clerk's Memoirs*, (available at <http://www.archive.org/details/memoirsoflifeofs13cler>, 132-3). I am grateful to Dr Iain Gordon Brown for this reference.

Immediately upon Mr Johnstone entering the Office, there devolved upon him the arduous and responsible duty of arranging, classifying, and hanging the numerous and various collections of Pictures and other works of art which were to form the National Gallery ... It was accompanied with the laborious undertaking of preparing a Descriptive and Historical Catalogue of the Gallery which besides selecting and indicating the points and the peculiar character of each work, gave a biographical sketch of the Master by whom it was executed, and touched artistically upon some of his chief works, involving a great amount of research and requiring a minute knowledge of Painters and their works possessed by few...<sup>2</sup>

This description provides a useful framework for exploring the role of the professional curator during the period. Johnstone's primary responsibilities were firstly to arrange the 'numerous and various collections' into a coherent display, and secondly to use his exceptional art historical knowledge to compile and constantly update the catalogue of these works, while at the same time always ensuring their safe custody.<sup>3</sup> A close analysis of his labours will show how his contribution enabled the newly established SNG to develop from inauspicious beginnings into a well-respected National Gallery, part of the network of similar galleries throughout Europe. It will highlight Johnstone's range of skills, including his aesthetic understanding of art display, his art historical expertise and his administrative capabilities. It will also provide an exemplary case-study of the emerging figure of the museum professional in the Victorian period, in an institution that offers particular insights into issues of national identity within the museum.

The task facing Johnstone ten years earlier had been a delicate one. His appointment in February 1858 marked the Board of Manufactures' first active step towards the inauguration of the Gallery, and it only occurred because of a Treasury Minute from the Westminster government urging them to proceed without further procrastination.<sup>4</sup> The reasons for the Board's procrastination are to be found in the

<sup>2</sup> Board Room Minutes, June 1868: National Records of Scotland (NRS), NG6/1/1/43.

<sup>3</sup> The first edition of the catalogue explained the provenance of the works on display: 'The Collection now exhibited in the National Gallery consists of (1.) The Pictures collected by the Directors of the Royal Institution, and first exhibited to the public in 1831. (2.) The Pictures, Bronzes, etc. bequeathed by Sir James Erskine of Torrie, to the College of Edinburgh, and deposited with the Board for exhibition under a Deed of Agreement. (3.) The Collection of Ancient and Modern Works commenced in 1829 by the Royal Scottish Academy. (4.) Pictures, the property of the Board, acquired either by purchase or gift for the National Gallery. (5.) Modern Works purchased by the Royal Association for the Promotion of the Fine Arts, with funds set apart for this purpose by their charter. (6.) Pictures deposited by the Marquis of Abercorn, and by Mr Raeburn, for fixed periods.' (William B. Johnstone, *Catalogue, descriptive and historical, of the National Gallery of Scotland*, Edinburgh: Murray and Gibb for H.M.S.O., 1859, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 7). The description conveys the diversity of the works that had to be arranged, and makes clear the inevitable changes that will occur when works 'for fixed periods' were removed. The works from the Marquis of Abercorn, for example, were placed in the Gallery while he looked for a country seat, although he guaranteed that they could remain for at least two years from the Gallery's inauguration.

<sup>4</sup> See Note 1 for details of the Board's formation and background.

background to the new institution. The idea of creating a new National Gallery had not originated with the members of the Board; rather, they felt it had been imposed upon them, and they therefore felt little urgency to pursue the project. The founding of the new Gallery had emerged as a coincidental by-product of the proposals put forward in 1847 by the Westminster government's representative, Sir John Shaw Lefevre, a member of the Board of Trade, who had been sent to Edinburgh to investigate the difficulties facing the Royal Scottish Academy (RSA). The RSA had been holding their annual exhibition in a section of the Royal Institution building since 1835, as this building contained the best exhibition space in the city.<sup>5</sup> Tensions arose, however, when the Royal Institution itself, one of the several bodies overseen by the Board, began forming a collection of works to display to the public: as their collection grew, it became more troublesome to take them down to allow for the annual RSA exhibitions, and so the Board gave notice to the RSA that from 1846, they would no longer host the annual exhibition inside the Royal Institution building.<sup>6</sup> The RSA complained directly to the government in London, and Shaw Lefevre was dispatched to Edinburgh to investigate the problem. He proposed commissioning a new building for the RSA, enabling the Royal Institution to continue showing their growing collection of Old Masters on a permanent basis. In the end, however, it was decided that the new proposed building for the RSA should also contain an as-yet-unformed SNG. As Nick Prior suggests: 'The gallery was founded by the British state in the early 1850s as a solution to the escalating conflicts north of the border between vying artistic factions.'<sup>7</sup> It is important to notice, however, that although the British state had been instrumental in the unusual circumstances of its foundation, the responsibilities for carrying out the proposal fell to the amateur Trustees on the Board of Manufactures, and this was where lack of enthusiasm led to procrastination.

<sup>5</sup> There are two Greek Revival buildings on the south side of Edinburgh's Princes St. One sits directly on Princes St, the other behind it to the South (see Figure 2). Confusingly, both of these buildings are now part of the Scottish National Gallery, but when the institution was first created in 1859 it occupied only one half of the building to the rear, the focus of attention for this paper. The building in front was the first to be completed, opening in 1826, and named The Royal Institution building. It housed many different bodies, including the Royal Society of Edinburgh, the Trustees' Drawing Academy, the Society of Antiquaries and the Royal Institution for the Encouragement of the Fine Arts in Scotland. The Royal Institution building had been financed by the Board of Manufactures, as a way of carrying out their responsibility to promote art education, and they controlled who occupied the various spaces within.

<sup>6</sup> A full account of this disagreement can be found in an article by John Stirling Maxwell, 'The Royal Scottish Academy', in *The Scottish Historical Review*, 10: 39, April 1913, 233-249

<sup>7</sup> N. Prior, 'The Art of Space and the Space of Art', *Museum and Society*, 1: 2, July 2003, 65

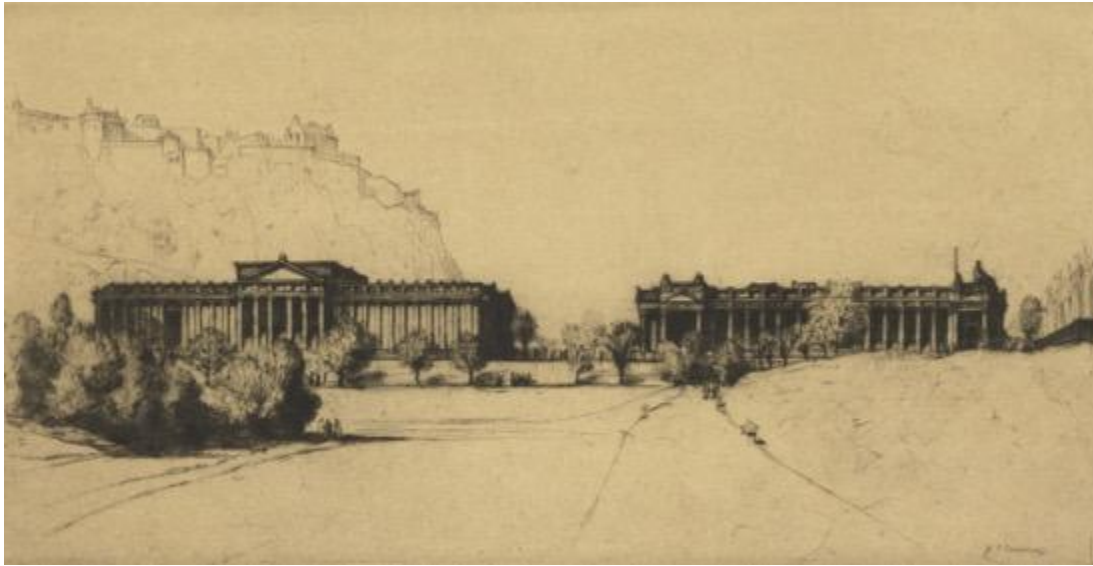


Figure 2: Sir David Young Cameron, *The Royal Scottish Academy Building and the National Gallery of Scotland*, National Galleries of Scotland

The 'vying artistic factions' mentioned by Prior were, on the one hand, the practising artists who wanted a space to show their work, and, on the other, the collectors and antiquarians who aspired to present a systematic introduction to European art based on a historical survey of old masters' paintings. The artists behaved as a united professional body under their President, Sir John Watson Gordon, whereas the collectors tended to adopt a more dilettante approach. The Secretary of the Board of Manufactures, the Hon. Bouverie Francis Primrose, was representative of the latter faction, and his interventions provide interesting insights into the transition from amateur to professional. He was aware of a change in his own position, and he wrote to the Trustees requesting a more commensurate payment:

You are aware that my salary from your Board is only £176 per annum, that it was fixed at this very low sum by the Treasury in 1840, when no National Gallery was in existence or in contemplation and when the duties of the Secretaryship were much lighter than they now are.<sup>8</sup>

Primrose's salary was duly increased, but his role remained ill-defined, and it would be Johnstone's task to reconcile the needs and aspirations of the two factions. As his correspondence shows, the early days of the Gallery involved considerable compromise, but it was Johnstone's overtly professional approach that was decisive in establishing a serious reputation for the evolving institution.

As at the National Gallery in London, it had been agreed that the Keeper of the SNG should be recruited from the ranks of the Scottish Academicians. Johnstone's background made him a suitable candidate. Born in 1804, he had initially trained as a lawyer, but had always had a passion for art and, after

<sup>8</sup> Memorial letter from Primrose, copied in Board Room Minutes, December 1857: National Records of Scotland (NRS), NG1/1/41

attending the evening classes in painting offered by the Trustees' Academy, began contributing to the RSA annual shows in 1836. He eventually decided to give up law, and spent two years touring Italy, furthering his artistic training. He was elected an associate of the Academy in 1840, a full Academician in 1848, and became RSA Treasurer in 1850.<sup>9</sup> He remained in this role until his appointment at the SNG in 1858. His background and training, therefore, illustrate qualities that would today qualify a candidate for the post of chief curator – a thorough knowledge of art, a willingness to diversify from a single career path, and a strong record of administrative skills.

Tim Barringer has pointed out that 'some of the most original Victorian contributions to the development of the museum took place in peripheral settings'.<sup>10</sup> Does the Scottish example fit this description? The SNG has an unusual museological identity, as at once a national institution within Scotland and a regional one within the United Kingdom, at least in terms of its size relative to the London counterpart. It is peripheral in relation to London, but it is central within Scotland. The background to its foundation reflects ambivalent political positions. The definition of Scotland as a '*Nation sans état*' reveals the essential paradox at the heart of the institution: it was a 'national' gallery, but the nation it represented was not a fully operational state, and therefore lacked full control of its own administration.<sup>11</sup> Prior's description of Scotland in the mid-nineteenth century as 'a semi-autonomous space of national authority... encouraging the movement towards partnership that the Union always promised' exposes the status of those in charge of governing the SNG, the Board of Manufactures.<sup>12</sup> As already noted, this was a Scottish institution, run by predominantly Scottish members based (at least for part of the year) in Scotland, but which was ultimately subject to direction from the central government in London. Johnstone's vision for the institution, meanwhile, was a 'national' one, insofar as he felt the responsibility that a national institution had for establishing and maintaining high standards, and for representing the 'national' Scottish school. He thus had to perform a delicate balancing act between national-scaled ambition and lack of resources, and between imposing his professional vision and taking instructions from an amateur Board.

Johnstone's memoranda to the Board show what his principal concerns and duties as Keeper were: in particular, they reveal Johnstone's clear perception of the SNG as a distinct type of space, despite the identical architectural features that it shared with the RSA's parallel east range of galleries. He believed that the SNG had

<sup>9</sup> John Morrison, 'Johnstone, William Borthwick (1804–1868)'. John Morrison in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Online ed. David Cannadine. Oxford: OUP, 2004. <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/14971>, accessed 2 Sept. 2017, and *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 1878 <https://doi.org/10.1093/odnb/9780192683120.013.14971>, accessed 2 Sept. 2017

<sup>10</sup> Tim Barringer, 'Victorian Culture and the Museum: Before and After the White Cube', in *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 11:1, Spring 2006, 133

<sup>11</sup> The term '*nation sans état*' was first used by the French author, Jacques Leruez in a work of 1983, entitled *L'Ecosse: une nation sans état*, Lille: Presse Universitaire, 1983

<sup>12</sup> N. Prior, *Museums and Modernity: Art Galleries and the Making of Modern Culture*, Oxford: Berg, 2002, 111

to follow a more rigorous approach to display precisely because of its role as a national instrument of public education and improvement. Johnstone's contribution to the emerging character of the Scottish institution was determinative in establishing a 'national' standard that was maintained by his successors; he launched the gallery as a highly-professionalised space, with a clear vision of what the institution should be, and thus demonstrated a typical mid-Victorian move towards an increased professionalization of the public art gallery.

The 'science' of displaying works of art in the public sphere had never been precisely codified, although the subject was of increasing interest to a growing body of art amateurs.<sup>13</sup> Charlotte Klonk has written that:

In the eighteenth century all public art exhibitions functioned, more or less openly, as marketplaces for artists' wares. When the National Gallery [in London] was founded, however, a different notion prevailed. Its value was seen to lie precisely in the fact that it provided a realm for a different kind of consumption, a non-material, spiritual one.<sup>14</sup>

Johnstone was aware of this distinction between temporary displays with a commercial intention and those intended to be more permanent and educational. He had experience hanging the temporary RSA exhibitions, but he knew that he now needed to construct an arrangement that would reflect the different institutional status of a national gallery. His memos suggest that he was trying to achieve this within the constraints of a very meagre collection, whilst also ensuring that it produced a satisfying overall aesthetic. Johnstone's contribution to the emerging field of public gallery planning lay in his skill at constructing a coherent arrangement from a random collection of works.<sup>15</sup> His correspondence reveals the principles and practicalities that underpinned his decisions, and constitutes an important reflection on the search for a clear language of public display.

Johnstone submitted a lengthy memorandum to the Trustees in December 1858 outlining his thoughts on possible arrangements for hanging the collection. His first proposal was to divide the works according to the most basic chronological sequence - Ancient and Modern.<sup>16</sup> Although chronology might suggest an art

<sup>13</sup> The subject is discussed in Francis Russell, 'The Hanging and Display of Pictures, 1700-1850' in *Studies in the History of Art*, Vol. 25, January 1988, 133-153. See also Peter de Bolla, *The Education of the Eye: Painting, Landscape and Architecture in Eighteenth Century Britain*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003, 160-163

<sup>14</sup> Charlotte Klonk, *Spaces of Experience: Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 to 2000*, Yale: Yale University Press, 2009, 19

<sup>15</sup> See Note 3 for a description of the various collections that had to be accommodated.

<sup>16</sup> This distinction had become standard. David Wilkie wrote about it in a letter to fellow-artist, William Collins in 1827: 'I have observed throughout my travels this difference between the pictures of the present day and the old masters, that they are never found in the same room, and seldom in the same gallery... The Duke of Bedford seems actuated by the same feeling. He has parted with his old pictures, intending to collect modern pictures in their place. He perhaps judges that they cannot be amalgamated together.' (in *Memoirs of the*

historical basis for the separation, Johnstone's reasons for adopting this classification were primarily aesthetic: 'I think the Ancient and Modern pictures should not be hung together - the former being in general much lower in tone, would not harmonise with the latter.'<sup>17</sup> Already in this first decision, we can see Johnstone drawing on his experience in hanging the RSA exhibitions, and with the well-trained eye of the curator, prioritising the overall look of the arrangement. Interestingly, when he described the same division in the catalogue, he gave a slightly different emphasis: 'The Gallery being laid out in separate Octagons, facilitates an arrangement by which Ancient and Modern works are kept distinct, with that proximity which conveniently admits of the intelligent student or amateur drawing inferences by comparison ...'<sup>18</sup> By focusing attention on the architectural space of the gallery, he managed to present the division into ancient and modern as a positive benefit rather than an unavoidable necessity, and he emphasised the scholarly advantage to be gained from it in the account he offered to the public. Comparative analysis was the essence of the growing art historical discipline, and Johnstone cleverly used this as a way to justify his arrangement, suggesting that the arrangement facilitated this type of study, without mentioning the primarily practical reasons. The subtle difference in emphasis may suggest a lack of transparency intended to reinforce the authoritative voice of the institution, and to disguise any of its shortcomings.

Johnstone then expanded on his ideas for how best to present the assorted works. His second proposal was that all the modern works – which made up by far the biggest proportion – should be shown together in the central octagon, in the grandest space that the gallery provided. He clarified that this was not a value judgment on these works, but was once again based on practical, mainly aesthetic principles:

I indicate this arrangement not with the view of giving the modern pictures anything like a preference, but partly from the idea that it would add to the general appearance of the Galleries, and partly from viewing it as a matter of necessity. The centre octagon though larger and more imposing in appearance than the others is not so well calculated for pictures on the line, that is on a level with the eye of the spectator, for the walls are higher than those of the other rooms, and the window is too far from the pictures on the line - but the great height of the wall and corresponding height of the windows afford good accommodation and light, to pictures hung above the line.<sup>19</sup>

Johnstone's professional hanging skills are here apparent. He understood the importance of the placement of works within the architectural setting, and in particular the importance of lighting, quoting his experience in hanging the works

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*Life of William Collins, Esq., R.A.*, vol. 1, London: Longman, Brown Green and Longmans, 1848)

<sup>17</sup> 'Memorandum to Trustees', copied into Board Room Minutes of December 1858, NRS, NG1/1/42

<sup>18</sup> Johnstone, *Catalogue, descriptive and historical*, 8

<sup>19</sup> 'Memorandum to Trustees': NRS, NG1/1/42

for the RSA annual exhibitions:

In arranging the modern Exhibitions [*i.e. the annual exhibitions of the RSA, which had been held in the east wing of the gallery since 1855 - AG*] it has always been found necessary in order to prevent the centre octagon having a bare appearance to hang there one row more of pictures than in the other rooms, but from their lower tone, few ancient works can be seen at such an height.<sup>20</sup>

Johnstone's justification articulates the fundamental dilemma: either hang the collection's most important works in the grandest space, or ensure that the grand space makes a strong impression. If he put what might be considered the most prestigious works in the collection, such as Anthony Van Dyck's *The Lomellini Family*, in the most prestigious space, he would signal their central importance to the collection, but not show them to best advantage – as his report states, 'they will not be seen so well, and would appear but small above the line'. If, however, he filled that most prestigious architectural space with less important but more vibrant works they would enhance the room and create a more opulent appearance for the new Gallery. The dilemma highlights the tension between the architectural frame of a museum, conceived to contain an ideal arrangement of works, and the practical reality facing a curator of a less-than-ideal collection. Johnstone acknowledged the architectural frame that the architect William Henry Playfair had created, and which was designed for an institution seeking to highlight the value and spiritual qualities of the art on display. But Johnstone also recognised that without an ideal collection the building's layout was problematic, and he proposed ignoring the intended spatial hierarchy in favour of an aesthetically satisfying arrangement. The most important works held by the new institution would paradoxically suffer if they were hung in the most important architectural space. Johnstone's combination of logic and aesthetic sensibility shows a developing professionalism being used to justify decisions through careful analysis.

Johnstone's foremost priority, therefore, was that the Gallery must make a good impression upon the public. In placing the Old Masters in the central space, he would forfeit this potential. He reiterated his dilemma:

I have doubts if there be enough of ancient pictures to admit of any selection... Though the whole of the Institution pictures (including their modern works) were placed in the centre octagon, I doubt if they would nearly fill it - and in that case the general effect of the gallery would be marred, for a bare appearance in the centre room would be more readily noticed than in the outer rooms.<sup>21</sup>

For Johnstone, the paramount quality of a well-presented display that would impress the public was that it must fill the walls. He was at pains to point out that he was not misinterpreting the value of any of the works, but he considered that the

<sup>20</sup> 'Memorandum to Trustees': NRS, NG1/1/42

<sup>21</sup> 'Memorandum to Trustees': NRS, NG1/1/42



esteem of the new institution would be compromised if the displays were too sparsely hung. Although John Ruskin had argued vociferously in an irate letter to *The Times* for a single line hang at the National Gallery in London - 'Every gallery should be long enough to admit of its whole collection being hung in one line, side by side, and wide enough to allow of the spectators retiring to the distance at which the largest picture was intended to be seen'<sup>22</sup> - most public galleries were still pursuing the more traditional and crowded 'aristocratic' hang, and certainly Johnstone believed this was required for the new institution.

The report also touched upon the differing artistic value of works in the collection, and how that should affect their placement:

One great difficulty in the arrangement is in disposing of the two copies of the Crucifixion and the Transfiguration, and a copy from Guido. From the enormous size of the two former they can only be accommodated on the line, and in that case would displace a number of original works – and the Guido copy is not only indifferently executed but of large size. After measuring the walls of the octagons and even those of the lobby leading to the Library, it has occurred to me that by placing the two large copies on the line, the south octagon may contain them and all the other copies. No doubt this room is not so well lighted as the others, but it is suitable enough for the copies and being out of range of the other rooms and not so directly under the observation of the curators and attendants it would not be safe to place there any works that might perhaps be damaged by some careless ... visitor.<sup>23</sup>

Copies of well-known masterpieces are rarely shown in national galleries today, but during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a well-made copy replicating both the scale and the palette of an important masterpiece still carried enough artistic value to be placed on display, to allow viewers to gain some appreciation of famous works. They fulfilled the educational role of the national gallery by providing the people of Scotland with the opportunity to view otherwise inaccessible masterpieces. They acted as substitutes for the original: in the catalogue entry for *The Transfiguration* by Raphael, Johnstone provided a full account of that painting, as if it were the work on display, using it to introduce the reader to the evolution of Raphael's style. The entry concluded by stating: 'The example in the Gallery (332) is a copy of the same size as the original, executed with great care, and very considerable success by G. Urquhart, and its acquisition was strongly recommended by Sir David Wilkie.'<sup>24</sup> The reference to Wilkie's recommendation seems intended to legitimise the painting's inclusion in the new institution. It is clear, however, that Johnstone considered the copies to be of lower value than the other works in the collection, and was unwilling to allow them, by virtue of their size rather than their quality, to 'displace' original works. There was a clear hierarchy of artistic value within the collection, and copies, even of the greatest masterpieces, fell below all categories of original works. This

<sup>22</sup> Letter signed 'The Author of Modern Painters', *The Times*, 7 January 1847, 5

<sup>23</sup> 'Memorandum to Trustees': NRS, NG1/1/42

<sup>24</sup> Johnstone, *Catalogue, descriptive and historical*, 34

value-judgement extended even to the amount of surveillance that the works required, with the copies meriting less attention from the guards.

Having set out his ideas in principle, Johnstone then proceeded with the experimental hang, showing the value of empirical observation. He prepared a second memo, dated 21<sup>st</sup> December 1858, in which he proposed some adjustments to the original plan, based on the practical experience of viewing the works *in situ*:

He found that the great number of full-lengths created much difficulty – and after various trials it occurred to him that by dedicating entirely to portraits the first room, which [...] affords the smallest space of wall of any of the other rooms – a feature of interest might be added which as yet has not been carried out in any other Gallery in Great Britain. This has been done experimentally, and the opinion and advice of the Committee is respectfully asked. It may be observed that by this arrangement four full lengths are hung 2½ feet from the ground, and these can be raised, and line obtained to accommodate eight or ten headsizes or kitcats, should they be afterwards acquired.<sup>25</sup>

The recent establishment of a separate Portrait Gallery in London must surely underlie this proposal, but once again, Johnstone's primary motive is practical and aesthetic: how to fit the works available into the space in a way that enhances both. His reports conjure up a sense of picture hanging as a primitive version of Tetris – fitting in shapes and sizes of works according to the space available. The advantage of his second proposal was the flexibility that it provided in allowing for more works to be inserted into the arrangement in future, as it was anticipated that the collection would grow. The need to build in flexibility remains an important feature of gallery planning today, and Johnstone showed himself in the vanguard with this future-proofing approach.

Johnstone's growing unease at including works of lower artistic value in the national collection became apparent in the memo regarding the first major re-hang, which took place in August 1859 just a few months after opening, prompted by the arrival of several important bequests. He asked to remove certain works of inferior status, which he now felt disturbed the integrity of the collection: 'Permission to withdraw, or place aside, a few works which are now scarcely worthy of the gallery, especially when its growing importance with reference to late and probable future acquisitions is taken into consideration'.<sup>26</sup> Already within this short time, the status of the institution had changed. Johnstone was aware that if the gallery continued to show works of inferior quality, it would risk not attracting more prestigious donations. The memo continued:

The Curator begs leave to suggest that no. 143 St Christopher, 325 Eruption of Mount Vesuvius by Jacob More, and 329 St Peter and another apostle a copy

<sup>25</sup> 'Memorandum to Trustees, 21 December 1858', copied into Board Room Minutes for December 1858: NRS, NG1/1/42

<sup>26</sup> 'Memorandum to Trustees, 21 December 1858': NRS, NG1/1/42

from Guido, the property of the Institution, should be put aside. The first is a copy of a picture (no 47) in the Gallery by Lanfranco, the second is a bad specimen of the painter and on account of its subject and colouring it injures the effect of the other works in the room where it is hung - the third is a professed copy of a very secondary work.<sup>27</sup>

It seems curious that the gallery should be showing two copies of the same work, but each had been donated by a different donor.<sup>28</sup> Johnstone had a more rigorous vision for the new institution, however, and did not want the collection to retain the imprint of the original donors but rather to assume the more serious identity that he was trying to craft for it. A professionally administered Gallery could not endorse hanging two versions of the same painting.

His justification for removing the Jacob More work was a more nuanced one. He objected to it on two separate counts as 'a bad specimen by the painter and on account of the subject and colouring it injures the effect of the other works in the room where it is hung'. This objection, therefore, focuses on the authority of the connoisseur as well as the authority of the curator. He felt it appropriate to assess the quality of the work in terms of the artist's general oeuvre, and within this criterion, judged it inadequate to justify a place in the collection. This remains the central consideration when selecting works for an educational collection: is it sufficiently representative of the artist's output to provide the average viewer with as clear an idea as possible of the artist's style? At the same time, the experienced eye of the curator was sensitive to how works interact with each other, and this painting posed problems, as its intense colours that depicted the molten lava streaming down from the erupting Mount Vesuvius impeded any harmonious juxtaposition with other works in the collection. For Johnstone, the collection had to work as a whole, not as a series of individual pieces.<sup>29</sup>

In arguing against the third work, the 'copy of a very secondary work', Johnstone foresaw the objection that this had been donated, and therefore there was an obligation to show it. He pointed out, however, that although works had earlier been donated to the Royal Institution, 'they were presented not to the Trustees of the National Gallery, but to the Royal Institution, so there could have been no condition made when they were presented that they were to be placed in the National Gallery'. As the newly-appointed professional Keeper of the National Gallery, Johnstone did not wish to be constrained by the actions of others, who might have been operating according to a less rigorous set of standards than he now wished to apply. Johnstone's overriding concern in requesting the withdrawal of

<sup>27</sup> 'Memorandum to Trustees, 21 December 1858': NRS, NG1/1/42

<sup>28</sup> Mary Beard discusses a comparable case of duplication in the display of the cast collections at the Fitzwilliam museum. Beard explains the repetition as a consequence of separate donations, and a similar explanation was found in Edinburgh (Mary Beard, 'Cambridge's 'Shrine of the Muses'', in *Journal of the History of Collections*, 24:3, November 2012, 201)

<sup>29</sup> It is interesting to note that as the SNG currently prepares for its latest extension, which will enhance the galleries devoted to Scottish art, this work by More features prominently as a key work of the Scottish collection.

these works was their negative effect on the status of the Gallery, either by their inferior artistic quality, or by their impact upon the overall aesthetic arrangements. Johnstone's vision for the institution combined a drive towards professional standards based on scholarly knowledge of art history with a clear sense of aesthetic harmony.

In the same memo, Johnstone discussed a painting on offer to the Gallery:

... the decision of the Board will be required on the offer by Mr Sprott of a picture "Roman Charity", said to be by Rubens.

The Curator has received a note from Mr Sprott in which he says that he encloses "a letter from Mr Buchanan the late proprietor of the picture from which it is evident that it is an undoubted Rubens", and this letter is now laid before the Hon.ble the Board. Mr Buchanan in it refers to his *Memoirs of Painting*, vol. 1<sup>st</sup> for a description....

But the Curator does not think that this picture is an original work by Rubens. For though characterised by his style of composition and drawing, it is deficient in that transparency for which his colouring is remarkable, and in the peculiar manipulation and texture in which he excelled.<sup>30</sup>

Johnstone then referred to the 1830 *Catalogue Raisonné* of Rubens by John Smith, listing all the various versions of this subject painted by the artist, and noting that none matched the canvas that was being offered. Johnstone's report constituted a meticulous exercise in connoisseurship, and it introduced a new professional standard by which the Gallery was to judge all future accessions. He recognised the need for all works to be rigorously assessed and attributed before being accepted by the new National Gallery, and he was determined that the institution should become an authoritative voice in such matters. This thorough and scholarly approach to attributions developed into one of the significant roles carried out by major galleries during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Johnstone's work ensured that the nascent SNG immediately fulfilled this requirement.

The Board's response to his request demonstrates the relationship between Johnstone as a hired professional and members of the Board as interested amateurs. The Minutes record that:

... the Board consented with the exception of the removal of the 'Copy after Guido' presented by Mr Drummond, M.C. which was ordered to be retained in the Gallery; and having examined Mr Sprott's picture of 'Roman Charity' consented to accept it upon condition that it should be received not as a Rubens but as 'of the School of Rubens' and so designated in the Catalogue.<sup>31</sup>

Johnstone's reports were given full consideration and in the main acted upon, but the Board, who were not professionals within the sector, retained the ultimate authority and could reject Johnstone's request to remove the 'Copy after Guido',

<sup>30</sup> 'Memorandum to Trustees, 21 December 1858': NRS, NG1/1/42

<sup>31</sup> Board Room Minutes, December 1858: NRS, NG1/1/42

despite his scathing description of it as a 'copy of a very secondary work'. The National Gallery employed a professional curator, but final decisions about what remained on display lay with amateur Trustees.

The discussions about Mr Sprott's *Roman Charity* and its description as 'School of Rubens' draw attention to that other area in which the Gallery sought to establish itself as an authoritative institution, through the production of its catalogue. The first *Daily Scotsman* review had been critical of the Trustees' disclaimer regarding attributions: 'In most instances the names attached to the Picture are given on the authority of those by whom the works have been presented or deposited.'<sup>32</sup> The reporter clearly viewed this as ceding the responsibility to the owners of the works, pointing out that this 'protective clause' might be appropriate for a commercial auction house, '... but it is somewhat anomalous to find a national institution sheltering itself under such a declaration...'<sup>33</sup> The comment reveals the high expectations that surrounded the new institution. The discussions about the correct designation of Mr Sprott's *Roman Charity* indicate that such criticism was quickly being addressed.

In early public museums, the catalogue played a key role in bridging the gap between those who were familiar with the art of the past thanks to their education and background and those who had no such knowledge to draw upon. A reasonably-priced catalogue was intended to give everyone access to the basic facts about a painting, and was an essential tool in the intended democratisation of the museum, particularly in the wake of the Great Exhibition, and the subsequent opening of the South Kensington Museum. One of the Trustees, Professor Lyon Playfair, was particularly interested in this aspect of the Gallery's activities. He had been a Commissioner for the Great Exhibition of 1851 and had collaborated with Henry Cole, sharing his vision for museums as places of education for all. He was insistent that the catalogue should be available at minimum expense to allow as many visitors as possible to be able to purchase it, and that it should contain useful and informative details about the works on display. Johnstone had to work under considerable pressure to have the catalogue ready in time for the opening in March 1859, particularly when the Board decided at the end of December 1858 that it should contain some descriptions and analysis as well. Primrose, as Secretary, wrote to Johnstone in early March, exhorting him to ensure that the catalogue be ready for the private view. His remarks convey mounting panic as the inauguration date approached:

All is new and raw, and every one will be anxious and unhinged, therefore the previous preparations ought to be complete to prevent failure, and have the dignity at least of working smoothly, even though there should be some scramble in reality behind the scenes.

... Better far to leave a picture or two out for a Second Edition, than disappoint the public in our arrangements upon first opening and call down reproof.

<sup>32</sup> Johnstone, *Catalogue, descriptive and historical*, 5

<sup>33</sup> *Daily Scotsman*, 2 April 1859, 5

I wish you to take well in, that this is the first occasion of your coming before the public in your official capacity, that the catalogue bears your name, and that it ought to be well put out with a wrapper etc.

Now if the Printer is working at a gasp, it will not be creditably executed, and the onus of its not being ready will fall far heavier on you, than a slight omission repaired in a second edition.

The Board too would be much annoyed after all that has taken place, if the Catalogue were not fully supplied to the Public on the promised day, or that any reflections should fall upon them and their management thereby.<sup>34</sup>

Primrose's remarks indicate a clear delineation between the Trustees, that amateur body who had already been accused of procrastination, and Johnstone, the professional whom they had appointed, and whose reputation, Primrose suggests, will be negatively affected by any failures on the opening day. Primrose hoped to deflect any possible criticism away from himself or the Board, and the comments about Johnstone's name on the catalogue sound vaguely menacing. Evidently, however, Johnstone managed to achieve what was required, and indeed, his work was singled out for praise by the critic from the *Daily Scotsman*.

The catalogue constituted one of Johnstone's main activities. He oversaw eighteen editions of it between 1859 and his death in 1868, constantly updating it as new works entered the collection. After the rush to produce the inaugural edition, a new edition was prepared for the first major re-hang, which saw the inclusion in the collection of, among others, Thomas Gainsborough's portrait of *The Hon. Mrs Graham*, bequeathed by Robert Graham of Redgorton. It was decided that for the second edition, an illustrated version should also be available, containing prints of three of the Gallery's most popular works: the freshly-acquired *The Hon. Mrs Graham* by Gainsborough, *Portrait of an Italian Nobleman* by Van Dyck, and a landscape by Jacob van Ruysdael. This therefore introduced a tiered offering to visitors: the cheapest version was still to be sold at sixpence a copy, but the illustrated version now cost one shilling, and it was agreed that 'a small stock of presentation copies with plates should be struck off on superior paper'.<sup>35</sup> From the early reformist ideal of the Gallery as a transformational space where everyone could 'acquire' culture on an apparently equal footing, the audience was rapidly being differentiated according to social and economic factors.

When the Gallery opened in March 1859, the local newspaper, *The Daily Scotsman*, praised Johnstone's contribution: 'Taking into account the materials at his disposal, the Curator, Mr W B Johnstone, has contrived to present a most interesting and striking display, filling the entire suite of the west range of galleries...'<sup>36</sup> The reporter recognised Johnstone's ability to make the most of an awkward selection of works, managing to arrange the hanging in such a way as to show them to best advantage. Johnstone's role as the 'presenter' of these works was noted, and

<sup>34</sup> Letter from Primrose to Johnstone, March 1858, in Miscellaneous Correspondence: NRS, NG3/4/29

<sup>35</sup> Board Room Minutes, July 1859, NRS, NG1/1/42

<sup>36</sup> *Daily Scotsman*, 19 March 1859, 2

appreciated, for the same qualities that we would admire today. However, like today, there was only so much that could be achieved by astute hanging. The *Scotsman* report continued by reflecting on what constituted a 'public gallery'. It insisted that it should be 'capable of teaching art, and of forming the taste of the public', and in order to do this, it had to contain a 'due proportion of works by the principal artists of each school or country'. Looking from this perspective, the writer clearly felt there was less cause for celebration: 'Judged by this standard, the present gallery is lamentably deficient.... As a collection of the comparative claims of genius, it is [therefore] quite useless, and likely even to cause false notions and unfounded conclusions.'<sup>37</sup> So there was a clear disparity between the appreciation of the 'curatorial' work carried out valiantly by Johnstone, and the disappointment at the unmet expectations for the newly constituted national institution, implying that there was a specific expectation for the institution that rested on assumptions about the role of a national gallery. The collection was criticised for failing to achieve that standard, while Johnstone was praised for trying to make the best of it. It would be the task of Johnstone to avert the dangers of misinterpretation that might arise from such an incoherent collection. And indeed, this is what he achieved.

Already in 1864, barely five years after opening, the *Scotsman's* description of the National Gallery as 'lamentably deficient', was transformed, referring to it as: 'an institution of which every Scotchman may well feel proud. Though only of recent formation, it has, under the fostering care of its first keeper, Mr W B Johnstone, attained a degree of importance which causes it to be viewed with satisfaction even by the most fastidious connoisseur fresh from the London or great Continental galleries...'<sup>38</sup>



Figure 3: Scottish School, *The interior of the National Gallery of Scotland, c.1867-1877*, National Galleries of Scotland. The Hon. Gertrude Forbes-Sempill Gift 1955

<sup>37</sup> *Daily Scotsman*, 19 March 1859, 2

<sup>38</sup> *Scotsman*, 11 May 1864, 2

Johnstone had used his expertise to create a pleasing impression on the gallery's opening: *The interior of the National Gallery, c. 1867-77*(fig. 3), by an unknown artist of the Scottish School, shows that his desire to 'fill the walls' remained the favoured display strategy well beyond the inauguration. He had also, however, immediately set about enhancing the quality of the collection, overseeing acquisitions, carefully assessing what works could be shown and where within the gallery space, and working tirelessly on the catalogue. By promoting high curatorial standards, he contributed to the emerging definition of what constituted a public art gallery. He had laid the foundations for a serious national collection that was well-catalogued and well-cared for, and well-presented. Although the size of the collection could not rival its London counterpart, the professional approach adopted by Johnstone in the early years enabled the Scottish National Gallery to garner a reputation and operate as an authoritative national voice on art matters. Despite its peripheral position with respect to the National Gallery in London, Johnstone ensured that the SNG became the central repository of Scotland's art collections.

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