Sir Frederic Burton and the controversy of art-historical expertise at the National Gallery, London, in the late nineteenth century

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This article draws upon a range of archival materials to present and consider the curatorial practice of Sir Frederic William Burton (1816 – 1900), the third director of the National Gallery, London, between 1874 and 1894. The issue of expertise was highly pertinent in this period, since as soon as Burton’s retirement had been announced, the popular and critical press and members of the art-world began to debate the qualities required for a new director. The debate centred around the types of pictures that ought to be acquired for the Gallery and whether an artist or a so-called ‘expert’ (a scholarly connoisseur) would be the best qualified to make these acquisitions. At the same time, the relative hierarchy of the director and trustees was recast through what became known as the Rosebery Minute, named after the newly-elected prime minister, Lord Rosebery. The Rosebery Minute, issued in 1894, altered the terms of an 1855 Treasury Minute – the result of a Parliamentary Select Committee begun two years earlier – which had established the post of director and vested it with sole authority to make acquisitions. After the Rosebery Minute the director was simply allocated equal status with the trustees.

The 1853 Parliamentary Committee also designed an acquisitions policy advocating that pictures of the earlier Italian schools from foreign collections ought to be the focus of the director’s attention, in order to illuminate the later Italian schools that dominated the collection. This mandate was in fact a repetition of a similar idea which accompanied the report of an earlier Committee of 1835. The intention was to balance out the collection but also to create a visual history of art upon the Gallery’s walls. In 1853 the Government committed to funding this project

1 This article is based upon doctoral research undertaken as a Collaborative Doctoral Award funded by the AHRC with the University of Nottingham and The National Gallery, London, under the supervision of Professor Fintan Cullen, Dr Susanna Avery-Quash and Professor Jeremy Wood. In addition to them, I would like to thank Sir Nicholas Penny and Paul Tucker for their assistance with the research of various aspects of this article and also Elizabeth Heath for inviting me to contribute to this volume.

2 Treasury Minute Reconstituting the Establishment of the National Gallery, 27 March 1855, NGA: NG5/118/1, National Gallery Archive, London (hereafter NGA). For the 1853 Parliamentary Select Committee see the report: Proceedings and Minutes of Evidence of the Select Committee appointed to Inquire into the Management of the National Gallery; also to Consider in what Mode the Collective monuments of Antiquity and Fine Art Possessed by the Nation maybe Securely Preserved, Judiciously Augmented, and Advantageously Exhibited to the Public (London, 1853). For the Rosebery Minute see: NGA: NG68/16/3.

3 Report from the Select Committee on Arts and their Connexion with Manufactures; with minutes of Evidence, Appendix and Index [of 1835] (London, 1836).
Elena J. Greer    Sir Frederic Burton and the controversy of art-historical expertise at the National Gallery, London, ... through an annual grant of £10,000. The appointment of Charles Lock Eastlake (director from 1855 to 1865), whose scholarship and collecting have been studied extensively, saw the beginning of the fulfilment of this collecting policy through his energetic acquisitions campaign. However, by 1894, as the debates of that year show, serious concerns about the expertise required for the role of director, the types of pictures that were desirable, and the role of the collection had resurfaced. As this article will show, the type of curatorial practice exercised by the director did not necessarily align with that required or desired by the Treasury, members of the art-world, or the needs of the public. Furthermore, the stipulations of the 1855 Minute, being usurped by different concerns; by the end of the century the context of the Minute had changed not least because the annual grant Minute had been suspended in 1872 after the purchase of the collection of Sir Robert Peel, and again in 1885, after the purchase of two works from Blenheim Palace at a cost of almost nine times the £10,000 grant. The suspension meant that the Gallery had to petition the Treasury for special grants to fund purchases. Furthermore, the price of Old Masters increased significantly in the 1880s on account of foreign competition, mainly from Germany and America. These foreign competitors coveted works from British private collections, the dispersal of which was in some cases forced by the agricultural depression of the 1880s. Ultimately, the collision of events outside the Gallery and the individuals within it (along with their agendas and relationships), resulted in a renewed conflict and controversy regarding curatorial practice and professional expertise.

With this in mind, this article will examine Burton’s methods and approach to augmenting the collection and the nature of his directorship through three inter-related issues. The first is his artistic training, which, as will be shown, influenced his priorities for the collection and his assessment of pictures. Burton had trained as a watercolourist from a young age in the Dublin Schools, painting scenes of Irish folk life and later becoming a society portraitist. His aesthetic sensitivity was balanced by the second point for examination, namely his concern for the historical

4 See the Treasury Minute of 1855, NGA: NG5/118/1.
6 The two works purchased – at a cost of £87,500 were Raphael’s Ansidei Madonna (NG1171) and Van Dyck’s Charles I on Horseback (NG1172).
7 See David Cannadine, ‘Pictures across the Pond’ in Inge Reist, ed, British models of Art Collecting and American Responses: reflections across the Pond, Farnham and Burlington 2014, 9-25.
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value of works of art in the collection, which derived from his interest in antiquarianism and archaeology.\textsuperscript{10} Thirdly, like Eastlake, Burton was well-acquainted with the history of art through his own travels and private scholarship, although, unlike Eastlake, he did not publish significantly on the subject.\textsuperscript{11} All three aspects informed Burton’s particular brand of connoisseurship and professional expertise but, as shall be seen, also resulted in purchases that could be regarded as eccentric at best and irrelevant and poor quality at worst. Finally, while Burton was theoretically the Gallery’s sole agent for acquisitions, he was naturally influenced by a network of individuals including advisers, agents, his own trustees, dealers and\textit{ marchands amateurs.} This article will also consider the impact of two of the most influential of these advisers, the dealer and connoisseur, Giovanni Morelli and the artist and dealer, Charles Fairfax Murray.

The debates surrounding Burton’s retirement

It is not the intention here to present all of the evidence nor to offer definitive answers for the debates of 1893-4 or the causes of the Rosebery Minute but rather to give a flavour of the debates and thus highlight the importance of the matter of expertise.\textsuperscript{12}

The news that Burton was due to retire as director of the Gallery provoked a reappraisal of the ideal candidate for the role in an attempt to influence the appointment of his successor. The key points reiterated in the triple-fronted debate that took place in the popular press, literary journals and in private letters to Gladstone and later Rosebery, as well as petitions and memoranda, were: an expert’s want of ‘taste’, the artist’s lack of art-historical knowledge or familiarity with the collections of European galleries and Burton’s bias towards schools of his own aesthetic taste. The broader argument centred on the role of the National Gallery and the type of pictures it ought to be acquiring, whether aesthetic ‘masterpieces’ or pictures of historic or antiquarian interest.\textsuperscript{13}

The significance of these debates in the context of examining Burton’s expertise and directorship, is that they exemplify the polarisation of the notion of


\textsuperscript{11} A list of Eastlake’s publications can be found in Avery-Quash and Sheldon,\textit{ Art for the Nation}. Burton extended and revised the National Gallery foreign schools catalogue, published in 1889: \textit{National Gallery Foreign Schools, Descriptive and Historical Catalogue}, London, 1889. Burton’s other scholarly publications include: ‘Mantegna’s Triumph of Scipio’, \textit{The Portfolio: An Artistic Periodical}, 5, 1874, 4-7 and ‘The Virgin of the Rocks’, \textit{The Nineteenth Century}, July 1894, 79-86.

\textsuperscript{12} A comprehensive survey and fresh analysis of the debates and an examination of the causes of the Rosebery Minute can be found in: Elena J. Greer, Frederic Burton and the Rosebery Minute, and will also be the subject of a future article.

\textsuperscript{13} Alan Bell, in 1975, was the first to publish many of these letters, which form part of the Rosebery papers held at the National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh: Alan Bell, ‘Colvin versus Poynter’, \textit{Connoisseur}, December 1975, 278-83.
the artist as aesthetic adjudicator (and his appropriation by those advocating a national collection of aesthetically approved ‘masterpieces’) and the emergence of the art-historical ‘expert’, or indeed ‘professional curator’, who would treat the gallery as a museum illustrating the development of the history of art through recourse to published scholarship.

The latter notion was in line with the mandates of the earlier Select Committees of 1835 and 1853, which recommended that the collection be developed along historical lines and that the main criteria for the selection of pictures should not be purely visual or subject to traditional ideas of ‘taste’. However, the conflict between the two positions illustrates that for the first time in the history of the Gallery the usefulness of collecting pictures for ‘historic purposes’ was doubted. Historically the post-holder had combined the profession or background of an artist with a variable amount of connoisseurial skill. William Seguier, the Gallery’s first keeper, was considered an ‘expert’ since he was a picture dealer and not an artist. However Eastlake, as an artist who had published on art history and artistic techniques, represented the ideal candidate. The growing distinction between the expertise of the artist and that of the scholar can be explained by the fact that by 1894 the painter-connoisseur was being usurped in terms of academic knowledge by the pure historical connoisseur and critic – figures like Giovanni Morelli and Wilhelm von Bode who were formulating their extensive visual knowledge into analytical systems for the ‘scientific’ criticism of works of art and the creation of the formal discipline of art history. For instance, Humphry Ward (who supported the candidacy of Sidney Colvin – a scholar and critic, rather than an artist, and keeper of prints and drawings at the British Museum) noted that the National Gallery was founded when ‘very few persons except the painter, knew much about art and its history, and that the director’s task was much simpler’ as the scope for potential acquisitions for the nascent Gallery was broader.

Positive reactions to the development of the discipline of art history promoted the elevation of the expert and in many cases arguments for such a move appear to have been influenced by changing political and economic circumstances. As noted, the 1880s had seen the sale of many paintings from British private collections – including from Hamilton Palace in 1882 and Blenheim Palace in 1884 – to overseas buyers and many saw increasing competition with foreign galleries as a critical feature of the debate.

14 Susanna Avery-Quash and James Carleton Paget, ‘The Artist as director at the National Gallery, London: intention or happenstance?’ in: Artists Work in Museums: Histories, Interventions, Subjectivities, ed Linda Sandino and Matilda Pye, Bath: Wunderkammer, 2013, 40. The fact that William Boxall, Eastlake’s immediate successor, was an artist was not much discussed in connection with his appointment.

15 Ward to Gladstone, 4 March 1893, Rosebery papers, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh (hereafter NLS), MS 10150.

16 The German curator, Wilhelm von Bode bought Botticelli’s drawings illustrating Dante’s Inferno for the Berlin Museums from the auction of the Hamilton collection in 1882 and
were at the head of foreign galleries it was important that Britain follow suit. This was particularly important as the study of art-history had defined more clearly both individual attributions and schools, and as such the director of a national institution ought to be au fait with this discipline in order to avoid errors. The Pall Mall Gazette brought up William Boxall’s (Burton’s predecessor) mistaken purchase of a Dutch picture as a Rembrandt as an example of the ‘reckless ascriptions’ made by artists.17

D.S. MacColl, later keeper of the Tate Gallery and Wallace Collection, was an influential voice on the side of the ‘expert’ arguing that the national collection ought to take seriously its role in the developing ‘science’ of connoisseurship. Looking to Europe, which had ‘outgrown the painter-director’ MacColl argued for the specialisation of the skills required for the director. He pointed out that he was now obliged to have knowledge of public and private collections but also the ability to marshal the evidence of documents, to compare drawings with finished works and to assess the relative status of various works of art, whether forgeries, works of a school or the master himself.18 Crucially MacColl saw the gallery as a museum – a place for the historical study and preservation of works of art, systematically collected to provide examples of as many artists and schools as possible – and as such knowledge, rather than taste, was key. The director ought to be able to discriminate between the ‘master and the follower’ (the ‘good’ and the ‘less good’) but most importantly be interested in both.19 J.C. Robinson, the dealer and, by then, surveyor of the Queen’s pictures, also supported Colvin’s candidacy but his opinion of the current state of art-historical connoisseurship in Britain was rather more critical.20 Referring to the continuing ‘art drain’ from British private to continental public collections, he claimed that Britain’s galleries were wasting money on ‘second-rate curiosities only, or worthless trash’.21 He made a direct correlation between the quality of a nation’s art collections and the calibre of its connoisseurship: ‘The continuance of a high level of connoisseurship in any country evidently in great measure depends on the continued possession of national wealth of art treasure previously acquired.’22 He regarded German connoisseurship as

several paintings from the Duke of Marlborough’s collection at Blenheim Palace including Rubens’s Andromeda and Sebastiano’s Fornarina although as he noted these pictures were in fact not coveted by the English: Wilhelm Bode, ‘The Berlin Renaissance Museum’, Fortnightly Review, 56, 1 October 1891, 506.

17 Pall Mall Gazette, 17 March 1894.
deleteriously book-based adding that it ‘too often degenerates into mere unenlivening pedantry’, of which the ‘Morellian method’ was an extreme example.\textsuperscript{23} Despite their different approaches, Robinson, MacColl and others on each side were keenly aware that the identification of quality and the ability to make correct ascriptions were crucial skills for those in charge of making acquisitions in order to compete successfully with foreign buyers and maintain the reputation of the national paintings collection.\textsuperscript{24}

In direct contrast to MacColl’s view of the nature of the gallery, one of the arguments posited in favour of an artist over an ‘expert’ was that the artist possessed superior aesthetic discrimination and would not be tempted to purchase pictures for ‘mere museum, or antiquarian, or historical purposes’ by artists who were ‘deservedly obscure’.\textsuperscript{25} The author of these comments in the Westminster Gazette believed that the exercise of creating a historically comprehensive collection had been fulfilled and the new director’s task would be to add only the greatest examples of works of art. Indeed by 1859 Eastlake had considered the early Italian collection to be complete.\textsuperscript{26} Many, such as the painter William Holman Hunt, felt that academic theory had taken over practical visual assessment. This attitude revealed a sense of unease that the intellectualising of the appreciation of art might result in a drop in quality in the national collection. They may have been concerned that some of the Gallery’s founding aims – to educate artists and elevate the taste of the nation – might be lost.\textsuperscript{27} The issue of taste was important not just in terms of the nature of the collection but also in terms of the sheer quality of the works: like J.C Robinson, many in favour of an artist felt that ‘experts’ would not possess the aesthetic judgment to avoid making ‘bad’ purchases. Finally, Rosebery chose to appoint the artist, Sir Edward Poynter, to succeed Burton, making the announcement at the Royal Academy in May 1894 when he also announced the alterations to the Gallery’s administration.\textsuperscript{28}

**Burton’s methods and approach**

The debates show that there was certainly no consensus in the art world about the nature of expertise required for the new director and that views were strictly polarised. Interestingly, Burton was not definitively placed in either category, and although the compromise between artist and connoisseur had clearly expired, he was not criticised for having embodied that compromise. Rather, characterisations of his directorship cleaved his dual identity as artist and scholar apart. For example, the Pall Mall Gazette noted that Burton ‘had ever been too anxious to acquire for the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{24} Ward to Gladstone, 4 March 1893, Rosebery papers, NLS, MS 10150.
\textsuperscript{25} Westminster Gazette, 21 August 1893.
\textsuperscript{26} Avery Quash and Sheldon, *Art for the Nation*, 159.
\textsuperscript{27} Bell, ‘Colvin vs Poynter’, 279.
\textsuperscript{28} Poynter was the first Slade professor of art in 1871 and later became the director of art at the National Art Training School at South Kensington. The speech was reported in The Times, 7 May 1894.
\end{footnotesize}
country the works of those early Italians who appeal most clamorously to his taste’. It firmly attributed this tendency to his background as a painter. Nonetheless, Colvin himself commented that Burton had been a good director, not because he was ‘a left-handed water-colourist’ but because he was, ‘in the first instance a trained and critical expert’. The National Gallery trustee, George Howard, himself a painter and a great advocate of Burton’s during his directorship, argued for a painter-director, like Burton, noting that the artist’s judgement was crucial in order to sway the Board.

The following examples will show that Burton indeed embodied both genres of expertise; he possessed the artist’s eye as well as a proclivity for the scholarly and historical. It will also examine how his background, training, personal interests and connections affected the development of the collection in order to demonstrate the nature of his particular brand of connoisseurship. Burton’s experience as a painter influenced his priorities for the collection and, naturally, his assessment of pictures for acquisition and conservation purposes.

![Figure 1 Workshop of Domenico Ghirlandaio, Portrait of a Girl, probably about 1490, tempera on wood, London: The National Gallery. © The National Gallery, London.](image)

Burton’s description of the cleaning of the Portrait of a Girl, attributed to Domenico Ghirlandaio (now called workshop of) (fig.1) and purchased in 1887, shows his knowledge of Italian Renaissance painting techniques and the subtlety of his visual appreciation. He noted, for example, that by removing over-painting in vermillion on the sitter’s face, ‘the terra verde of the shadows is visible throughout’. The cleaning also removed overpainted black puff sleeves to reveal the original green sleeves of the dress, ‘as well as the deep transparent red shadows of the

29 Pall Mall Gazette, 17 March 1894.
30 Colvin to Lyttleton, 9 February 1893, Rosebery papers, NLS, MS 10150.
31 Carlisle to Gladstone, 19 February 1894, Rosebery papers, MS 10150.
scarlet bodice between the breasts & the armpits. This improves astonishingly the
harmony and diminishes the hardness of the whole.\textsuperscript{32}  
Evidence from Burton’s correspondence and diary of a trip to Italy in 1880
reveals in detail his careful and forensic visual approach to assessing works of art.
Firstly, the descriptions of pictures he visited in churches, museums and dealers’
shops reveal his sophisticated and discriminating visual skills, no doubt deriving in
part from his artistic training. For example, his record of Veronese’s \textit{Christ in the
House of Simon} in Turin’s Pinacoteca describes the picture through the artist’s use of
colour, a theme that dominates his response to many of the images he viewed. He
identified five or six varieties of blue within the scene and his response to the colour
combinations was visceral, ‘the play of the […] grey-blue sleeve & upper dress of M.
Magdalene with her [fair] skin & whitish or […] transparent veil is delicious’.\textsuperscript{33}  
The diary also contains frequent references to climbing up ladders or having pictures
removed from their positions in order to facilitate such close looking.

This close inspection is evident in his notes on Paolo Veneziano’s \textit{Dormition of the Virgin} in the Accademia in Venice, which include a transcription of the
inscription, a detailed description of the composition and shape of the panel, an
analysis of its various parts, including the heads, faces and hands, and finally a
stylistic comparison with other artists. He noted the striations of Christ’s robe,
surmising that the gilding had been applied to the panel separately from the paint,
‘the folds being made out with lines indented (I think) in the gesso’.\textsuperscript{34}  
Burton’s account of a copy of the Earl of Cowper’s Raphael, \textit{Virgin and Child}, the Niccolini-
Cowper Madonna, or the ‘large Cowper Madonna’, bought by a certain Signor Banti
in Florence as a Fra Bartolommeo similarly attest to his careful visual analysis.\textsuperscript{35}  He
describes in great detail the differences between the copy and the original at
Panshanger (now in the National Gallery of Art, Washington), based upon an
engraving that he had of the latter. He noted the careful drawing and that the
outline was incised in the gesso, and he recognised that the blue mantle had turned
a ‘dull olive green’. He then carefully recorded the subtle differences between the
two images, specifying that the copy was less fully developed in the modelling, and
the limbs placed in slightly different positions.\textsuperscript{36}  This detailed and forensic
approach to visual analysis reflected the manner in which he had approached his
own painting practice; his close observation of nature and detail – as well as his

\textsuperscript{32} Burton to Murray, 22 September 1887, Charles Fairfax Murray papers, Harry Ransom
Humanities Research Center, University of Austin, Texas (hereafter, Austin), MS-2970. The
National Gallery, London, information dossier for NG1230 (all inventory numbers preceded
by NG hereafter denote paintings in the collection of the National Gallery, London).
\textsuperscript{33} Turin, 24 September 1880, Diary, Bindon Burton archive, National Gallery of Ireland
archive (hereafter NGIA), no. 100.
\textsuperscript{34} Diary, Vicenza, 17 October 1880, Bindon Burton archive, NGIA, no. 100.
\textsuperscript{36} Diary, Florence, 17 November 1880, Bindon Burton archive, NGIA, no. 100
choice of medieval and literary subjects and use of strong colours – expressed his affinity with his friends in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.\(^{37}\)

Burton’s own background as an artist most likely informed his acquisition of copies after Old Masters for the national collection, citing their value for art students unable to see the originals. Burton was the first and last Director to acquire known copies. His idiosyncratic hang of the new suite of rooms (the ‘Barry rooms’) in 1876 in which he brought together similar visual motifs arguably reflected his desire to create a ‘sketchbook’ of iconography on the gallery walls to aid student artists.\(^{38}\)

Despite Burton’s acutely sensitive visual awareness and his interest in the aesthetic quality of an image, he often justified purchases through recourse to their historical value. This is seen in his defence of the purchase of two paintings by the little-known Venetian artist, Gerolamo Mocetto (figs 2-3), on account of the fact that they had been engraved in Seroux d’Agincourt’s *Historie de l’Art*.\(^{39}\) He may also have known that they were engraved for the Venetian writer, dealer and collector Giovanni Maria Sasso’s *Venezia Pittrice* and that they once formed part of his collection. Furthermore, Burton stated clearly to Gregory that he was not interested in the works for their artistic quality: ‘As works of art simply’, he wrote, ‘little can be said for them … However, a recorded or signed work by Mocetto has its value in a historical collection, and as pictures by that painter are rare.’\(^{40}\) The documentation of the works in a respected art-historical tract, the fact that one of them was signed and the rarity of the artist’s known oeuvre provided Burton with three good reasons to purchase the pictures. These rationales illustrate his view of the Gallery as a collection of art-historical artefacts that were useful as reference tools for both the student and the scholar if not the aesthetic appreciation of the general public.\(^{41}\)

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\(^{38}\) See: Elena J. Greer, ‘Frederic W. Burton as Director of the National Gallery, London’ in *Frederic William Burton: For the Love of Art*, 66-75, 71.

\(^{39}\) *The Massacre of the Innocents with Herod* and *The Massacre of the Innocents*, NG1239-40.

\(^{40}\) Burton to Gregory, 9 February 1888, William Gregory papers, Military and naval Club (on deposit at the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford) (hereafter Bod.), Dep.d.976. Burton reiterated the point in a further letter, Burton to Gregory, 12 February 1888, Bod., Dep.d.976. Layard had seen these pictures by 5 March and commented to Gregory that they were ‘very interesting’, Layard to Gregory, 5 March 1888, BL Add MSS 38950, Layard papers, British Library, London (hereafter identifiable by reference BL).

\(^{41}\) Furthermore, although there is no evidence that Burton knew it, the provenance of the pictures proves that they were once esteemed by distinguished collectors; they belonged to the British diplomat and antiquarian John Strange (1732-1799) who left them in Venice after his departure in 1786 when they passed into the collection of Giovanni Maria Sasso, the Venetian writer, dealer and collector, for whose *Venezia Pittrice* they were engraved. The signed picture (NG11239) is one of only three extant, signed works by the artist.
Thus, in a letter to Gregory, Burton revealed that in 1888 he had purchased a Dutch portrait on account of its ‘usefulness’, rather than aesthetic quality, ‘It is not a great work of art: but the monogram gives it value for us’; the promise of a potential future attribution made it worth preserving for posterity.\textsuperscript{42} Again he was more interested in the works as art historical artefacts or perhaps even specimens – an attitude that reflects his professional approach towards the function of the art museum but one that may have alienated his audience and indeed the government who were financing the acquisitions.

Often Burton’s purchases combined several of his interests and aims for the collection. For example in 1888 he made the unusual purchase of a series of first to second-century AD portraits (figs 4-5), originally painted as burial portraits attached to mummies, which had been excavated in Hawara, Egypt, that spring.\textsuperscript{43} At the
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National Gallery the portraits were called ‘Greco-Roman’ or ‘Romano-Egyptian’ in reference to the multi-faceted identity of the subjects. While his trustees eventually supported the purchase (limiting his expenditure) they did question their suitability for the collection suggesting that they might be more appropriate acquisitions for the British Museum (where they were transferred in 1994) or the South Kensington Museum.44

Burton noted that the portraits ‘illustrate the unbroken succession in the art of painting’ and as such showed the method which had been handed down from Byzantine art and could be seen in Cimabue and even in Lorenzetti’s frescoes. As such he saw them as ‘appropriate and desirable in a gallery that pretends to be historical as any […] Italian fresco or other work’.45 In this sense, the purchase was an extreme interpretation of the 1855 Minute and aims of the 1835 and 1853 Select Committees. It also reflected Burton’s interest in archaeology; not only was he a supporter of the Egypt exploration fund that had financed the Hawara expedition but he had also published on archaeological artefacts in the 1870s, namely two long

Figure 4 Mummy portrait of a Woman from Hawara, Egypt, AD 55-70, wax on lime wood, 41.6 x 21.5 cm, London: British Museum, EA74713. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence. Figure 5 Mummy portrait of a Man from Hawara, Egypt, AD 100-200, wax on lime, 40.1 x 21.5cm, London: British Museum, EA74715. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.

44 Burton raised the portraits at a board meeting on 3 July 1888, NGA NG 1/6.
45 W.H. Gregory papers, Burton to Gregory, 6 July 1888, Bod., Dep.d.976.
and sensitively written articles on the Castellani collection of antiquities at the British Museum and one on the marbles of Ephesus. Indeed Burton’s private notebooks contain frequent notes from his readings on Roman antiquities and his drawings and writings about Ireland’s ancient past. They contain observations on a variety of diverse antiquarian subjects including, for example, an article on the origins of the introduction of the game of chess into Europe, extracts on an essay on the origins and beliefs of the Sadducees, incomplete handwritten notes from James Fergusson’s Rude Stone Monuments in all Countries (1872) and a list of a variety of Roman antiquities including, for example, the sarcophagus della Vigna Ammendola. It is now possible to establish the exact scholarly sources he was reading on the basis of his summary references. He also sketched in great detail two pieces (a king and a queen) from the chess set known as the Lewis Chessmen – destined in the twelfth century for sale in Ireland, which were discovered in 1831 and purchased the following year by the British Museum, including both a front and back view and details of the ornaments of their thrones. Burton was a member of the Irish Archaeological Society and a fellow of London’s Society of Antiquaries, interests perhaps fostered by his youthful friendships with Ireland’s famous antiquarians such as George Petrie and Samuel Ferguson.

The preceding examples have shown the range of Burton’s interests and expertise and the scope of his vision for the Gallery’s collection. However, it would be inaccurate to present his directorship as immune to the influence of his art-world contacts. The following paragraphs will focus on two in particular – Giovanni Morelli and Charles Fairfax Murray – with whom he had very different relationships. Burton’s expertise was fostered and challenged by his interactions with these two men whose impact upon his role as director and the development of the collection was significant.

Giovanni Morelli

Burton’s two most vocal and influential trustees were the explorer turned politician and diplomat and doyen of the Victorian art world, Austen Henry Layard (1817 – 1894) and the art collector, diplomat and MP, William Henry Gregory (1816 –

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48 The notes regarding antiquities appear to be drawn mainly from the ‘annali’, most likely referring to, Annali dell’Instituto di Corrispondenza Archaeologica. The reference regarding the Sarcophagus della vigna Ammendola probably refers to an 1831 article by J. S. Blackie.
49 Bindon Burton archive, NGIA, no. 60.
50 Neither was officially engaged by the Gallery. Murray was paid agency fees upon successfully securing purchases for the National Gallery.
While they were both publically supportive of Burton, Layard frequently criticised Burton for his apparent unwillingness to travel to the continent to view pictures for purchase; writing about a group of pictures offered to the Gallery by Jean-Paul Richter in 1887, Layard wrote to Gregory, ‘It is very unfortunate that we cannot get the Knight [as Layard ironically referred to Burton, after he was knighted in 1884] to stir to examine these and other pictures … but he is lazy and indifferent and would rather not leave his armchair at the Athenaeum to encounter the dangers and privation of a journey in Italy’. Perhaps in order to counteract Burton’s perceived inactivity Layard became particularly reliant upon the advice of the dealer and critic, Giovanni Morelli. Morelli had been involved with the Gallery since Eastlake’s directorship. He had also advised Layard on purchases for his own collection. Layard’s friendship with Morelli did not materially benefit the collection (of the seventeen pictures that the Gallery purchased through Morelli’s agency or on his advice, only two now hang on the main floor with any regularity) and neither did it greatly affect Burton’s assessment of works of art. Burton realised the importance of acknowledging Morelli’s opinions, however, as attested to by the notes in Burton’s hand that the present author discovered tucked into the National Gallery’s copy of Morelli’s 1880 *Die Werke Italienischer Meister* … Furthermore, he added a footnote referencing Morelli’s suggestion that the Dresden *Sleeping Venus* was attributable to Giorgione, perhaps at Layard’s insistence to his biography of the artist in his revision of the Gallery’s Foreign Schools catalogue of 1890 (amongst many referencing Morelli). Indeed, Burton’s 1880 Italian diary records that he spent many hours discussing pictures and attributions with Morelli in Milan. That Burton was subject to pressure from Layard to acquiesce to Morelli is evident in the

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51 Both Layard and Gregory collected paintings and had served as trustees of the National Gallery from the 1860s. They were both influential members of the Arundel Society and in the 1860s had agitated for the reform of the organization of London’s museums.

52 Layard to Gregory, 13 November 1887, Layard papers, BL Add MSS 38950. Interestingly, in the context of this volume, Layard also wrote to Gregory, during the hang of the new rooms that opened in 1887 (which include the present Central hall) comparing Burton’s supposed lack of method unfavourably with the National Portrait Gallery director George Scharf’s approach: Scharf used miniature scale reproductions of the works with which he could experiment until he made a decision. Layard to Gregory, 16 April 1887, Bod., Dep. d. 973. For more on Scharf’s methods and approach to connoisseurship and display see: Elizabeth Heath, *Sir George Scharf and the early National Portrait Gallery: reconstructing an intellectual and professional artistic world, 1857–1895*, PhD thesis, University of Sussex/National Portrait Gallery, 2017.


55 See for example: Diary, Milan, 1 October 1880, Bindon Burton archive, NGIA, no. 100.
case of the purchase of a picture by Marco d’Oggiono (fig. 6) from the Manfrin collection where it had long been attributed to Cesare da Sesto. Morelli and Layard congratulated themselves upon persuading Burton to purchase the Virgin and Child and put Burton’s reluctance to buy it down to his extreme caution, despite the fact that the picture was given short shrift in Zanotto’s 1856 guide to the collection.

Burton was right to be cautious of Morelli, however, as Morelli’s agency was not unbiased and he often promoted pictures for the Gallery from the collections of his friends and relatives. Thus in 1886 Burton purchased a Bonifazio de Pitati and a Cariani from Morelli’s cousin Enrico Andreossi. Burton’s role in this transaction appears, according to Morelli and Layard’s correspondence, at least, to be somewhat passive – the entire negotiation instigated and finalised by Morelli – he even attended a tribunal on behalf of the Gallery to secure the export of the pictures.

The most significant contribution that the relationship made to Burton’s directorship was the tension it caused between him, Layard and Gregory (important in this instance as Layard’s closest ally and friend on the Board). When Burton did

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56 NG1149. See Anderson, ‘Layard and Morelli’, 124. The attribution, which may have been Morelli’s, has recently been verified by technical examination. See Marika Spring et al., ‘Painting Practice in Milan in the 1490s: The Influence of Leonardo’, National Gallery Technical Bulletin 32, 2011,106-8.

57 Francesco Zanotto, Nuovissima guida di Venezia e delle isole della sua laguna, Venice 1856, 344.

58 NG1202, NG1203. Morelli to Layard, 7 February 1886, BL Add MSS 38965.
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not agree with Morelli’s recommendations Morelli would respond by undermining his authority to Layard, often implying that it was in fact Burton’s judgment that was questionable. Later that year, Morelli claimed that Burton would have been put off purchasing the rare pictures that he had just acquired that included two Botticelli portraits (now in the Accademia Carrara, Bergamo) since they were covered in a darkened varnish that probably impeded Burton’s appreciation of them.⁵⁹

Despite the complexity and tensions caused by the relationship between Layard, Burton and Morelli, Burton was not afraid to reject his attributions. One of Burton’s finest acquisitions, Giorgione’s Adoration of the Kings purchased from the Leigh Court collection in 1884 was doubted by Morelli but is now one of two works in the Gallery’s collection that is attributed to that master.⁶⁰

Charles Fairfax Murray

Though Layard and Gregory were sceptical as to Burton’s energy and initiative when it came to making purchases, Burton’s friendship and professional relationship with Charles Fairfax Murray show that he was in fact eagerly in pursuit of acquisitions and very actively engaged with the art market and the study of the history of art.⁶¹

Burton’s relationship with Murray directed the Gallery’s collecting of early Italian painting towards the early Sienese school, Murray’s particular area of expertise. Murray began his career as an assistant to Edward Burne-Jones in the late 1860s and through him found employment at the firm of Morris & Co. He was later employed as a copyist by John Ruskin and accompanied him on a visit to Italy in 1871-2, where he later settled. Burton’s pursuit of Sienese pictures was novel.⁶² Until this point there were only three pictures from this school represented in the Gallery.⁶³

Their correspondence covers a wide range of subjects relating to connoisseurship, art sales, private collections, conservation, dealers and competitors and reflects the closeness and trust between the two men. Burton frequently asked Murray’s opinion regarding purchases for the Gallery, asking him to inspect

⁵⁹ See Anderson, ‘Layard and Morelli’, 124
⁶⁰ NG1160.
⁶¹ Murray offered the National Gallery eighteen pictures, of which Burton purchased eight. Paul Tucker’s publication of Murray’s correspondence with Frederic Burton, Wilhelm Bode and Julius Meyer represents the most up-to-date scholarship on Murray: Paul Tucker, ‘A Connoisseur and his Clients: The Correspondence of Charles Fairfax Murray (1849-1919)’, Frederic Burton (1816-1900) and Wilhelm Bode (1845-1929) in The Walpole Society, vol. 79 (2017).
⁶² Murray offered the National Gallery eighteen pictures, of which Burton purchased eight.
⁶³ Matteo di Giovanni, Christ Crowned with Thorns, NG247, (purchased 1854), Duccio, Virgin and Child, NG566, (purchased in 1857) and Segna di Bonaventura, Crucifix, NG567, (purchased in 1857). The Virgin and Child with Six Angels now attributed to the Sienese master of the Albertini (master of the Casole Fresco), NG565, (purchased in 1857), was then attributed to Cimabue.
pictures he had purchased or was about to purchase for the Gallery. Murray also sold Burton drawings for his private collection including a supposed Hals and a Signorelli. If Burton was intrigued or perplexed about the attribution of a picture he would frequently consult Murray and appears to have trusted him far more than Morelli.

In 1883 Murray invoiced the Gallery for two small panels by Duccio. The panels, representing The Annunciation and The Healing the Man born Blind (figs 7-8) are now known to have belonged to the predella of that master’s great altarpiece painted for Siena cathedral in 1311 but they were not purchased as such. Several years after the purchase of the works, Burton, enquiring after their provenance, (perhaps in preparation of the 1890 National Gallery catalogue) asked Murray whether they might have belonged to a series that they had once seen together in the Opera dell’ Duomo or indeed to the Maestà itself. He even suggested their function as, ‘[…] part of that same great Pala of the Duomo – of a predella perhaps?’. Paul Tucker has discovered that Murray was convinced, despite opinions otherwise, that these dispersed panels had not come from the Maestà. That Burton purchased them without hesitation, without knowing their provenance and that he later supposed their actual origin shows his appreciation of and familiarity with the artistic production of fourteenth-century Siena.

The purchase of Matteo di Giovanni’s Assumption of the Virgin in 1884 was a complicated affair but Burton clearly thought the acquisition highly important: ‘The price which it is rumoured S.gr Griccioli, the proprietor, would demand for it is a high one – altho’ it may not be more than the worth to the Gallery of so

64 NG1139-40
65 Tucker, Charles Fairfax Murray and Duccio’s Maestà, 24.
representative a work’. The complex negotiations for its purchase took over one year during which time Burton and Murray steadfastly pursued the picture despite the difficulties that arose. Throughout, Burton displayed a shrewd understanding of the practices and manipulations of sellers, closely advising Murray on how to proceed.

One particular Sienese picture purchased through Murray was the fragment of a fresco by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *A Group of Four Poor Clares* (fig. 9). The fresco, which depicts the heads of four Clarisse nuns, was removed from the Chapter House of San Francesco, Siena, where it had been discovered under whitewash in the mid-nineteenth century since which time it had been kept, according to Murray, in the room of the *maestro di casa*.

The frescoes had been mentioned by Vasari, Ghiberti, Milanesi and Crowe and Cavalcaselle, ensuring they were well-known to nineteenth-century collectors. Furthermore, their attribution to Ambrogio has not ever been doubted on account of

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66 NG1155, See Burton to Murray, 19 December 1882, Charles Fairfax Murray papers, Austin, MS-2970. The picture came from the Church of Sant’Eugenio, Monastero, near Siena which was closed and acquired in 1812 by the Griccioli family who used it as their residence.

67 For example, Burton decided not to purchase Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s, ‘Madonna and Bambino’ from the same church as the Matteo di Giovanni for, ‘fear that the purchase of the minor work would give the owner occasion to ride a still taller horse hereafter, or to brag elsewhere, & [?puff] the greater one…’ See Burton to Murray, 25 February 1883, Charles Fairfax Murray papers, Austin, MS-2970. The picture in question is now at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 39.536.

68 NG1147. See Murray to Burton, 2 August 1877, National Gallery information dossier for NG 1147. Murray noted that the fresco belonged to part of a series that was removed when the old refectory was demolished and that it was available for sale as the Italian government had overlooked it when the others were removed. The suggestion that the frescoes came from the Chapter House was made by Davies, 1968, who suggested that the fresco may have been that which was described by Milanesi as having belonged to part of an unidentifiable fresco in the Chapter House of San Francesco. It is unclear what the whole composition may have represented. See also, Dillian Gordon, *National Gallery Catalogues: Italian Painting before 1400*, London: National Gallery Company, 2011, 284-86.
the firm and documented provenance. Finally, as Murray pointed out, the central head was in perfect preservation.\(^{69}\) International competition for the fragment was intense.\(^{70}\) Burton thought it ‘a thing of beauty’ and had no difficulty in obtaining the trustees’ permission for the asking price of £40.\(^{71}\) However, the difficulties arose when Burton and Murray were discouraged by the calibre of the competition, especially after the priest, presumably buoyed by the market he had created, employed Lombardi to act for him. Finally, however, Murray managed to secure the fragment for the Gallery after Burton had seen it in September 1877.\(^{72}\)

The zeal with which Burton and Murray jointly pursued these purchases attests to their common interest in the school and the benefits of their excellent working relationship. Neither Morelli nor Murray were formally engaged by the Gallery on a permanent basis. Unlike the Gallery’s relationship with Morelli, which undermined the director’s expertise, Burton’s independent relationship with Murray was more fruitful and fortified his connoisseurial skills by providing him with a sounding board and precious information regarding the art market and private and public collections.

**Conclusion**

Although the debate surrounding the appointment of Burton’s successor did not coincide with a formal parliamentary investigation, it did, in common with the earlier Select Committees, critically reflect upon the immediately preceding years. The debate was clearly stimulated by progress in the field of connoisseurship and the increasing professionalisation of the museum curator. Eastlake’s directorship, which came about in the wake of the report of the 1853 Select Committee, had altered both the shape of the collection and the nature of the director’s role: he had filled many gaps in the collection so that the earlier Italian and Netherlandish schools were better represented and the visual narrative of the history of art was more comprehensive. The discussion surrounding Burton’s directorship and the

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\(^{69}\) Murray to Burton, 2 August 1877.

\(^{70}\) International agents included a Dane, a Russian and a German. See Murray to Burton, 11 October 1877, NGA, NG 54/6 and Burton to Murray, 30 August 1877, NGA, NG 54/6.

\(^{71}\) Burton had been prevented from viewing the fragment in person in Siena in 1877 and so was reliant upon the opinion of his trustee George Howard who had initially recommended the picture for purchase.

\(^{72}\) These included a Russian, the Danish Government and a German buyer. See Murray to Burton, 11 October 1877, NGA, NG 54/6. Burton was worried about competition from Berlin but informed Murray that, ‘The Berlin people at any rate, are out of money, as I have just heard from one of themselves - The Hamilton MSS have got to be repaid by the Museum. It would [seem] the Gov:t only advanced the money - So that, as far as they are concerned the Matteo is safe’, Burton to Murray, 25 February 1883, Charles Fairfax Murray papers, Austin, MS-2970. See also, Burton to Murray 5 April 1883, Charles Fairfax Murray papers, Austin, MS-2970, ‘I should not wonder if Bode went after the Matteo di Siena while he is in Italy - It will be a pity if we can't balk him there too - I hope soon to be able to tell you that I have snatched another important prey out of his talons. But until it is safe here I prefer saying nothing about it’.
backlash against the ‘expert’ director suggests that there were some who felt that the connoisseurial trajectory had progressed beyond a useful point and that the appointment of an artist as opposed to a critic or scholar was an attempt to halt the direction in which the role was being professionalised. Indeed, for the first time in the Gallery’s history, the debates reflect a desire to limit, rather than progress, the academic nature of the museum official’s work.

Rosebery’s appointment of the artist Edward Poynter demonstrates that he sympathised with the anti-‘expert’ camp. The appointment also reflects the government’s appreciation for the unique talents of the artist to assess works of art and a desire to continue the tradition of appointing artists to the role. The result of the refusal to appoint an ‘expert’ as championed by the art critics, and the diminution of the director’s power through the Minute, was the limitation of the Gallery’s ability to purchase pictures that might be regarded as too expensive or too ‘obscure’ to be justly in the national interest. This shift away from the ideals of the Select Committees suggests that the government preferred to purchase ‘aesthetic masterpieces’, as opposed to works of historic significance and that the idea of the National Gallery as a repository of aesthetic masterpieces as opposed to a museum of art-historical artefacts had prevailed.

As this article has shown, while Burton was aware of and an active participant in the development of the discipline of art history in the late nineteenth-century, his acquisitions were shaped by a number of particular interests, concerns and circumstances. Economics played a part: the price of Old Masters had rapidly increased since Eastlake’s directorship and since pictures were now being sold to foreign competitors the stakes of qualitative analysis and attributional accuracy were higher. As a director with final responsibility for making additions to the collection, Burton melded his antiquarian interests – regarding the Gallery as a repository for interesting, rare or ‘useful’ works, links in the art-historical chain – with his concerns for the education of the art student and his aesthetic preference for early Italian painting. His purchases were sometimes challenging and he had no qualms about including works that were not visually appealing or required justification. Burton exercised the authority with which he was endowed through the 1855 Minute to mould the collection according to his own interests in straitened times. Nevertheless, his personal networks in the art world also influenced and shaped the collection. These relationships were significant, though he resisted and encouraged them to varying degrees.

Analysis of these networks adds nuance to the assessment of his directorship and the nature of the expertise involved. The fact that the history of art was not a fully formulated discipline allowed flexibility and a more individual approach to collecting for the nation. It was perhaps this degree of individuality that summoned the backlash against the so-called ‘expert’ and the scholarly approach, despite its many champions. Burton’s directorship represents the last moment at which the director possessed full authority for acquisitions and he was able to exercise his own brand of scholarship relatively unhindered by his trustees. The trials of those who followed him are well documented. Suffice to say for several decades in the early
twentieth century the director’s ‘expertise’ was secondary to the tastes and desires of his trustees.\textsuperscript{73}

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\textsuperscript{73} The appointment of Alfred de Rothschild as trustee in 1894 exemplified this dynamic. Jonathan Conlin’s article offers a good account: ‘Butlers and Boardrooms: Alfred de Rothschild as collector and connoisseur’, \textit{Rothschild Archive Annual Review}, 2006, 26-33.