

'How to observe': Charles Eastlake and a new professionalism for the arts

Lucy Hartley

In a letter written on 3 May 1841, Charles Lock Eastlake (1793-1865) detailed the process by which he assessed the provenance of a painting. Having been invited by the trustees of the National Gallery 'to give an opinion on a soi-distant Raphael which they have some idea of purchasing', he delivered the following judgement:

I am afraid it will be rather humiliating to them (*entre nous*), but at least it will show that Sir Robert Peel was right. I have been able to give the whole history of the picture, for it is described in more than one work, and this kind of lore (with the help of the artistic library which I have by degrees collected) I have, as you know, at my fingers' ends. I have given them my own opinion, confirmed by a mass of evidence, dates, &c., which I think must show them that they need a little enlightening on these matters.¹

Neither an ordinary spectator nor a government official, Eastlake's expertise as an artist gave authority to his judgement and a degree of independence from the business of purchasing pictures for the nation. In this instance, the 'enlightening' of the Trustees was primarily aesthetic and principally via the archival record. But while the painting did not pass muster as a Raphael, Eastlake offered the opinion, 'without pretending to judge the price, that it would be an acquisition to the Gallery as the work of the painter to whom I attribute it (on grounds amounting to proof).'² The emphasis on scholarship and schools is telling because it establishes not only a method of aesthetic corroboration but also a check on economic expenditure. Though far from an isolated example, the issue of what Eastlake called 'doubtful pictures' in the context of 'documentary evidence' raised the broader issue of the relation between provenance and purchasing and, in turn, the question of aesthetic and economic responsibility.³

¹ *A Memoir of Sir Charles Lock Eastlake, compiled by Lady Eastlake*, in: Charles Eastlake, *Contributions to the Literature of the Fine Arts. Second Series*, ed. Bellenden Ker, London: John Murray, 1870, 158.

² As Lady Eastlake (1809-1893) notes in the *Memoir*, 'the work in question was an unfinished Holy Family by Fra Bartolommeo—purchase several years later by Mr. Thomas Baring, and now in his gallery' (159).

³ *Memoir of Sir Charles Lock Eastlake*, 159.

How did a successful painter assume a position of unparalleled power in the major institutions and Parliamentary commissions for art in nineteenth-century Britain? Some background is necessary given that Eastlake's contributions to the profession have generally been overlooked.⁴ Taught by Samuel Prout (1783-1852) in Plymouth and Benjamin Robert Haydon (1786-1846) in London along with Royal Academy teachers including J. M. W. Turner (1775-1851), Eastlake moved to Rome around 1816 where he stayed for fourteen years.⁵ It was during these years that Eastlake commenced a thoroughgoing investigation of the techniques of painting of the Old Masters using extensive archival research and secondary sources; it was also during these years that he forged links with the group of German artists, known as 'the Nazarenes' and led by Peter von Cornelius (1783-1867) and Friedrich Overbeck (1789-1869), and he helped to found the English Academy of Painting in 1821. A steady stream of commissions from private patrons forged Eastlake's artistic reputation: he was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy in 1827 during the presidency of Sir Thomas Lawrence (1769-1830) and became a full Academician in 1830 under the new presidency of Sir Martin Archer Shee (1769-1850). Through the 1830s, Eastlake balanced two complementary pursuits: as an artist, he worked in the mixed genre of landscape and history as well as painting scenes from the Bible, and, as a scholar, he examined the historical development of painting in relation to changes in techniques and the public purpose of the arts. While the scholarship remained a preoccupation through his life, his painterly activity diminished for the simple reason that he became an arts administrator, most notably as Secretary to the Royal Commission on the Fine Arts (1841-65), Keeper of the National Gallery (1843-47), President of the Royal Academy (1850-65), and first Director of the National Gallery (1855-65).⁶

This essay will not attempt to trace the trajectory of Eastlake's career as an arts administrator; rather, it will be more narrowly focused on Eastlake's two periods of tenure at the National Gallery. The project of decorating the new Houses of Parliament, which was overseen by the Fine Arts Commission (with Prince Albert in the Chair) and was in session from 1841 to 1870, can be viewed as a testing-ground for Eastlake both aesthetically and administratively; on the aesthetic side was the question of how to shape new traditions for a new era and a burgeoning nation, and on the administrative side was the matter of how to balance competing

⁴ Two notable exceptions are: David Robertson, *Sir Charles Eastlake and the Victorian Art World*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978, and Susanna Avery-Quash and Julie Sheldon, *Art for the Nation: The Eastlakes and the Victorian Art World*, London: The National Gallery and Yale University Press, 2011.

⁵ On Eastlake's early training and influences, see: Robertson, *Sir Charles Eastlake*, 2-39.

⁶ Eastlake was also Librarian to the Royal Academy (1842-44) and first President of the Photographic Society (1853).

interests in promoting art to the nation.⁷ The challenges Eastlake encountered at the new Houses of Parliament were undoubtedly instructive for his career as chief executive officer, so to speak, of two major institutions of British art in the mid-nineteenth century. To understand his transformation into a museum professional at the National Gallery, however, it is necessary to reconsider the most substantial of Eastlake's essays on the arts, 'How to Observe' (1835), before considering its import on his later practice as a custodian of the national collection. The argument thus falls into three parts: the first shows how Eastlake developed a professional aesthetic through literary study of European art, the second tells why issues of provenance, purchasing, and preservation defined Eastlake's first tenure at the National Gallery as Keeper, and the third assesses what organizational changes Eastlake effected in his second tenure at the Gallery as its Director and their impact on professionalism for the arts.⁸

A professional aesthetic

Eastlake's literary study of European art originated in three essays written between 1829 and 1835 – 'On the Philosophy of the Fine Arts' (1829), 'The Fine Arts' (1834) and 'How to Observe'⁹ – and encompassed translations of Goethe's *Theory of Colors* (1840) and Franz Kugler's *Handbook of Painting* (1842) before publication of the major works: *Methods and Materials of Painting of the Great Schools and Masters* (1847) and *Contributions to the Literature of the Fine Arts* (1848/1870).¹⁰ These major works present

⁷ For more on Eastlake's role on the Fine Arts Commission, see: T. S. R. Boase, 'The Decoration of the New Palace of Westminster, 1841-1863', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 17.3/4 (1954), 319-358; Janice Carlisle, *Picturing Reform in Victorian Britain*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 85-116; and Emma Winter, 'German Fresco Painting and the New Houses of Parliament at Westminster, 1834-1851', *The Historical Journal*, 47.2 (2004), 291-329.

⁸ It is important to note that the first part of this essay revises part of a chapter on Eastlake from *Democratizing Beauty in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Art and the Politics of Public Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, 18-63.

⁹ Of these essays, only 'The Fine Arts' was published at the time in the *Penny Cyclopaedia* (1834). 'The Philosophy of the Fine Arts' was accepted for publication in the *Quarterly Review* before Eastlake changed his mind; 'How to Observe' was first published in the second series of *Contributions to the Literature of the Fine Arts*, 199-300.

¹⁰ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Goethe's Theory of Colors; translated from the German by Charles Lock Eastlake, R. A., F. R. S.* London: John Murray, 1840; Franz Kugler, *Handbook of Painting. The Italian Schools. Tr. from the German of Kugler, by a lady. Ed. with notes, by Charles L. Eastlake*, London: 1842; Charles Lock Eastlake, *Methods and Materials of Painting of the Great Schools and Masters*, 2 vols., London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1847, and *Contributions to the Literature of the Fine Arts*, London: John Murray, 1848. It is worth noting that *Methods and Materials* was initially published as *Materials for a History of Oil Painting*, London: Longman,

less a fully synthesized aesthetic philosophy and more a collection featuring the importance of the early Italian schools of painting and the potential for reviving the English school of painting. Insofar as there was a prevailing preoccupation, it consisted of bringing the major developments in the history of art and aesthetics to the attention of a British audience. Against a backdrop of nation-building in the decades after the Napoleonic Wars, the idea of art as cultural capital, both an index of progress and mark of taste, was once more taking hold.¹¹ In 'The Fine Arts,' for example, Eastlake likened the development of art in different societies to 'the bloom of a plant, true to its peculiar developing causes, and originally modified by the soil from which it springs.'¹² The story of art that can be glimpsed here points to a grand narrative of the rise and superiority of European nations on the world stage, a narrative in which art is necessary to the development of modern civilization but requires cultivation for its advantages to be realized and enjoyed. So, Eastlake says, 'we may smile at the simple attempt of the savage to excite admiration by the gaudiness of his attire; but we should shudder to contemplate the scenes which his fortitude or obduracy can invest with the seeming attributes of sublimity.'¹³ The racial overtones cannot be ignored in the rendering of a 'savage' as amusing to the (presumably white) observer for their 'attire' but not for the 'scenes' of art they might produce. Construed thusly, the organic metaphor for art licenses a geopolitical distinction of civilized from barbaric nations and an aesthetic distinction of high from low forms.

Eastlake's professional aesthetic derived from precisely such a belief in hierarchy — of forms and of nations. As in his paintings so in the essays, he followed Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-93) in emphasizing nature as a sourcebook for art but, unlike his contemporary and rival, John Ruskin (1819-1900), he held the artist to a standard of perfection that was moral in the sense of decorous not doctrinal. In 'Discourse IV' (10 December 1771) of the *Discourses on Art* (1769-90), Reynolds advanced his aesthetic belief as follows: 'the works, whether of poets, painters, moralists, or historians, which are built upon general nature, live for ever; while those which depend for their existence on particular custom and habits, a partial view of nature, or the fluctuations of fashion, can only be coeval with that which

Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1847, and that *Contributions: Second Series* contained three additional essays and the *Memoir* (see note 1 above).

¹¹ See: Holger Hock, "'Struggling against a Vulgar Prejudice": Patriotism and the Collecting of British Art at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century', *The Journal of British Studies*, 49.4, 2010, 566-591; Peter Mandler, 'Art in a Cool Climate: The Cultural Policy of the British State in European Context, c. 1780 to c. 1850', *Unity and Diversity in European Culture c. 1800*, eds. Tim Blanning and Hagen Schulze, Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 2006, 101-120.

¹² Eastlake, 'The Fine Arts', *Contributions: Second Series*, 2.

¹³ Eastlake, 'The Fine Arts', 2-3.

first raised them from obscurity.¹⁴ These, the rules Reynolds established for the highest kind of art, set the terms for Eastlake's understanding of the purpose of art and its most vaunted practitioners. To place general over particular, nature over custom, and permanence over transience is to describe a process of purification whereby the artist perfects nature, or, as Reynolds explained in 'Discourse III' (14 December 1770), 'the grandeur of his ideas' creates 'an ideal beauty, superior to what is to be found in individual nature' and therefore fixes a universal principle of taste.¹⁵ John Barrell's characterization of Reynolds as grounding 'public spirit not on virtue but on social knowledge' sharpens further with the contention that 'he replaced the rhetorical with a philosophical aesthetic, which attempted to promote, in the doctrine of the 'central forms,' a uniformity of perception.'¹⁶ A key contention of this essay is that Eastlake adapted the philosophical aesthetic into a professional aesthetic not only to meet the changing conditions for art in the mid-nineteenth century but also to make a case for competency to adjudicate on, and thereby protect, the standards of art.

'How to Observe' establishes the principles for Eastlake's professional aesthetic. Divided into two chapters, this long piece is presented as 'an essay intended to assist the intelligent observation of works of art.'¹⁷ Whereas the first chapter reflects on 'the general nature of the arts' (199) in contradistinction from science, the second and more substantial chapter elucidates the practices of the artist, the connoisseur, and the amateur by adopting a quasi-scientific method of classification. The essay proper (that is, the second chapter) thus begins with Eastlake adumbrating the different kinds of knowledge 'essential for the practice, the criticism, and the enjoyment of works of art' and then adding: 'it is perhaps even more ostensibly the groundwork of interest in the case of the two last, than a source of any professed claim to approbation in the artist' (210). This notion of knowledge grounding the interests of connoisseur and amateur bears echoes of Lessing's *Laocoön* (1766) and, of course, Reynolds's *Discourses*.¹⁸ Nonetheless, it becomes clear that for Eastlake the connoisseur occupies a privileged position because his knowledge derives from 'acquaintance with facts rather than truths, with appearances and results rather than their causes' (212). All of this leads to a grandiose statement about the skills of connoisseurship:

¹⁴ Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. Robert Wark, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975, 73.

¹⁵ Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, 42.

¹⁶ John Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt. 'The Body of the Public'*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986, 63.

¹⁷ Eastlake, 'How to Observe', *Contributions: Second Series*, 199. Subsequent page references will be given parenthetically in the body of the essay.

¹⁸ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. Edward Allen McCormick, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984.

The chief distinction between the connoisseur and the amateur is that the knowledge of the first assists the exercise of the judgement, while that of the latter tends to kindle the imagination. The studies of the connoisseur may, however, take a higher range, and be directed not only to recognize excellence in works of art, but to investigate the nature and principles of that excellence; in short, in addition to a practical and habitual acquaintance with specimens, and a discrimination of their relative claims, to penetrate the causes of the world's admiration (212).

It is salient that Eastlake distinguishes the different kinds of observer by elevating judgement over the imagination with the principal aim of vesting the connoisseur with professional responsibility in matters of art. Put differently, he extends the hierarchy of forms and of nations to include a hierarchy of observers: professional and amateur, higher and lower. Connoisseurs are in the middle below artists and above amateurs because they have acquired the technical and historical knowledge to assess periods, 'epochs, schools and individual masters,' along with provenance, 'imitations from original works' (212), and can – or even should – put this knowledge to the service of elevating public taste.

Referring to 'How to Observe,' John Steegman has claimed that 'Eastlake formulated the law which was to govern the whole of his public career: that the knowledge of the connoisseur and the imagination of the amateur will, when combined, form a judgement making the nearest approach to a truth which questions of Taste permit.'¹⁹ This essay takes a different view for several reasons. Firstly, Eastlake's identification of 'classes of association' was premised on the separation of 'experience' from 'tradition' and 'authority' (220) and so articulated an unequal process of looking at art; hence, 'the associations of individual experience appeal chiefly to the *feelings*—the associations derived from Tradition and History kindle the *imagination*, and those founded on authority bias the *judgement*' (221). Secondly, Eastlake explained competency in looking at art in terms of simple to complex interests with the assumption being that more knowledge leads to greater interest in a work of art; accordingly, '*some* mental preparation is necessary in addition to the exercise of the eye,' but 'the interest of the ordinary spectator is...especially dependent on associations' (221). Thirdly, the precision with which Eastlake positioned the connoisseur in the aesthetic hierarchy was not matched by precision around the position of the amateur who is variously described as the ordinary spectator, the lettered amateur, the general observer, and the attentive spectator. The ambiguity of address is apparent throughout 'How to Observe,' and Eastlake's other writings. He appears to want broader competency in the process of looking at art and he certainly wants to secure a custodial role for the connoisseur in judgements of taste. If, on the one hand, it is possible that amateurs could develop competency in 'the habit of observation which can alone lead to a sincere relish and

¹⁹ John Steegman, *Consort of Taste, 1830-1870*, London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1950, 63-64.

eventually to a just discrimination of the efforts of art' (221), then, on the other hand, the fact that such 'habit' required the time and means to study the history of art in galleries and libraries seems to be ignored. So, to the question 'of what and why we should admire in the works of a given painter' (222), the short answer would be subject-matter and the longer answer would include the personal history of the painter and the place and conditions of the time.

The rest of 'How to Observe' expands on these elements in the context of the development of painting and the influence of religion, Greek mythology, political relations, and literature thereon. To all intents and purposes, Eastlake performs the practice of connoisseurship, sifting and sorting through distinctions between the Florentine and early Flemish schools and the Venetian and Dutch schools, and drawing especial attention to the early Italian painters. What he sought to pinpoint was the impetus for changes in taste, or, in other words, how some artists and schools come to define historical periods. Crucially, he singled out Raphael as standing alone at a point 'immediately preceding a remarkable change in taste' (231) when a range of works contributed, in different ways, to the 'triumph of art' (233). In Florence, Venice, and Parma, the study of form, color, and light and shade were brought to perfection for 'in the accomplished productions of Michelangelo, Titian, and Correggio, grandeur or beauty are the predominant characteristics, and the style of their works is the more striking precisely because it is more partial and exclusive than Raphael's' (233). Raphael's significance lies in preparing the way for Michelangelo, Titian, and Correggio through, in Eastlake's words, 'adequate representation,' that is, 'the vagueness which necessarily excludes all particular circumstances' (224-225). The point is underlined when he goes on to suggest that 'adequate representation' served an important purpose insofar as it opened access to art; indeed, it is 'a mistake to suppose that any other conditions than attention and common sagacity are requisite to enter fully...into the merits of these [Raphael's] works' (223). The example given is the Cartoons of Raphael: the subject is intelligible to the ordinary observer without recourse to historical knowledge about dress, architecture, and manners, therefore the work stands above the work of his peers and warrants admiration for the artist.

Eastlake's version of the rise and triumph of Renaissance art is largely familiar. There are, however, a few points of departure from the standard narrative where it becomes possible to perceive the broader application of the lessons in looking. The first is political. Eastlake enlarged upon the connection between painting and public life, citing the example of the Medici to illustrate how political regimes, however tyrannical, can shape national art and national character. Moving to the present, he then offered the example of the modern school of German art to illustrate how 'a total revolution in taste' reverberated from the Napoleonic Wars and the establishment of the German Confederation and 'the eyes of all were suddenly opened to the forgotten or unheeded excellence of their forefathers in the arts of peace—arts devoted to the service and embellishment of religion' (282). The

dilemma faced by German artists, to pursue the 'original character of their art' or 'to borrow from a foreign nation or period' (284), was, as Eastlake saw it, resolved by the Nazarenes who broke with classical traditions and sought to mitigate modern industrial existence by promulgating a primitivism that linked art with religion. The second point is social. Eastlake attended to the influence of national manners and enthusiasms on taste, citing the Florentine republic once more. The smiling expressions introduced by Leonardo, the golden hair and fair skin of women in Florentine and Venetian painting, and the fine eyebrow and high foreheads of Florentine Madonnas were singled out as moments when an artist or artists broke from convention and thus stimulated changes in taste. The third point is professional. Eastlake presented connoisseurship and the connoisseur as equal in value to manners and enthusiasm in contributing to changes in taste. He, and Eastlake's connoisseur is always gendered masculine, was fully conversant with the traditions and principles of painting and equipped with the skills, and therefore power, to guide public taste. Scholar and intellectual, educator and lobbyist: the first two are apt descriptors for Eastlake but, as we shall see, the last two would prove taxing when he sought to put a professional aesthetic into practice at the National Gallery.

Provenance, purchasing, preservation

The new National Gallery opened on 9 April 1838, a date which marked the culmination of decades-long debate about the need for a national gallery and brought forth new debate about the adequacy of the national collection of art.²⁰ The early history of the National Gallery and its first location is well known: in sum, the government, led by Lord Liverpool (1770-1828), bought the thirty-eight paintings in the collection of John Julius Angerstein (1735-1823) at a cost of £57,000, leased his house at 100 Pall Mall, and opened it to the public on 10 May 1824.²¹ Replicating the type of display that had become customary at the summer exhibitions of the Royal Academy of Arts, the Pall Mall Gallery presented a crowded hang of paintings,

²⁰ On debates about art and the state, see Nicholas M. Pearson, *The State and the Visual Arts: A Discussion of State Intervention in the Visual Arts in Britain, 1760-1981*, Milton Keynes: The Open University, 1982, 1-38; see also note 11 .

²¹ On the institutional history, see: Charles Holmes and C. H. Collins Baker, *The Making of the National Gallery, 1824-1923*, London: The National Gallery, 1924. More recent studies include: Jonathan Conlin, *The Nation's Mantelpiece: A History of the National Gallery*, London: Pallas Athene, 2006; Philip Hendy, *The National Gallery London*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1960; Brandon Taylor, *Art for the Nation: Exhibitions and the London Public, 1747-2001*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999, 29-66; Colin Trodd, 'Culture, Class, City: The National Gallery, London and the Spaces of Education, 1822-57', *Art Apart: Art Institutions and Ideology across England and North America*, ed. Marcia Pointon, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994, 33-49.

large and small, without identifying details and with little curatorial oversight; still, the building was open to the public from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. from Monday through Thursday and to artists and students on Fridays and Saturday, and entry was free. While the relocation of the gallery to the new building in Trafalgar Square was driven by practical considerations of space, it pointed to ideological concerns about shifting the gallery's collection from private to public taste. 'Every specimen of art in a national collection should, perhaps, be assumed to be fit to challenge inspection, and to be worthy of being well displayed. It is hoped that there *is little danger of pictures being purchased for the nation which will not bear this test*; although the case may be sometimes different with regard to donations.'²² These are the words of Eastlake, written in a letter to Sir Robert Peel (1788-1850) in 1845 when he occupied the role of second Keeper of the National Gallery (following William Seguier, who held the post from 1824 to 1843). The 'test,' of fitness for scrutiny and worthiness for display, is notable as an articulation of the competing pressures of provenance and purchasing at the Gallery. In essence, Eastlake reiterated the connoisseurial themes of 'How to Observe' in a letter that enumerated the difficulties of the current building: the want of space for display, cleaning and restoration, study, and offices, and the want for better lighting and ventilation. Two years into his tenure as Keeper and a mere seven years after the move to Trafalgar Square, Eastlake concluded 'the time is arrived when a more capacious and suitable building is necessary for the purposes of a National Gallery.'²³

The story of Eastlake's association with the National Gallery is uneven in part because of the climate of political agitation and social unrest in the 1840s and in part due to the challenge of instilling order in a museum beset by the kind of difficulties indicated above. The sociopolitical and administrative aspects were not, in fact, mutually exclusive. Eastlake was appointed Keeper on 24 November 1843 and remained in post until November 1847; this was a short tenure compared to William Seguier, albeit one during which two controversies and one initiative contributed to a major reshaping of managerial practices at the Gallery with policy implications for the museum professional at large. It was in April 1845, shortly before Eastlake's letter to Peel, that the purchase of *A Man with a Skull* as a work by Hans Holbein the Younger ignited the first controversy. Now, during his tenure as Keeper, Eastlake acquired eleven paintings at a total cost of £13,230. *A Man with a Skull* was purchased for £630 but the relatively modest price belied the historical and national value for the Gallery in acquiring its first Holbein. The celebrations did not last long for the painting quickly became a scandal when critics weighed in to

²² [Charles Lock Eastlake], 'The National Gallery—Observations on the Unfitness of the present Building for its purpose in a Letter to the Right Hon. Sir Robert Peel, Bart. By Charles Lock Eastlake, R. A., Keeper of the National Gallery', *The Athenaeum*, 7 June 1845, 570.

²³ [Eastlake], 'The National Gallery', 571.

cast doubt on its authenticity and therefore the expenditure of public money.²⁴ The result was that, while the painting remained in the Gallery, its attribution to Holbein was removed; indeed, the entry in the official Return notes the painter as 'Unknown; at first called Holbein' and the subject as 'Portrait of a Man.'²⁵ There is no doubt criticism over the 'fake' Holbein, or, as it was sometimes known, 'the Holbein affair,'²⁶ was damaging to Eastlake, indeed it undermined his own art historical methodology. Nonetheless, it also throws a different light on the letter to Peel. Was Eastlake urging action to address the Gallery's deficiencies by way of deflecting attention from the purchase? Was he attempting to reclaim authority in the face of public criticism through his connection with Peel? And was the 'test,' with the qualification 'that there is *little danger of pictures being purchased for the nation which will not bear this test,*' intended to mitigate his mistake?

These questions could surely all be answered in the affirmative. Yet there were more, even sharper, questions to come. The scandal of the Holbein had barely died down before a second controversy arose in the autumn of 1846, which turned public attention from provenance and purchasing to picture cleaning. From the beginning of his tenure, Eastlake, with the oral authority of the Trustees, had selected pictures for John Seguier (1785-1856), professional picture-cleaner and brother of William, to clean during the six weeks when the Gallery was closed. Picture-cleaning, as the *Report from the Select Committee on the National Gallery* of 1853 noted, 'denotes the removal, by mechanical or chemical processes, in whole or in part, of the old varnishes or other incrustations, by which a painting may be obscured, but by which it is usually also in some measure protected from injury.'²⁷ The problem was that a series of paintings cleaned in 1846, including Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne* (1520-23) and Rubens's *Peace and War* (c. 1629-30), were perceived to have been substantially altered, in fact injured, by the process. The subject of picture-cleaning rose to a crescendo in 1846-47 in the main due to J.

²⁴ For example: 'The National Gallery', *The Art-Union*, 7, 20 June 1845, 237; S. J. Rochard, 'The Pseudo-Holbein', *The Times*, 17 July 1845, 8; 'Portrait in the National Gallery', *The Illustrated London News*, 7, 9 August 1845, 89.

²⁵ *Returns of all the Pictures Purchased for the National Gallery during the Administration of Sir Charles Eastlake, President, R. A., as Keeper, Trustee, and Director; together with the prices paid for each Picture and Collection of Picture with the Date of Purchase; and, of all the Pictures Sold for the Gallery during the same Period; together with the Price obtained for each*, 20 April 1860, *House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online*, 1.

²⁶ A recent exhibition at the National Gallery, 'Close Examination: Fakes, Mistakes and Discoveries', 30 June - 12 September 2010, returned to the controversy over the 'fake' Holbein and showed how dendrochronological analysis had proved it was not as a fake but a work by Michiel Coxcie from c. 1560; for more details about this attribution, see: www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/research/a-man-with-a-skull

²⁷ *Report from the Select Committee on the National Gallery; with the Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence, Appendix and Index*, 4 August 1853, *House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online*, vi.

Morris Moore who, under the pseudonym of Verax, waged a campaign in the press against the damage inflicted on the nation's art at the Gallery.²⁸ Moore's scathing criticism was matched by an equally indignant response from Ruskin who, referring to the Titian, declared: 'the picture has been scraped raw in some parts and repainted in others...the former process especially, has the effect of altering the apparent position of some of the objects. This ought to be the end of a series of barbarisms.'²⁹ The language of moral outrage exposed one vulnerability of the Gallery in the sense that the pictures were the property of the nation and consequently the nation had a right to intervene in the protection of its property.

In this light, it was inevitable that a large section of the *Report on the National Gallery* of 1853 would be given over to 'The Management of the Gallery, as specially connected with Picture Cleaning.'³⁰ The Committee records that Eastlake had been asked to report on Moore's findings and that 'the Trustees resolved that "the Report is entirely satisfactory, and justifies the confidence which they have reposed in Mr. Eastlake's judgement in respect of the treatment of the pictures in the National Gallery"' but adds that 'the effect produced on these pictures is still a matter of dispute.'³¹ Herein lay another vulnerability of the Gallery in the sense that the reporting structure between Keeper and Trustees was not systematic and tended to protect the authority of both parties. While the Select Committee of 1853 had produced the most comprehensive report to date, the Gallery had been the subject of Parliamentary inquiry from as early as the Select Committee on Arts and Manufactures in 1835-36 and a Select Committee on National Monuments and Works of Art in 1841. The level of Parliamentary surveillance over the Gallery gathered pace from the 1840s into the 1850s and included Select Committees on 'the best mode of providing additional room for Works of Art given to the Public, or purchased by Parliamentary Grants' (1847-1848), on 'the State of the Pictures in the National Gallery' (1850), on 'the present Accommodation afforded by the National Gallery' (1850), and on 'the Management of the National Gallery' (1853). To be sure, the controversies had not encouraged public confidence in the management of the institution and led to the resignation of Eastlake as Keeper in 1847. Even so, it is clear from the titles of the Select Committees that the matters under Parliamentary

²⁸ 'For example: 'Verax,' [J. Morris Moore], 'On Injuries to certain pictures in the National Gallery', *The Times*, 29 October 1846, 6; 'The Purchases of the National Gallery', *The Times*, 19 November 1846, 5; 'On the Abuses of the National Gallery', *The Times*, 31 December 1846, 7. The letters and related materials were collected into a single volume: *The Abuses of the National Gallery, with the letters of "A. G.," of "The Oxford Graduate"; The Defence of Mr. Eastlake, in "The Daily News", and Remarks upon them by Verax; to which are added, Observations on the Minutes of the Trustees of the National Gallery, including Mr. Eastlake's Report, by Verax*, London: William Pickering, 1847.

²⁹ John Ruskin, 'Danger to the National Gallery', *The Times*, 7 January 1847, 5.

³⁰ *Report from the Select Committee on the National Gallery*, 1853, vi-xiv.

³¹ *Report from the Select Committee on the National Gallery*, 1853, ix; see note 26 above for details of Eastlake's report and the resolution of the Trustees.

discussion followed along similar lines of investigation to those adduced by Eastlake in 1845. Space, preservation, display, purchasing, and management: these were the dynamics at work in professionalizing the National Gallery.

The fact that two major controversies occurred during Eastlake's watch must have been galling; he was, after all, a man who defined his work by scrupulous attention to the methods and materials of painting and careful analysis of the historical archive and critical literature.³² To some extent, the *Descriptive and Historical Catalogue of the Pictures in the National Gallery; with Biographical Notices of the Painters* (1847) served a counterbalancing function. Compiled by Ralph Nicholson Wornum (1812-1877) and revised by Eastlake, the catalogue was an important initiative for establishing the educational value of the Gallery by focusing interest on, to use Eastlake's earlier words, 'what and why we should admire in the works of a given painter.' It was 'designed not merely as a book of reference for visitors in the Gallery, but also as a guide to the history of painting, as represented by the examples in the collection,' and, furthermore, 'it may be used likewise, so far as it extends, as a Biographical Dictionary of Painters.'³³ This, then, was a catalogue constructed according to the principles of connoisseurship and affirming the right way of looking at painting. The national collection was small by comparison to other European galleries, containing only 214 paintings compared to the Uffizi with 1200 and the Louvre with 1400.³⁴ Nonetheless, the appeal to visitors rested on the importance of following the development of an historical narrative of painting supported by details of the life-narratives of painters. For, as Wornum and Eastlake explained, 'a certain degree of historical knowledge, as regards both the art itself and its criticism, is perhaps indispensable for the due appreciation of some work,' and they continued: 'the information thus offered, without superseding individual predilections, may sometimes assist in the formation of a correct judgement, which is the basis of a correct taste.'³⁵ The target comes into view at the end of this sentence in a move that is, at once, expansive and regulating. Structured around the artworks, the catalogue rendered correctness the code for a civilizing mission of education and improvement. The evidence suggests it was effective as a way of making sense of the collection since the number of visitors rose in 1848 and so, too, did the number of catalogues sold.³⁶ In effect, correctness became the 'test' of Gallery's mission. The question was: for whom?

³² For more on Eastlake's response to these controversies, see: Avery-Quash and Sheldon, *Art for the Nation*, chap. 4, and Robertson, *Sir Charles Eastlake*, chaps. 8-10.

³³ Ralph Wornum and Charles L. Eastlake, 'Notice', *Descriptive and Historical Catalogue of the Pictures in the National Gallery; with Biographical Notices of the Painters*, London: W. Clowes and Sons, 1847, 4.

³⁴ See the note in *Descriptive and Historical Catalogue*, 7.

³⁵ Wornum and Eastlake, *Descriptive and Historical Catalogue*, 3-4.

³⁶ The visitor numbers rose from 608,140 in 1846 to 703,410 in 1848 and the number of catalogues sold increased from 4,879 in 1846 to 13,327 in 1848. See *Returns of the Number of*

Organizational change

The moment when Eastlake became the first Director of the National Gallery in 1855 marked a very public trial of his capacity to marshal the professional aesthetic into a means of organizational change. The operations of the 'new' Gallery remained inconsistent at midcentury even while it received increasingly large numbers of visitors: for example, 575,005 in 1850, rising to a peak of 1,005,705 in 1851 (likely a bounce effect from the Great Exhibition), before falling back to 352,220 in 1852 and 446,641 in 1854.³⁷ The decisive steps towards change were initiated by the Select Committee on the National Gallery of 1853, which was composed of some familiar names with radical sensibilities (such as Francis Charteris, Lord Elcho (1818-1914), William Ewart (1798-1869), and Henry Labouchère (1831-1912)).³⁸ The Committee issued twelve directives pertaining to the management, present site, and future location of the building, of which the most important were the continuation of a Board of Trustees albeit with appointment by the Treasury; the abolition of the office of Keeper and the appointment of a salaried Director for a fixed term with recommendations for purchase to be made in writing to the Trustees; the apportionment of a fixed sum for the purchase of pictures subject to the approval of Parliament. The broad goal was 'to render the British National Gallery worthy of the name it bears,' and so the Committee stipulated funds 'should be expended with a view, not merely of exhibiting to the public beautiful works of art, but of instructing the people in the history of that art, and of the age in which, and the men by whom, those works were produced.'³⁹ Herein was a new blueprint, for the Committee recognized the benefit of art for nation-building on the one hand, and the diverse aesthetic considerations on the other hand. To put it another way: there was a tension between increasing the quantity of paintings in the national collection in order to compete with 'other enlightened nations' and communicating the quality of the works on display so that 'the intelligent public could contemplate the genius which produced them, not merely in its final results, but in the mode of its operation, in its rise and progress, as well as in its perfection.'⁴⁰ The hope was that, with a governance structure and operating budget in place, the mission of the

*Visitors, and Number of Students, Admitted to the National Gallery for each Year, from 1846 to 1854; of the Number of Catalogues Printed, Number Sold, Cost of Paper and Printing, and Sum Realised, in each Year; and Copy of the Rules and Days of Admission to the Gallery, 11 August 1855, House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online, 1 and 2 respectively. For a table of visitor numbers, see Conlin, *The Nation's Mantelpiece*, 473.*

³⁷ *Returns of the Number of Visitors...from 1846-1854*, 1.

³⁸ On the intervention of radicals into matters of art, see: Conlin, *The Nation's Mantelpiece*, 57-72.

³⁹ *Report from the Select Committee on the National Gallery*, 1853, xvi.

⁴⁰ *Report from the Select Committee on the National Gallery*, 1853, xvi.

Gallery would be safeguarded and the Director empowered to set the protocols by which its collection could be displayed—and correctly appreciated.

Given the oversight by Parliament and the press, it was not surprising that Eastlake proceeded cautiously as Director, at least initially. In line with his work on the Fine Arts Commission, he looked towards the German example and in particular the leadership shown by Gustav Friedrich Waagen (1797-1868) at the Royal Paintings Gallery (Königliche Gemäldegalerie) in Berlin. Interestingly, Waagen was thought to be Prince Albert's choice to lead the National Gallery, he was personally acquainted with the Eastlakes, and he was an expert witness at the Select Committees in 1850 and 1853. The extent to which Eastlake could emulate Waagen was determined by a combination of executive and aesthetic principles. The Report of 1853 set the bar high: 'the qualifications of a director, whose duty it will be to recommend pictures for purchase, should comprise not only a complete knowledge of the styles of the various masters and schools of art, and of the value, both intrinsic and commercial, of their works, but also an enlightened taste in appreciating their several merits, to the exclusion of all partiality for particular schools, epochs, or authors.'⁴¹ Yet Eastlake had foreseen the need for a 'complete knowledge' of styles and schools and an 'enlightened taste' regarding the value of artworks on the evidence of the *Descriptive and Historical Catalogue* and 'How to Observe.' And yet, Elizabeth Eastlake described her husband's role in an altogether less burdensome manner: 'in this position, the most interesting and delightful at that time which the painter, the connoisseur, and the man of taste could hold, he found employment of a peculiarly congenial nature, and reaped the choicer fruits of his life of labour.'⁴² While the requirement to liaise with the Trustees and make annual reports to the Treasury underlined the responsibility attached to purchasing, Eastlake actually secured a substantial budget of £10,000 per annum for acquisitions and chose to retain the services of a Keeper, Ralph Wornum, and to add a travelling agent, Otto Müндler (1811-1870), to the management team. Supported in this way, Eastlake set about the process of re-creating the National Gallery.

To assess the impact of Eastlake's directorship, it is worth adverting to the 'test' identified in the letter of 1845 as well as the changes he effected from 1855. The first matter was purchasing and acquisitions. The highest priority was to build the national collection to better and more fully represent the historical traditions of western European painting or, as Eastlake put it, 'the expediency of forming, by means of a chronological series of works by early masters, an historical foundation for a complete gallery of pictures.'⁴³ To this end, 180 paintings were acquired for the Gallery in the decade of Eastlake's appointment; the breakdown is noteworthy because it shows the budget enabled Eastlake to wield considerable power in the

⁴¹ *Report from the Select Committee on the National Gallery, 1853*, xvi.

⁴² Elizabeth Eastlake, *Memoir of Sir Charles Lock Eastlake*, 190.

⁴³ Eastlake, *Report of the Director of the National Gallery for the Year 1857-58*, Appendix 9, *House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online*, 59.

European art-market: 130 paintings were purchased and 39 sold in the first five years while 50 were purchased and 41 donated in the next five years.⁴⁴ Even with Mündler as travelling agent, Eastlake took annual summer trips to Europe to procure the best examples of the early and late Italian schools. By Elizabeth Eastlake’s account, ‘no fatigues or discomforts deterred him from visiting the remotest parts of Italy: wherever the prospect was held out of securing (and in most cases it was rescuing) a work of interest, he patiently made his way; and before every picture, whether in church, convent or private house, worthy of his investigation, accurate notes were taken, and every evening carefully transcribed.’⁴⁵ 1857 is of especial note for two major purchases: the Lombardi-Baldi collection from Florence and Paolo Veronese’s *The Family of Darius before Alexander* (1565-67) from Venice. Negotiations for these purchases were protracted and the costs were enormous. The Lombardi-Baldi collection of twenty pictures, including Paolo Uccello’s *The Battle of San Romano* (c. 1438-40), would provide the foundation for an Italian Gallery and was eventually secured for £7,035.⁴⁶ The acquisition of *The Family of Darius* (fig. 1) from Conte Vittore Pisani was an altogether different proposition. The eventual price of £13,650 for a single painting forced Eastlake to get



Figure 1 ‘The Family of Darius before Alexander, in the National Gallery, painted by Paul Veronese’, Engraving, *The Illustrated London News*, 31, 26 December 1857, 652

⁴⁴ *Returns of all the Pictures Purchased for the National Gallery*, 20 April 1860 and 16 March 1866, 1-7 and 1-3 respectively

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Eastlake, *Memoir of Sir Charles Lock Eastlake*, 191.

⁴⁶ For the list of pictures in the collection, see: *Returns of all the Pictures Purchased for the National Gallery*, 1860, 4.

special permission from the Treasury and provoked heated debate in the press. From one side, the purchase was hailed a triumph for the nation by Charles Dickens, Henry James, and Ruskin no less; even Queen Victoria visited the Gallery to see the painting. From the other side, a special parliamentary debate was convened and gave voice to public opinion about wasting money on art. The upshot was that Müндler was dismissed in 1858 and Eastlake took on responsibility for acquisitions thereafter.

The second matter was visitors. The relationship between the artistic purpose of the Gallery and its existence for the public was brought into relief as a result not just of the purchase of *Darius* but also increased numbers of visitors who entered the Gallery for different purposes. A generous interpretation might be that Eastlake assumed the public would be satisfied by the various acts of 'securing' or 'rescuing' paintings for the nation; a less generous one may suggest that he, exemplary connoisseur, focused on collecting and curating an historical survey of painting without giving much regard to the public. Eastlake's strategy, as Susanna Avery-Quash explains, rested on the eligibility of a picture according to rarity, size, variety, preservation, and decorum.⁴⁷ The specific art-historical sense of decorum (that is, the appropriate rendering of emotion, character, scene) was obviously important to Eastlake in his efforts to raise the standards of art on display. But, as Janet Minihan points out, 'contemporaries often spoke of working-class visitors, and the evidence suggests that the more skilled and educated strata of the working classes had begun to treat museums and galleries as forms of entertainment, as well as places of instruction, by the 1840s.'⁴⁸ There were, in other words, two senses of decorum, one for pictures and the other for people. The emergence of a division between those visitors interested in looking at the pictures and those interested in using the rooms for shelter (from bad weather), recreation (for children), or convenience (for refreshment) posed a conundrum. If the success of the Gallery was measured by the quantity of visitors, then the highpoint was 1850; if, however, success was judged by the quality of the collection, then the highpoint was 1857. What could not be ignored was the effect of the environment on the collection, particularly in terms of light, preservation, and air quality. The Report from the Select Committee of 1850, for instance, reserved its strongest language for 'the chief source of danger to the pictures, namely the injury arising from the dust and impure

⁴⁷ Susanna Avery-Quash, *The Travel Notebooks of Charles Eastlake*, 2 vols., London: The Walpole Society, 2011, vol. 1, 16-29. On the role played by Elizabeth Eastlake in acquisitions, see: Avery-Quash and Sheldon, *Art for the Nation*, 142-48.

⁴⁸ Janet Minihan, *The Nationalization of Culture: The Development of State Subsidies to the Arts in Great Britain*, New York: New York University Press, 1977, 53. On a related theme, see: Paul Barlow and Colin Trodd, 'Constituting the Public: Art and its Institutions in Nineteenth-Century London', *Governing Cultures: Art Institutions in Victorian London*, eds. Paul Barlow and Colin Trodd, Aldershot: Ashgate Press, 2000, 1-29.

atmosphere to which they are continually exposed.⁴⁹ One factor was smoke from chimneys adjacent to the building on Trafalgar Square but the other, remarkably, was the visitors themselves who assumed blame for 'cover[ing] the pictures with a film of dirt' and injuring 'the colour of the paintings, which will permanently diminish their value.'⁵⁰ The language of moral outrage expressed with respect to the 'fake' Holbein here cedes to a class-inflected language of purity whereby the juxtaposition of large crowds with valuable pictures produced disquiet about what Brandon Taylor has described as 'the public-as-pollutant.'⁵¹

The third (and related) matter was space. The building at Trafalgar Square simply did not have enough space to accommodate either large crowds or an expanded national collection, let alone the Royal Academy or the Turner Bequest. Whereas the Select Committee of 1853 recommended a new location at Kensington Gore, the *Illustrated London News* argued in 1856 for extension of the current site on the basis that 'these gems of art are not intended for casual inspection by a few virtuosi, but to gratify the eye, solace the imagination, and educate the taste of the hardworking denizens of a crowded industrial metropolis.'⁵² The split between protection (of the artworks) and access (to the Gallery) exposed an assumption that the public, specifically the working-class public, posed a real and present danger to the pictures. In this respect, Eastlake's position was complex: he went on the record in 1845 to advocate for a new site but shifted in favour of extending the current site by the time he was Director, and he testified to the National Gallery Site Commission in 1857 about protection of the pictures using glass but authorized the retouching of pictures bought in Italy to make them fit for display. The soft yet steadfast diplomacy that characterized Eastlake's transactions in acquiring paintings might have had an oblique effect on the political wrangling about the Gallery. For one thing, an agreement was eventually reached to keep the Gallery at its current location and extend the space and to relocate the Royal Academy to Burlington House (although further wrangling meant the Royal Academy did not move until 1869 and the new space was not completed until 1876). For another thing, the existing space was rearranged and an additional gallery was added in 1861 (fig. 2). The image of 'The New Room at the National Gallery' from *The Illustrated London News* is arresting for the lack of crowds (a mere eighteen people), the hang of the pictures on the line (with *The Family of Darius* in the centre left), and the abundance of natural light (from windows in the vault). This, it seems, is a representation of an ideal Gallery for both the viewing experience of visitors and the visual display of paintings. As such, it underlines the connoisseurial principles that informed

⁴⁹ *Report from the Select Committee on the National Gallery; together with the Minutes of Evidence, Appendix and Index*, 25 July 1850, *House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online*, iv.

⁵⁰ *Report from the Select Committee on the National Gallery*, 1850, iv.

⁵¹ Taylor, *Art for the Nation*, 59.

⁵² 'The Proposed New Site of the National Gallery, and New Destinies of Trafalgar-Square', *The Illustrated London News*, 28, 28 June 1856, 703.

Eastlake's organizational changes at the Gallery: not only did he re-hang the displays in accord with the historical development of schools of painting and produce an accurate catalogue to encourage the scholarly study of works of art but he also redecorated the rooms with red rather than green walls, adjusted the lighting of rooms according to schools of painting, introduced labels denoting artist, subject, and date of the work, and paired paintings with frames reflecting the style of their school.⁵³



Figure 2 'The New Room at the National Gallery', Engraving, *The Illustrated London News*, 38, 15 June 1861, 547

In their important study of the representational practices of the empirical sciences, Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison contend that 'objectivity the thing was as new as objectivity the word in the mid-nineteenth-century,' and that 'men of science began to fret openly about a new kind of obstacle to knowledge:

⁵³ For more details on Eastlake's changes to the visual organization of the Gallery, see: Charlotte Klonk 'Mounting Vision: Charles Eastlake and the National Gallery of London', *The Art Bulletin*, 82.2 (2000), 331-347.

themselves.⁵⁴ It seems that the same conditions held true for men of art, or, to put it more directly, the new professionalism initiated by Eastlake at the National Gallery reveals the challenges of objectivity. It is clear Eastlake set in process a new way of looking by reference to a long history of western European painting and by attending to the preservation, illumination, and exhibition of artworks; it is also clear that he did so against a backdrop of Parliamentary and public scrutiny, indeed one could plausibly say fretting, over the costs of art and the benefits to the public. The Report of the Select Committee of 1853 constituted an important statement about the need for professionalism at the Gallery insofar as it dictated the terms of engagement and thus expectations for a museum professional in the service of the national collection. However, the push for professionalism ran the risk of obscuring the social mission of the Gallery in the service of the public. Colin Trodd puts it as follows: 'Firstly by the 1840s and 1850s the National Gallery was involved in the construction of an institutional identity which focused upon history, education and popular instruction. Secondly, at the same time, cultural managers and cultural critics examined the identity of one of the gallery's main targets – the working class – and saw in it a series of blank signs.'⁵⁵ To be sure, Eastlake led the first and was implicated in the second of these narratives. The changes he instituted at the Gallery may not have amounted to a 'total revolution in taste' but the principles outlined in 'How to Observe' were operative in policies he developed for acquisitions and display. To borrow from Daston and Galison: 'instead of a pre-existing ideal being applied to the workaday world, it is the other way round: the ideal and ethos are gradually built up and bodied out by thousands of concrete actions, as a mosaic takes shape from thousands of tiny fragments of coloured glass. To study objectivity in shirtsleeves is to watch objectivity in the making.'⁵⁶ The point is that Eastlake's first and second tenure at the National Gallery illustrate 'objectivity in the making,' the building of an 'ideal and ethos' through gradual accumulated changes. That Eastlake's professional aesthetic is still discernible in the Gallery testifies to his influence but that the number of visitors to the Gallery decreased in the final third of the nineteenth century bears witness to the fragility of correctness as the test of how to observe.

Lucy Hartley is Professor of English in the Department of English Language & Literature at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. She is the author of *Physiognomy and the Meaning of Expression in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2001) and *Democratising Beauty in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Art and the Politics of Public Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), and the editor of *The History of Women's Writing, 1830-1880* (Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2018). She is currently working on a biography of a movement for social justice in the late

⁵⁴ Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity*, New York: Zone Books, 2007, 34.

⁵⁵ Trodd, 'Culture, Class, City', 47.

⁵⁶ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 52.

Lucy Hartley

'How to observe': Charles Eastlake and a new
professionalism for the arts

nineteenth century entitled: *Poverty and Progress: The Whitechapel Project of Henrietta
and Samuel Barnett.*

lhartl@umich.edu



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)