George Scharf and improving collection care and restoration at the National Portrait Gallery

 Jacob Simon

Figure 1 George Barker, Sir George Scharf, 17 June 1863. Albumen carte-de-visite, 8.3 x 5.5 cm. London, National Portrait Gallery. NPG Ax30345.

When George Scharf (1820–95) was appointed as secretary of the newly founded National Portrait Gallery in 1857, he was thirty-six and already had extensive experience as a draughtsman, lecturer and, most recently, exhibition organiser at the Art Treasures exhibition at Manchester in 1857.¹ [Fig. 1] He was later designated as the Gallery’s director. His appointment brought him three collection challenges:

¹ See Elizabeth A. Pergam, *The Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition of 1857: entrepreneurs, connoisseurs and the public*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2011, 61–7. She identifies that Scharf was employed as Secretary for the department of the Ancient Masters; he was one of a number of experts hired by the Executive Committee. See also Melva Croal, “‘The spirit, the flesh and the milliner’: Hanging the Ancient Masters at the Manchester Art-Treasures Exhibition’, *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 87:2, 2005, 53–62.
housing the collection, protecting it from damage and deterioration and, if necessary, restoring individual works of art. What distinguishes the work of a curator such as Scharf from that of an exhibition organiser or an art critic is the need to take ongoing responsibility for the care of a collection and its public display. This paper examines Scharf’s learning process when it came to the treatment of works of art and places him in the context of the developing role of the museum professional in Victorian England.

In the century before the Portrait Gallery was founded, a series of collections had opened in London: the British Museum in 1759, Dulwich College Picture Gallery in 1817, the National Gallery in 1824, Sir John Soane’s Museum in 1837 and the future South Kensington Museum, later the Victoria and Albert Museum, in 1852. These institutions were in the public eye. On his appointment to the Portrait Gallery, George Scharf will have been only too aware of the recent Royal Commission into the management of the British Museum and the even more recent parliamentary committee into the controversy surrounding the cleaning of pictures at the National Gallery.²

By the 1850s the distinction between artists, picture restorers and curators was hardening into three separate professions.³ Charles Lock Eastlake at the National Gallery and Richard Redgrave at the South Kensington Museum began as artists and became curators.⁴ George Scharf’s background was as a skilled draughtsman. They were leaders in the first generation of professional museum curators working with pictures. They did not expect to undertake picture restoration themselves.⁵

What differentiated the work of curators of public galleries and museums from the management of other collections, whether those of royalty, the aristocracy, collegiate institutions or city companies, was the degree of public accountability. Such accountability took varied forms: to government through regular reporting and parliamentary scrutiny, to a body of trustees who would oversee the work of

² Report of the Commissioners appointed to inquire into the Constitution and Government of the British Museum, London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1850; Select Committee on the National Gallery, Report, together with the proceedings of the Committee, minutes of evidence, appendix and index, 1853.
⁵ To take the example of George Scharf, he hardly ever carried out restoration work himself beyond treating the Hilliard miniature of Queen Elizabeth I in 1863, discussed below. Additionally in 1864 he cleaned a corner of Thomas Beach’s William Woodfall to reveal the artist’s signature (National Portrait Gallery records, NPG20/3, letter, Scharf to William Smith). And in 1870 he carried out overnight retouching of a bare spot on an unnamed portrait, ‘where paint had fallen from canvas, before the public admitted’ (National Portrait Gallery records, NPG7/1/1/1, Secretary’s journal, 19 April 1870).
the director and staff, and to the wider public, particularly those visiting the collection or making donations of works of art. The National Gallery used its annual report to parliament to provide a summary record of restoration work but the Portrait Gallery did not follow suit until 1887. In the aftermath of the National Gallery cleaning controversy, the ongoing interest of public and press helped encourage higher standards in the museum profession, including in picture restoration and in collection care more widely.⁶

**Housing and protecting the collection**

![Image](image.png)

Figure 2 George Scharf, ‘I’ve got no where to go’, 1869. Self-portrait caricature, pen and ink, 17.8 x 11.1 cm. London, National Portrait Gallery. NPG 5344.

The first concern for curators was in housing their collection. The British Museum, the National Gallery and the South Kensington Museum greatly expanded their exhibition spaces as their collections grew in the nineteenth century, and numerous great public galleries and museums were built outside London.⁷ As to the National Portrait Gallery, in the space of forty years it saw four homes, a cramped Georgian town house in Great George St, Westminster (1858–69) [Fig. 2], the Royal Horticultural Society’s old exhibition building on Exhibition Road, South

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Kensington (1870–85), the Bethnal Green Museum (1885–95) and finally the present purpose-built galleries in St Martin’s Place, designed by Ewan Christian, which opened in 1896. South Kensington provided cleaner air but the building was deemed unsuitable after a fire in an adjacent gallery [Fig. 3]. Bethnal Green (now the Museum of Childhood) was claimed to be an unsafe environment for works of art: the iron roof with its glass skylights gave little protection against heat and cold, and it suffered from leaking and condensation. Only St Martin’s Place was fit for purpose and Scharf never saw the collection hung there, dying at the age of seventy-four in 1895 as building work approached completion.

Perhaps the second concern in collections care for a museum professional such as Scharf was preventative conservation through controlling environmental conditions and avoiding accidental damage and vandalism. This was a considerable challenge for all museums in London and there were those who felt that the National Gallery and other institutions would be better off in a location such as South Kensington away from the polluted atmosphere of Central London. Scharf’s growing understanding of the insidious nature of pollution is a theme of this paper.

The most obvious way to protect pictures was by glazing and backing, effectively an enclosing sandwich, and this was gradually achieved at most public collections, including the National Gallery, South Kensington, the Soane and

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8 Soon after the collection was installed at Bethnal Green, ‘water from the melting of snow on the roof came upon the surface of several of the pictures’, as Scharf reported (National Portrait Gallery records, Trustees’ minutes, 24 March 1886).

Dulwich. It was the National Gallery that led the way, following a report in 1850. A programme of glazing pictures was put in hand in 1854 and of backing canvases in 1856. Further advice was taken from Michael Faraday (1791–1867) concerning the best way to back pictures in 1858. The South Kensington Museum followed suit, backing pictures from 1857 and glazing them from 1860. At the Portrait Gallery the process was begun in 1866. Scharf later reported that certain portraits were ‘likely to suffer from the constant action of dust and from the effects of steamy warm breath at holiday seasons’. Glazing a picture had further advantages: it greatly reduced the likelihood of petty vandalism, an important consideration given the many early reports of visitors scratching or puncturing pictures, and it meant that pictures did not need to be surface cleaned so frequently.

A third concern was the treatment of individual works. For Scharf, assuming responsibility for a burgeoning collection meant going beyond the process of acquisition, framing and public display. He had to learn about the conservation needs of a collection in a very wide range of media, not only paintings but also miniatures, works on paper, documents, and sculpture in marble, bronze, terracotta and plaster. It is Scharf’s approach to treating and restoring portraits which forms the main focus of this paper.

To explore these themes, it will be helpful to focus on Scharf’s developing understanding in caring for the collection and providing advice by considering some of the constituencies he dealt with: fellow museum professionals, leading restorers and scientists, collectors and country house owners and, of course, the Gallery’s own trustees.

**Working with fellow museum professionals**

George Scharf worked closely with colleagues at other institutions, as Elizabeth Heath discusses elsewhere in this publication. William Hookham Carpenter (1792–1866), keeper of prints at the British Museum, was a helpful ally in Scharf’s initial years. Scharf used the staff of the museum’s prints and drawings department for

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10 William Russell, Michael Faraday and Charles Eastlake were appointed in 1850 to investigate glazing picture in the National Gallery (National Gallery Archive, NG1/2, pp. 80–9, 91). Their report recommending glazing, ‘The Protection of Pictures in the National Gallery by Glass’ (National Gallery Archive, NG5/84/2), was published in printed form in Report from the Select Committee on the National Gallery, 1850, appendix A (reprinted in Sarah Staniforth, ed., Historical Perspectives on Preventive Conservation, Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2013, 270–5).


13 National Portrait Gallery records, Trustees’ minutes, 12 June 1872.

14 For surface cleaning, see C.L. Eastlake junr, ‘The Administration of the National Gallery: A retrospect’, Nineteenth Century and After, 54, 1903, 942.
restoration work on occasion. He also knew Augustus Wollaston Franks (1826-97), the museum’s keeper of British and Medieval Antiquities. However, it was Charles Eastlake (1793–1865), Ralph Wornum (1812–77) and, subsequently, Frederic William Burton (1816–1900) at the National Gallery who were more significant to him in the care of the National Portrait Gallery collection. Working with colleagues did not mean turning to one institution exclusively. When Scharf was offered an early panel portrait of Henry VII in 1876 both Franks and Burton examined it and recommended acquisition.

Scharf’s early relationship with Eastlake was one of professionals with a shared interest rather than of a particular friendship. It was Eastlake as a trustee of the Portrait Gallery who recommended the restorer, Henry Merritt (1822–77), to Scharf in 1859, a recommendation which proved its worth in the following years. Eastlake and Scharf visited the Barber Surgeons’ Hall together to examine the great but damaged Holbein group portrait in 1861. But Eastlake’s support was not unconditional. He opposed the idea of purchasing Thomas Phillips’ portrait of William Blake for the National Portrait Gallery in 1863, ‘on account of Blake’s want of importance’. The portrait was acquired three years later, after Eastlake’s death, and is now one of the highlights of the collection.

When the National Portrait Gallery moved to South Kensington in 1870, Scharf developed new working relationships, notably with Sir Henry Cole (1808–82), Richard Redgrave (1804–88) and Captain E.R. Festing (1839–1912), respectively superintendent of the Department of Practical Art, keeper of paintings and assistant director works. It was Scharf’s close friend (and deputy chairman of trustees at the Portrait Gallery), William Smith (1808–76), who provides a nice insight, ‘I am glad you are getting on so favourably with the new officials, as well as with the South Kensington swells. My small intercourse with Cole has been very pleasant, and I believe R. Redgrave’s apparent want of courtesy is by no means intentional’. Much of Scharf’s business with officials at South Kensington tended to be mundane: monitoring repairs to roofs and leaking windows, and adjoining building works. But an occasional entry in his journal suggests a closer contact, as in November

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15 For Scharf’s use of the prints and drawings department staff for restoration work, see below.
16 For Scharf’s friendship with Franks, see Helena Michie and Robyn Warhol, Love Among the Archives: Writing the Lives of George Scharf, Victorian Bachelor, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015, 72–3. Scharf depicted Franks in his lithograph of himself and friends at a dinner party he gave in 1873 (repr. Eloise Donnelly, article in this publication).
17 Scharf to William Smith, National Portrait Gallery records, NPG20/3, see Elizabeth Heath’s article in this publication. The portrait, by an unknown Netherlandish artist, dated 1505, is NPG 416.
18 National Portrait Gallery records, NPG7/1/1/4, Letters from trustees, Eastlake to Scharf, 8 February 1859. Given that Merritt wrote a series of articles for the Art-Treasures Examiner on the occasion of the Manchester exhibition in 1857, it is possible that Scharf was aware of him before 1859 (information from Elizabeth Pergam).
19 National Portrait Gallery records, Letters from trustees, Smith to Scharf, 7 November 1863.
20 National Portrait Gallery records, Letters from trustees, Smith to Scharf, 14 November 1869.
1871, when Scharf noted, ‘Mr. Cole, Captn. Festing & Mr. Thompson came to the Gallery. Mr. Cole was struck by the glazed metal tablets attached to the frames.’

Later, Scharf was able to take advantage of the presence of the South Kensington Museum’s art restorers, conveniently close to the then Portrait Gallery, in particular Frederick William Andrew, for cleaning sculpture and restoring miniatures, as is discussed below.

Despite the distance of Trafalgar Square from South Kensington, it was often staff at the National Gallery that Scharf consulted, given that both institutions had a focus on paintings. In 1873 he seeks advice from the keeper, Ralph Wornum, about photography of pictures on display, and in 1877 concerning arrangements for polishing pictures. Subsequently Scharf records examining various pictures together with the director, Frederic Burton. When Karl Anton Hickel’s outsize canvas of the *Reformed House of Commons* was on its way to the Portrait Gallery from Vienna in 1885 Scharf sought advice from the National Gallery about importing pictures from the continent, clearly a subject in which the National had much more experience than the Portrait Gallery. When the Portrait Gallery moved to its third home at Bethnal Green late in 1885, some of the pictures were deposited at the National Gallery. Lining large pictures was another area where Scharf could learn from the National Gallery. In 1887 the *Reformed House of Commons* was lined there by William Morrill (1838–1910) at considerable expense. Burton had to reassure Scharf, ‘I have never observed in Morrill any desire to make jobs for himself. And I think that both his honesty & his experience may be relied upon in any recommendation he makes as to the soundest course to pursue in any given case.’

In turn Scharf helped staff at the National Gallery. He was called on to join the committee set up by Burton to advise on the restoration of Sebastiano del Piombo’s great *Raising of Lazarus* in 1880. He provided details at Burton’s request in August 1882 as to which of the Haines picture restoring businesses, i.e. William Henry Haines or Frederick Haines & Sons, the Portrait Gallery used, and a year later Burton was said to be much pleased with the latter’s work in cleaning National Gallery pictures transferred to the Portrait Gallery. And in 1885 when the National Gallery’s care of Raphael’s recently purchased *Ansidei Madonna*, came under attack, Burton was able to refute accusations of miscare on the basis of a diagram

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21 National Portrait Gallery records, Secretary’s journal, 9 November 1871. These tablets provided information on the sitter and artist for each portrait. Thompson is probably to be identified with Richard Anthony Thompson (1819–1908).
22 National Portrait Gallery records, Secretary’s journal, 17 May 1873.
23 National Portrait Gallery records, Secretary’s journal, 10 March 1877.
24 National Portrait Gallery records, Secretary’s journal, 24 December 1877, 11 February, 27 July 1878, 22 November 1879, 1 April 1880, 22 September 1883.
25 National Portrait Gallery records, Trustees’ minutes, 19 March 1887.
26 National Gallery Archive, NG1/5, 21, 27 June, 2, 21 July 1880.
27 National Portrait Gallery records, Trustees’ meeting correspondence, meeting of 6 November 1882; Secretary’s journal, 22 September 1883.
28 Its cracked appearance was compared adversely with its supposed ‘nearly perfect condition, flawless’ at Blenheim (*The Athenaeum*, no. 3005, 30 May 1885, 704).
made by Scharf at Blenheim in 1870, showing that the cracks in the picture then already existed.  

**Working with restorers and improving collection care**

By the time of the foundation of the National Portrait Gallery, painting restoration work at leading institutions was rarely carried out by curators, as it had been earlier in the century by William Seguier (1772–1843), with help from his brother, John (1785–1856), at the National Gallery, or by Stephen Poyntz Denning (1795–1864), miniature painter and watercolourist, at Dulwich. Instead restoration was seen as the province of a professional picture restorer. At the National Gallery, Eastlake employed John Bentley (c. 1794–1867), and then from 1858 Charles Buttery (1812–78), Henry Merritt and Raffaelle Pinti (c. 1826–1881). At the Portrait Gallery, Scharf liked to have two or three painting restorers on the Gallery’s books at any one time. In the 1860s and into the 1870s he used George Barker (1818–83), Henry Merritt, and then John Lewis Rutley (1836–1921) and Manfred Holyoake (1844–1921). From the late 1870s he employed Merritt’s assistant, John Reeve (c. 1831–1896) and Frederick Haines & Sons, and from the late 1880s William Morrill and William Dyer (1822–96).

What set Scharf apart from other curators of the time was his exceptionally close connections with both practising picture restorers and with owners of great country house collections. On the one hand, Scharf enjoyed privileged access to restorers’ studios where he could study portraits in the course of restoration, often from institutions or country houses.  

On the other, he would sometimes make recommendations to the owners of important pictures to employ one of his favoured restorers. His public role and trusted position meant that a recommendation from him would carry weight.

Here, Scharf’s dealings with one leading restorer, Henry Merritt, are used to illustrate these connections and just how a restorer could contribute to the care and understanding of the Gallery’s collection. Merritt’s distinguished clientele included the National Gallery and the Royal Collection. At the Portrait Gallery he fulfilled a number of roles. He restored panel paintings such as John De Critz’s *Earl of Salisbury* in 1860 and canvases including John Singleton Copley’s full-length *Lord Mansfield* in 1864. He advised on collection care as when sending his assistant to polish pictures at the Gallery in 1866: ‘I have restricted him to the use of wool with which, having had much practice, he can do no harm. ... The defects of the portraits is the accumulation of ordinary London smoke deposit & it requires experience to remove this...’.  

He provided advice as to whether inscriptions and signatures on early portraits were original or not, as with a panel portrait of the Marquess of Winchester in 1861, where the inscription ‘Sir F. Knolles’ was shown to be of recent date.

29 British Library, Add. MS 39038, Burton to Layard, 21 June 1885; see also Burton’s letter to *The Times*, 3 June 1885.


31 National Portrait Gallery records, Trustees’ meeting correspondence, meeting of 12 April 1866.
Scharf respected Merritt’s skill and expertise. When cataloguing the pictures at Lambeth Palace in 1864 he took Merritt along to examine the pictures with him and appears to have steered restoration work in Merritt’s direction.\footnote{National Portrait Gallery records, Secretary’s journal, 6 October, 9 November 1864.} In 1866 Scharf made several visits to Merritt’s studio to study the great Westminster Abbey portrait of Richard II during its problematic restoration. The artist, George Richmond, was involved and on one occasion Scharf noted going to the studio to meet Richmond ‘to watch progress of the cleaning and restoring’ the portrait.\footnote{National Portrait Gallery records, Secretary’s journal, 13 September, 1 October 1866.} Scharf lamented Henry Merritt’s early death at the age of fifty-five in 1877, which he felt must be ‘a serious loss to the interests of art & the preservation of old paintings’.\footnote{National Portrait Gallery records, Secretary’s journal, 12 July 1877.}

It has been observed that Scharf enjoyed the company of men, often professional man, such as Augustus Franks at the British Museum.\footnote{Michie and Warhol, Love Among the Archives, 71-79} His personal friendships with picture restorers remain to be explored in detail. In the case of George Barker not only did Scharf own a photograph of this leading restorer [Fig. 4] but Barker took Scharf’s own photograph in his St John’s Wood garden during a studio visit in 1863 [Fig. 1].\footnote{Now in the National Portrait Gallery, Ax30343–30345.} In a better documented case, that of Manfred Holyoake, Scharf extended his friendship to Holyoake following the death of his wife and this friendship became particularly close in 1875 when ‘Manfred’ is often noted in Scharf’s personal diary as staying with him.\footnote{Scharf had a remarkably close friendship with Holyoake during the course of 1875; in his personal diary entry for 4 March 1875 he records, ‘Manfred came & slept here. He offered to do so, whenever he could; rather than I should be alone in my rooms every night’; over the}
several collections, including to Lady Camden at Bayham Abbey. The extent and depth of Scharf’s connection meant that he was particularly upset when Holyoake had to be dismissed from the Gallery in 1877 for seeking loans from more than one of the attendants.  

In a collection as wide ranging as the National Portrait Gallery’s, Scharf had to cope with the conservation needs of works on paper and of sculpture in various materials, learning through experience and through his contact with leading experts. Straightforward treatment of prints and drawings would be handled by the Gallery’s framemaker, Henry Critchfield (c. 1823–1887), but occasional more ambitious work went to the British Museum, where George William Reid (1819–87), future keeper of prints and drawings, was asked to clean, mount and inscribe the newly acquired Droeshout engraving of Shakespeare in 1864.  

Figure 5 Martin Droeshout, William Shakespeare, 1632? Engraving, 19.1 x 15.9 cm. From the second or third editions of the First Folio of Shakespeare’s plays, either 1632 or 1663–4. London, National Portrait Gallery. NPG 185.

next six months Holyoake frequently slept at Scharf’s when both men were in town (National Portrait Gallery records, NPG7/3/1/32).

38 National Portrait Gallery records, NPG7/1/1/3/5.

39 National Portrait Gallery records, Secretary’s journal, 1 September, 27 October 1864, Trustees’ minutes, 9 February 1865. Subsequently Scharf used William May Scott (c. 1822–1912) for mounting and repairing drawings, see Secretary’s journal, 24 June 1869, 6 October 1870, 31 July, 21 September 1876.

40 National Portrait Gallery records, Secretary’s journal, 17 February 1875.
the National Gallery in the 1850s, began to be used at the Portrait Gallery, initially for a recently acquired pencil portrait of Thomas Gray in 1876.\textsuperscript{41}

There was a somewhat similar learning curve when it came to exhibiting autograph letters of famous people, a feature of the displays at the time. In 1884 Scharf had to transcribe a letter written by George Eliot which he noted as ‘unhappily fast fading’ and he then took one of the three leaves off display to serve as a control in assessing fading.\textsuperscript{42} The lesson is evident from the precautions the following year in displaying a newly acquired miniature of Sir Henry Lawrence: Scharf reported that a ‘green silk casing had been prepared to protect the colours of the original from fading & the miniature at no time to be exposed to too powerful a light’.\textsuperscript{43} Subsequently, Scharf will no doubt have read Russell and Abney’s landmark Report on the Action of Light on Water Colours with interest (his copy, dated in his hand 30 August 1888, is in the Gallery’s library).\textsuperscript{44}

The young National Portrait Gallery under George Scharf’s leadership built up a collection of sculpture, including marbles, terracottas, plasters and electrotype copies. Each type of sculpture came with its own challenges. Scharf’s overriding concerns were twofold: firstly, finding ways of ensuring the long-term future of delicate plaster busts and casts, leading to the production of electrotype versions and, at a later date, of bronze casts; secondly, keeping marble and terracotta sculpture clean in the heavily polluted London atmosphere of the time.

Initially marble busts were maintained in house, with Scharf purchasing ‘Chlorate of Lime to clean busts’ in 1861 and, at the same time, taking preventative conservation measures by protecting busts through the production of Brown Holland bust covers.\textsuperscript{45} On a visit to Windsor in 1863 Scharf noted how they cleaned busts in the Royal collection, by laying on potash and a little hartshorn (a traditional ammonia-rich solution) with no soap, using a hog bristle brush and drying with a sponge.\textsuperscript{46} Following this, in 1864 and 1865 he made purchases of ‘potash & hartshorn for cleaning busts’, getting two of his Gallery attendants to clean the marbles. White marble busts easily showed up the grime of the London atmosphere and cleaning busts had to be repeated every few years (a problem the British Museum was no nearer resolving with its collection of antique marbles). In 1885 Scharf called at the South Kensington Museum, still the Gallery’s neighbour, to ask about their arrangements for cleaning busts, leading Frederick William Andrew

\textsuperscript{41} National Portrait Gallery records, Secretary’s journal, 30 August, 12 October 1876. William May Scott at the British Museum is credited with the introduction of the sunk mount in Alfred Whitman, The Print-Collector’s Handbook, London: G. Bell, 1902, 106.

\textsuperscript{42} National Portrait Gallery records, Secretary’s journal, 8 July, 5 December 1884.

\textsuperscript{43} National Portrait Gallery records, Trustees’ minutes, 20 February 1885.


\textsuperscript{45} National Portrait Gallery records, NPG7/1/1/2/2/1, cash book entries.

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(1822–1903), the museum’s restorer of art objects, to clean twenty-seven of the marble busts in the collection.47

A terracotta was a desirable acquisition if deriving directly from the sculptor’s hand as in the case of Roubiliac’s bust of William Hogarth, purchased in 1861, and restored that year by the Gallery’s sculpture restorers, William Bartlett & Co. But on more than one occasion Scharf found that potential acquisitions were plasters painted to look like terracotta. Here the advice from an expert was invaluable. ‘To Bartlett’s to request a speedy inspection of the Newton bust’, Scharf noted on 18 March 1864, receiving the response that it was ‘not terra cotta but thick plaster & only a cast’.48 And in 1866 a ‘terracotta’ bust of Charles I at Christie’s proved to be ‘only plaster of Paris’.49

Plasters were prone to breakage in the exposed conditions of the galleries. ‘An accident had happened to the large plaster bust of the Queen,’ Scharf noted in 1891 of a newly acquired bust of Queen Victoria by Sir Joseph Boehm [Fig. 6], continuing, ‘The crown on the top of her head [was] in fragments lying on the floor.’50 The solution, if there was one, was to have a cast made in bronze or as an electrotype although it is not easy to discern why some plasters were cast and others not. Much earlier in 1869 Scharf had obtained the sculptor, Henry Weekes’s

47 National Portrait Gallery records, Secretary’s journal, 4 and 6 March 1885; Duplicates of Accounts, vol. 2, p. 80; Trustees’ minutes, 2 May 1885. Scharf had used Andrew for restoring miniatures in the late 1870s, see Secretary’s journal, 23 March, 16 October 1876, 4 January 1877, 31 March 1879.
48 National Portrait Gallery records, Secretary’s journal, 18 and 21 March 1864.
49 National Portrait Gallery records, Secretary’s journal, 8 March 1866.
50 National Portrait Gallery records, Secretary’s journal, 7 August 1891.
agreement that his bust of William Buckland [Fig. 7] should be cast by Elkington & Co ‘in pure copper by Electric deposition’, so as to produce a work ‘in sound metal of the most durable quality’ but with the loss of the original plaster in the process.51 In response to Scharf’s concern about the finished electrotype, Elkington’s manager explained that ‘the glossy appearance of the surface will soon subside, and be much better after a time than were it now altered. Experience has proved that.’ 52 The polluted London atmosphere presumably hastened this natural process. Other than the South Kensington Museum, the Portrait Gallery was the institution that commissioned the most electrotypes.53

Taking advice from scientists

One of the interesting features about museums in the mid-nineteenth century is the importance attached at this particular time to obtaining proper scientific advice on environmental and restoration matters. It was Charles Eastlake in a wide ranging open letter to the then prime minister, Sir Robert Peel, in 1845, who first openly

52 National Portrait Gallery records, RP 255.
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identified the need for access to advice from an experienced chemist or investigator.\textsuperscript{54}

![Figure 8 Nicholas Hilliard, Queen Elizabeth I, 1572. Watercolour on vellum, 5.1 x 4.8 cm. London, National Portrait Gallery. NPG 108.]

Michael Faraday was called on to advise at several museums and galleries. He sat on the National Gallery Site Commission in 1857. His opinion was sought on glazing pictures and on the effects of pollution on the National Gallery’s collection in the 1850s, on cleaning the Elgin and other marbles at British Museum in 1857 and on gas lighting at South Kensington in 1859.\textsuperscript{55} Faraday was also consulted by George Scharf in 1863. But by now in his early seventies, he referred Scharf to a colleague at the Royal Institution, the chemist, Edward Frankland (1825–99), who was able to advise Scharf on a newly acquired Nicholas Hilliard miniature of Queen Elizabeth I, then the only portrait of the queen in the collection [Fig. 8]. Scharf had withdrawn the miniature from display when it began to suffer from blackening of lead white in London’s sulphurous atmosphere. The process of treating the blackened lead white with hydrogen peroxide is very well documented in the Gallery’s records and has


\textsuperscript{55} For the National Gallery, see ‘The Protection of Pictures in the National Gallery by Glass’, cited in note 10 above, and for his recommendations on backing pictures see note 11 above. For the British Museum, see \textit{Report of the National Gallery Site Commission}, cited in note 9, 1857, 149 (appendix 1), republished in \textit{The Literary Gazette}, 29 August 1857, 835–6. For South Kensington, see Costaras, ‘Richard Redgrave’, 59.
been published on the Gallery’s website as a very early case study.\(^{56}\) Exceptionally, it was Scharf himself who treated the miniature.

The experience of acquiring a very important miniature and seeing it discolor within a couple of years as a result of pollution had an impact on Scharf’s approach to the collection. Scharf continued to turn to Frankland, in 1865 asking him to test the paper that he used for his precious notebooks for durability against hydrogen sulphide as a pollutant and in 1867 to test what would appear to have been early examples of photolithographs.\(^{57}\) Scharf seems neurotically precocious in his precautions in proactively testing out materials against deterioration from environmental causes.\(^{58}\)

Later in the century there is less evidence of public galleries in London feeling the need to seek scientific advice and few such instances are recorded. At South Kensington in 1869 the physicist, John Tyndall, provided advice on the heating, lighting and ventilation of the museum and in 1888 the chemist, William James Russell, and the chemist and astronomer, W. de W. Abney, reported on the fading of watercolours.\(^{59}\) At the National Gallery in 1881 Dr John Percy, consultant on ventilation at the Palace of Westminster, was called on to investigate atmospheric conditions in the galleries, thought to be the cause of paint flaking in panel paintings.\(^{60}\) But scientific advice was rarely sought on the treatment of individual works of art.\(^{61}\) It was not until after the First World War that a scientist was taken on to the staff at any institution, in the first instance at the British Museum.

**Providing advice and assisting country house owners**

Over a lifetime of close study Scharf gained a deep knowledge of country house collections. He became a trusted adviser to several country house owners. Scharf’s contributions were three-fold: researching and publishing collections and individual portraits, advising on or even directing picture restoration, and on occasion assisting in hanging collections. In many ways he became the authority to go to.

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\(^{57}\) See Simon, ‘Queen Elizabeth I’, addendum, November 2015. Elizabeth Heath kindly drew these references to my attention.

\(^{58}\) In an early instance of active testing at the South Kensington Museum in 1857, Richard Redgrave and William Mulready prepared paint samples ‘to test the effects arising from atmosphere, as well as those from the use of gas lighting’, see Costaras, ‘Richard Redgrave’, 59.

\(^{59}\) For Tyndall, see Costaras, ‘Richard Redgrave’, 61. For Russell and Abney, see above and note 44.

\(^{60}\) See National Gallery Archive, NG1/5, 13 June 1881.

\(^{61}\) In a bizarre incident in 1889 concerning the condition of Francia’s large St Anne altarpiece at the National Gallery, it was supposed that there was a ‘thread like fungus’ growing on panel’s surface. It took Arthur Church, professor of chemistry at the Royal Academy, to point out what the Gallery’s staff and restorers had failed to notice, namely that the threads were ‘merely fragments of cotton wool used for cleaning the picture and overlaid with fine dust’ (National Gallery Archive, NG1/6, 4 June 1889).
Blenheim Palace, the seat of the Duke of Marlborough, is a notable example: Scharf recommends George Barker to the Duke in 1858 and visits the collection at the same time as Barker in 1859 and checks his restoration work, he himself treats the reverse of Raphael's Ansidei Madonna, then still at Blenheim, with corrosive sublimate the same year, and he publishes his catalogue of the collection in 1860 with further editions in following years. Later, Scharf entrusts two of the Duchess of Marlborough’s portraits to Manfred Holyoake in 1871, he takes in pictures from Blenheim for Samuel Paskell to work on in 1875, and he passes on to Frederick Andrew at the South Kensington Museum one of the Duchess’s miniatures for repair in 1876.

Scharf was a frequent guest at one great house or another, often for a week or two at a time. In August and September 1875 he visited Lady Camden at Bayham Abbey, Mrs West at Knole, Countess Beauchamp at Madresfield and the Duke and Duchess of Marlborough at Blenheim. Following a visit to a particular country house or other collection, Scharf would sometimes direct pictures in need of restoration to one of his favourite picture restorers. His involvement extended to Claydon House in 1861, Lambeth Palace in 1864, Corsham Court in 1866 and Boughton House in 1887. He recommended Merritt to Sir Edward Cust in 1865 and Manfred Holyoake to Lady Camden in 1873. He was asked by Lord Bath, a Gallery trustee writing from Longleat, to recommend a good picture restorer in 1878.

Scharf would also on occasion advise on the arrangement of pictures. At Knole in 1875 he participated in hanging the collection. The great pictures by Joshua Reynolds were grouped together in what is still the Reynolds’ room, the Italian pictures in another room, and portraits by Sir Peter Lely in a third. Family pictures were hung in the lower corridors. This is a hang that has survived in part until very recently. What is fascinating is to gain an insight into how Knole came to have its thematic hang with Scharf's active involvement. Classifying pictures by artist or school is essentially a museum idea originating in the late eighteenth century.

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62 George Barker’s manuscript ‘Book of Testimonials’ (Private coll.), letter from Scharf to Barker, 19 June 1858: ‘The Duke of Marlborough came in at the same time and I have given his Grace your address’; National Portrait Gallery records, NPG7/3/1/14, Scharf’s personal diary, 27 November 1859: ‘Called on Mr. Barker in the afternoon ... Saw the Reynolds Fortune Teller which Barker had repaired for the Duke of M.’

63 Scharf’s personal diary, 30 April 1859: ‘at Blenheim. Had the Raphael large picture taken down, applied corrosive sublimate to the back.’

64 National Portrait Gallery records, Trustees’ meeting correspondence, meeting of 23 November 1871; Secretary’s journal, 2 June 1875; Secretary’s journal, 23 March 1876.

65 National Portrait Gallery records, Secretary’s journal, July–September 1875.

66 National Portrait Gallery records, Letters from trustees, Lord Bath to Scharf, 7 May 1878.

67 Scharf helped with the hang, 21–24 August 1875, noting on 22 August, ‘Walking through the house with Mrs. West & planning changes of pictures’ (National Portrait Gallery records, Scharf’s personal diary). He wrote to William Smith on 24 August that they had been ‘very busy ... re-arranging & classifying the pictures. The crimson drawing room is devoted to Sir Joshua. The Venetian dressing room to Italian art and the Spangled dressing room to Sir Peter Lely’ (National Portrait Gallery records, NPG20/3).
Working with trustees

The role of trustees in the management of London’s museums in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has begun to be explored. At the National Portrait Gallery in the early years of Scharf’s term of office as secretary, the trustees tended to be quite precise about what they wanted him to do when it came to treating the collection. In Scharf’s first full year, when John Webber’s portrait of Captain Cook was acquired in 1858, ‘The Secretary was directed to have the picture … relined and the frame regilt. At the same time the writing on the back of the frame was to be carefully preserved.’ And later in the year when a copy portrait of Lord Chancellor Talbot was acquired, ‘The Secretary was requested to have this … Portrait carefully cleaned and lined. The present size of the strainer to be preserved and a handsome gilt frame to be provided for it.’ However the tone of the minutes, which Scharf himself drafted, gradually changes as he gains in confidence and experience. He makes recommendations on the care of the collection to the trustees which they generally endorse, for example in protecting pictures by Joshua Reynolds by glazing in 1866.

Scharf enjoyed an excellent working relationship with his trustees, and this differentiates the Portrait Gallery from the National Gallery, where later there were difficulties from time to time. He worked closely with certain individual trustees, most especially successive chairmen, Philip Stanhope, fifth Earl Stanhope (1805–75) and, from 1875, Charles Hardinge, second Viscount Hardinge (1822–94), who was also a trustee at the National Gallery. Initially, Scharf relied a good deal on advice from William Carpenter at the British Museum and Sir Charles Eastlake at the National Gallery, both founding trustees of the Portrait Gallery. Carpenter was a close friend and particularly useful in identifying acquisitions, such as Roubiliac’s bust of William Hogarth in 1861. A rare if hackneyed piece of conservation advice

Notably by Andrea Geddes Poole in Stewards of the Nation’s Art: contested cultural authority, 1890–1939, Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 2010; she focuses on the the National Gallery, the National Portrait Gallery, the Wallace Collection and the Tate Gallery.

National Portrait Gallery records, Trustees’ minutes, 27 January 1858.

National Portrait Gallery records, Trustees’ minutes, 5 May 1858.

National Portrait Gallery records, Trustees’ minutes, 12 April 1866: ‘The Secretary invited attention to the importance of adopting some means for the more complete preservation of the very valuable pictures by Sir Joshua Reynolds; namely, his own portrait and that of Lord Keppel, and recommended that they should be protected with Plate-glass in a similar manner to that adopted at the National Gallery. The Trustees approved of this suggestion...’.

Geddes Poole, Stewards of the Nation’s Art, 2010, 32, provides an insightful analysis of the differences in composition, function and purpose of the Portrait Gallery’s board from those of the National Gallery and the Wallace Collection. In short, the trustees of the Portrait Gallery were appointed for their professional knowledge and had to make decisions on the historical importance of a portrait’s subject rather than aesthetic judgments.

Scharf noted of Lord Stanhope after his death, ‘I never had a better or truer friend’ (National Portrait Gallery records, Scharf’s personal diary, text added to entry for 20 November 1875).

National Portrait Gallery records, Letters from trustees, Carpenter to Scharf, 12 January 1861.
from Carpenter is a warning against allowing a certain picture framemaker to varnish pictures.\textsuperscript{75} Charles Eastlake died in 1865. His replacement on the board of trustees was the portrait painter, Sir Francis Grant (1803–78), a very different and less accommodating man. Rather extraordinarily, William Smith, the deputy chairman, wrote to Scharf privately, ‘Don Pomposo e Cavaliere Grant is a precious bad exchange for poor Sir Charles’.\textsuperscript{76} And Smith continued, ‘I am persuaded he thinks the strongest possible Guinness stout of himself.’

There was an increasing reliance on controlled procedures in making decisions on conservation, through initial report to trustees, investigation into the work, followed by a straightforward restoration proposal or estimate, and a final report back to trustees.\textsuperscript{77} Here, three specific examples of the influence of trustees on the appearance and care of the collection are considered: the occasional cutting down of pictures, a practice starting in 1867, the crossover with the National Gallery in the dismissal of a picture framer in 1880 and the care of the collection when at Bethnal Green in 1889.

It was through Francis Grant that the subject arose of reducing portraits in size with the idea of improving the appearance of a portrait.\textsuperscript{78} In 1867 Grant proposed that a recently donated portrait, John Graham-Gilbert’s unfinished replica Sir Walter Scott, should be reduced in size to eliminate ‘some defects at the outer corners of the picture’.\textsuperscript{79} As President of the Royal Academy and a portrait painter himself, his opinion carried considerable weight with his fellow trustees. It may now seem somewhat surprising, cutting down a picture, but for portrait painters of the day the practice of adjusting the size of their own work was commonplace as is known to be the case with John Everett Millais, a later trustee of the Portrait Gallery.

With Samuel Laurence’s portrait of the computer pioneer, Charles Babbage, Scharf and the trustees found themselves under external scrutiny. This portrait was accepted as a bequest in 1876 but with a proviso from trustees ‘that the very extensive and unmeaning space round the head be reduced’.\textsuperscript{80} Obeying instructions but keeping open the possibility that the decision might be reversed, Scharf had the canvas folded back by Henry Merritt, rather than cut, and with reason, for two years

\textsuperscript{75} National Portrait Gallery records, Letters from trustees, Carpenter to Scharf, 23 October 1857.
\textsuperscript{76} National Portrait Gallery records, Letters from trustees, Carpenter to Scharf, 23 October 1857.
\textsuperscript{77} Scharf’s way of working can be illustrated by his approach to a newly acquired early panel portrait of William Paget, 1st Baron Paget, in 1894. On 8 February he made a meticulous drawing in his sketchbook, which he annotated with research information. On 19 March he obtained the trustees’ approval to acquire the portrait and to put it into ‘perfect order’. On 22 June he obtained his chairman’s approval to consult William Dyer on cleaning and repairing it. On 9 July he obtained an estimate from Dyer, which was initialled by the chairman to indicate approval. On 26 July Dyer’s bill was passed for payment and on 6 December the panel’s return, ‘well cleaned and restored’, was reported to the trustees.
\textsuperscript{78} For further information, see Jacob Simon, ‘Reducing portraits in size: a debated practice’, forthcoming on the website of the National Portrait Gallery.
\textsuperscript{79} National Portrait Gallery records, Trustees’ minutes, 21 June 1867.
\textsuperscript{80} National Portrait Gallery records, Trustees’ minutes, 8 March 1876.
later, Babbage’s son, Colonel Babbage, accused the Gallery of mutilating his father’s portrait. Scharf now faced a battle on two fronts, to prevent adverse press publicity and to deal with his own trustees. Thanks to his deft handling, the editor of the influential Athenaeum magazine decided not to publish the colonel’s letter of protest.81 As to his own trustees, Scharf told them that the picture could readily be restored but they decided that they ‘continue satisfied that quite enough of the dark unmeaning background has been retained around the head.’82 It was only in 1882 that the picture was returned to its original size [Fig. 9]. In due course the Trustees came to the view that they would no longer consider reducing a portrait in size without the express agreement of the artist or donor.

Figure 9 Samuel Laurence, Charles Babbage, 1845. Oil on canvas, 127.0 x 101.6 cm. London, National Portrait Gallery. NPG 414.

Of all the restorers, craftsmen and contractors that George Scharf had to manage, it was probably the Gallery’s framemakers, Henry Critchfield from 1861 and Francis Draper from 1884, that he had to deal with most often. The framemaker was responsible for hanging the collection, mounting works on paper and transporting pictures, as well as picture framing. The position was of critical importance when it came to the care of the collection. Critchfield also worked for the National Gallery but in November 1879, two trustees of the National Gallery, Sir William Gregory and Lord Hardinge (chairman of trustees at the Portrait Gallery), protested that Critchfield’s charges were excessive. When he refused to reduce his charges he was dismissed. Some months later it emerged that he had been in the habit of charging on numerous occasions for attendance simultaneously at both the National Gallery and the Portrait Gallery, as was made clear by particulars supplied

81 See National Portrait Gallery records, Secretary’s journal, 15 April 1878.
82 National Portrait Gallery records, Trustees’ minutes, 18 May 1878.
by Scharf.83 But it was not until November 1884 that Critchfield was gently removed from his position at the Portrait Gallery, following a report by Scharf that he 'had become so neglectful & uncertain in his work'.84 Scharf, as ever, felt a sense of loyalty towards the professionals who undertook work for the Gallery.

When the National Portrait Gallery collection was moved to Bethnal Green in 1885, offices for Scharf were found in Westminster, some five miles away. In his declining years Scharf rarely inspected the collection, relying on his clerk, Laurence Holland, to do so, and on his man on the spot, the Gallery’s messenger, Charles William Edward, who made weekly reports.85 When melted snow got in and dripped onto five of the portraits in the winter of 1888-9, the trustees held a special meeting to consider a report on the condition of the collection.86 Many of the pictures were found to be in deplorable condition: ‘dreadful state. The canvas is in a terrible state’ (Godfrey Kneller’s James II) and ‘Paint lifting and blistering all over’ (Cardinal Wolsey) were two of the comments. The trustees played a more active part in Scharf’s declining years, lobbying for a permanent home for the gallery and seeing that questions were asked in Parliament about the damage to the collection. It was in 1889 that the property owner, William Henry Alexander, came forward with funding for a purpose-built gallery. The new building helped resolve many of the problems associated with the care of the collection. It opened in 1896, a year after Scharf’s death. It was the fulfillment of his life’s work.

**Scharf's place**

What was George Scharf’s significance in Victorian England and in the emergence of the museum professional? If he was not a leader in advancing matters relating to restoration – that position probably belonged to curators of more specialised collections – he was active and well-informed and through his actions the care of the National Portrait Gallery’s diverse collection was maintained and improved. Additionally through his influence the standard of restoration work at several major country houses was enhanced as work was allocated to professional restorers, rather than to a peripatetic artist, a local print dealer or a framemaker, as historically had often been the case.

At a general level, Scharf responded and contributed to the wider process of professionalization among museum curators of his time. At a more particular level, what distinguishes Scharf’s work from that of his museum contemporaries is not so much his personal characteristics of energy, dedication and scholarship, which can be found elsewhere. Rather it is the peculiar nature of the National Portrait Gallery’s mission, which has always meant working closely with portraits and with the country house owners who held many of the nation’s portraits. His particular

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83 For Critchfield’s attendance at both the National Gallery and the Portrait Gallery, see National Gallery Archives, Trustees Minutes 1877–86, pp. 137, 141, 147, and National Portrait Gallery records, NPG History, Various Notes late 19th century, 22.C.5.
84 National Portrait Gallery records, Trustees’ Minutes, 19 November 1884.
85 National Portrait Gallery records, NPG66/3/2.
86 National Portrait Gallery records, Trustees’ minutes, 30 April 1889; report, see NPG66/3/1/3.
contribution was as an expert in British history and iconography and, secondly, in the care and arrangement of collections. In a remarkable way he was responsible for establishing the methodology and *modus operandi* of the National Portrait Gallery, through his knowledge, application, persistence and longevity.

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