

## SYMPOSIUM

Drawing: A pre-eminent skill

William Shipley Group for RSA History 27 March 2015

*Susanna Avery-Quash*

Plaster casts after Antique heads, an *écorché* horse and skeleton provided an evocative and appropriate setting in the Royal Academy's life-drawing classroom for a symposium about the earliest history of drawing schools in Britain. The event was organised by the William Shipley Group for RSA History on Friday 27 March 2015, and supported by the Tavolozza Foundation and the RA. A highlight of the day was a tour of the casts corridor and skeleton cupboards, led by Helen Valentine, Senior Curator of the RA, who explained that some of the items had come from earlier drawing academies, including the St Martin's Lane Academy. This link was reinforced when some of the power point presentations included 18th-century student drawings depicting these very same casts.

The symposium was scheduled to mark the tercentenary of the birth of William Shipley (1715–1803), a drawing master who founded the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce in 1754. One of the initial ambitions of the Society was to encourage drawing skills in boys and girls, through prize competitions, in the hope that good design would reinvigorate the native school of painting and induce the production of more competitive manufactured goods.

The decision to focus on the history of drawing schools before the foundation of the Royal Academy in 1768 was intentional so that the papers presented would dovetail with, and complement, the Royal Academy's *Educating the Artist* seminar series of 2010, which had concentrated on the foundation of the RA Schools and the subsequent emergence of other academies. Clearly there is currently a renewed interest in this topic within the university and museum worlds as two of the speakers, Jane Munro and Adriano Aymonino, have been involved with mounting exhibitions this year on related themes: 'Silent Partners: Artist & Mannequin from Function to Fetish' at the Fitzwilliam Museum (October 2014–January 2015) and 'Drawn from the Antique: Artists & the Classical Ideal' at the Sir John Soane's Museum (June–September 2015).

The day was buttressed either end with two lucid survey papers. Charles Saumarez Smith, Secretary and Chief Executive of the RA, offered an overview of the range and type of drawing schools that emerged in the middle decades of the 18th century, including those outside London (eg, the Dublin Drawing Schools) and those established in schools (eg, at Eton). Although the various establishments had different aspirations and clienteles, by the time the RA was founded there was a deeply rooted recognition that the teaching of drawing was an essential tool for fine art and craft. The day finished with a contribution from Annette Wickham, Curator of Works on Paper at the RA, about the beginnings of the RA schools: there were many connections between the earlier drawing schools and the RA, in terms of teaching staff, equipment and curriculum.

The day was divided into various parts with the first dedicated to case studies of particular drawing schools in London, which often had inspired innovators at their head, but which nevertheless suffered changes in fortune early on, especially in terms of fluctuating finances. From Kim Sloan (British Museum) we heard about the teaching of drawing at Christ's Hospital, which included the copying of topographical views and coastal scenes of use in the training of prospective

mariners; about Shipley's Drawing School and its links with the RSA from a paper written by Dr David GC Allan (Shipley's biographer and historian of the RSA, in whose honour the day was partly organised. Ill health, sadly, meant Dr Allan could not attend, and so his paper was read by Susan Bennett, the symposium's organiser as well as Honorary Secretary of the William Shipley Group and former Archivist of the RSA). We also heard about the pioneering Anatomy School and Museum established at Great Windmill Street, London, by William Hunter, who had connections with both the RA and RSA (Helen McCormack, Glasgow School of Art). It was interesting to hear from Pat Hardy (Museum of London) about the impact of the Painter-Stainers Company in the early 18th century and how, despite its turning down the proposal of keeping an academy, many of its members, including Sir James Thornhill, Charles Catton, Peter Monamy and George Lambert, were proficient draughtsmen who gained prestigious painting commissions. One of the afternoon sessions, delivered by Anne Dulau and Peter Black (both from the Hunterian Art Gallery), broadened the focus away from London, through talks about the Foulis Academy in Glasgow, the 20-year success of which (1754–1776) was due largely to support from like-minded spirits at the University of Glasgow and among the city's merchants.

The second major topic of the symposium concerned the type of equipment used by drawing masters. Jane Munro of the Fitzwilliam Museum spoke about the first use of lay models by drawing academies and of their perceived advantages over live models. Two other speakers explained the theory behind and the use made in both workshops and academies of Antique statuary (Adriano Aymonino, University of Buckingham) as well as of renaissance and baroque sculptures (Charles Avery, independent sculpture historian). We were shown, for instance, a drawing by the youthful Charles Beale, Jr (1660–1726?), made after Giambologna's *Architecture*.

In addition to presenting comparatively well-known material in a new light (eg, the involved relationship between Shipley and the RSA), speakers explored some understudied areas, such as the education in drawing available for women (eg, Pat Hardy has found a few names of young women in the records of the Painter-Stainers' Company). What also became clear was how, on the one hand, there was much influence on British drawing schools from their longer-established Continental counterparts (not least through the translation of influential tracts and the imitation in London of a system of study based on that in Rome) and yet, on the other, over time, drawing schools in Britain have developed along independent paths (for instance, in this country students are usually taught by a number of masters, whereas on the Continent they still tend, as was traditional, to learn from a single master).

Thanks to the exciting venue, the range of well-informed and beautifully illustrated papers, and the lively ensuing discussion, a stimulating and memorable day was enjoyed by all. Sitting in the RA life-drawing classroom, surrounded by age-old equipment still in use today, caused me to reflect on the vagaries of history. The discipline of drawing, considered in the 18th and 19th centuries as the root of artistic practice, then utterly neglected in the 1960s and 1970s, is now enjoying a renaissance at, for example, the Royal Drawing School and the City & Guilds London Art School. To quote part of the latter's manifesto, drawing is now regarded 'as a crucial route to innovation across the creative disciplines and beyond'. Against such a background, investigation of the origins of British drawing schools, their rationale, methods and working practices, seems to carry with it a happy relevance.