

A Disagreement with The Jackdaw

The Jackdaw (see our Column 2) is running a campaign to try to veto the reappointment of Sir Nicholas Serota as director of the Tate. Ways and means include a petition to the Prime Minister at <http://petitions.pm.gov.uk/tatedirector> and an article in the current issue, "What is Wrong with President Serota?" by Charles Thomson.

Mr Thomson lists some failures in earlier directors, for instance James Bolivar Manson, who, he says, "turned up his nose at anything after [Impressionism], including German Expressionism, Cubism and Surrealism" and who, declining a donation of work by Henry Moore, said that it would enter the gallery only "over my dead body".

Then he goes on to his central argument. "The mistake is not that [previous directors] made the wrong choice. The mistake is that they made a choice at all." Private collectors follow and back their taste, but for the public "the required role is neutrality and objectivity, necessitating an acquisitions policy to represent the whole field of contemporary practice."

This is a counsel of despair. Perhaps Florence was lucky because the line between public and private was not so sharply drawn, and by following their taste a line of enlightened despots created within one city two of the great art collections of the world. If the Medici had followed a policy of representing the whole field of contemporary practice, nobody would now bother to visit the Uffizi or the Pitti. Or perhaps the idea is that over a long enough period of time taste will somehow prevail and the inevitable preponderance of the not-first-rate in any cross-section will get weeded out? That was not how the Tate itself became a great collection. The original core was the Turner Bequest, which embodied Turner's hope that most of the works in it would be kept together. Behind that was the immensely influential art criticism of John Ruskin. Would anybody have put the same effort into founding a gallery to house a collection made on the principle of neutrality and objectivity?

Judgement *must* come into collections of works of art, as into all the performing arts with the decision of what to perform, and as into literature with the decisions what to publish and what to read more than once. The British Library is there for anybody who wants everything published in Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but whoever would think of that as a base for reading? And judgement is always vulnerable to challenge. Perhaps Sir John Rothenstein was not stupid to make sure that the Tate "had an adequate representation of Augustus John", or perhaps we are stupid even to make the suggestion. Either way it is a question of judgement: but not therefore irrational. Judging works or art is like Mr Thomson's phrase "to bet on a favourite horse" only to the extent that backing horses too can be reasonable and open to discussion. Horse-racing is actually more demonstrably reasonable than art criticism, because each act of judgement is supported or disproved by the race. That there is such a thing as generally good judgement in backing horses (as against choosing lottery tickets) is proved by the general prosperity of bookies.

The thing wrong with Sir Nicholas as director of the Tate is not that he judges, but that he judges extremely badly.

By the way the current *Jackdaw* has a very good review of the Hadrian exhibition at the British Museum, though it takes too long over rebukes, just in themselves, about the failure of the Museum to exhibit its permanent collection properly, before getting to unanswerable adverse judgements on much of the work in the Hadrian exhibition. "The risible statue from Tivoli reincarnating peachy boy Antinous as a pharaoh is Ben Hur Hollywood at its worst." (But no doubt representative of the expensive art of its day.)