This is Whitechapel

Outside Blooms

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The Waste

THE WHITECHAPEL ART GALLERY Helen Sachs

Of the various palliatives offered by Victorian reformers for the social sickness of their age, none was the target of more derision than the notion of Art for the People. 'Once a year, as regular as clockwork' a Pall Mall Gazette editorial told its readers, 'the Lords and Commons amuse themselves with discussing whether the masses care for high art, whether they would like to have good pictures to look at on Sunday and whether they would derive any pleasure or benefit therefrom. These annual discussions are innocent enough, but somewhat superfluous inasmuch as the point at issue was settled some years since by private enterprise in the East End of London.

The Gazette was referring to the art exhibition held annually in the East End, which had been organised since 1881 by Canon Barnett, then Vicar of Whitechapel. The exhibition had grown out of a suggestion by friends that Barnett and his wife should show their Whitechapel neighbours some of the things they had brought back from a visit to Egypt. The idea took a firm hold and the more ambitious plan of showing pictures as well as objects soon evolved.

The accommodation for the exhibitions was far from ideal: 'We were brave if not foolhardy to hold free public exhibitions in the premises at our command' wrote Canon Barnett. 'There were three schoolrooms each 30 feet by 60, behind the church, not even on a central thoroughfare but approached by a passage yard. The light was much obscured by surrounding buildings, the doorways narrow and the staircase inadequate'.

Despite the inadequacy of their setting, the exhibitions were a resounding success. In the first year although an admission charge of 3d was made, 10,000 people came to see the show. The charge was sensibly abolished the following year and was never reimposed. As the years went on and the word got around that the exhibitions in the schoolrooms were worth a visit, attendance figures soared. By 1886, the year in which the Pall Mall Gazette saw fit to print the editorial quoted above, the number of visitors during the twelve days in March for which the show was open had increased to 60,000.

With the exception of the exhibits, which were amongst the best known and admired works of the time, the tone of the exhibitions bore little resemblance to the coldly impersonal West London academies. Flowers were placed in the entrance, friendly 'watchers' were invited from among the young of the West End, and a catalogue was written which gave simple and

evocative descriptions of the pictures. Many of those attending could not read and for their benefit Canon Barnett took to going the rounds of the exhibition giving impromptu lectures and sermons in front of the pictures. What the people thought of these strange sermons cannot be known, that they listened with grave respect is clear, for Canon Barnett was always able to command rapt attention when he spoke. For his part, Barnett declared that he never enjoyed himself so much as in his talks with his fellows, around the pictures of Watts, the pottery of de Morgan and the 'stuffs' of William Morris. 'I felt as I spoke in front of a picture, the power of speaking by parables, the people heard so much more than was in the words', he later wrote to his brother.

The Barnetts resolved from the first to keep the exhibitions open on Sundays when most of the working people of Whitechapel would be free to attend. As might have been expected, this caused something of an uproar. Mrs Barnett described how the Lord's Day Observance Society 'sent men to stand in the street and with loud voices threaten future punishment to those who entered the exhibition'. When this proved ineffective they wrote to the Bishop of London, who responded by sending Barnett a letter condemning the Sunday openings.

Barnett was fervent in defence of his action: 'Distinctly, I am certain that the sight of pictures, helped by the description of those who try to interpret the artist, does touch the memories and awaken the hopes of the people', he wrote in reply to the Bishop. 'Never have I been so aware of the Soul and its needs as when the people listened to what I had to say of Watts picture 'Time, death and Judgment'. I cannot think that if you knew the lives of my neighbours as I do, you would say it is better for the value of old Sunday associations to keep the people amidst the paralysing and degrading sights of our streets than to bring them within view of the good and perfect sights of God. Pictures if they could be more generally shown on weekdays and on Sundays would educate people so that they might realise the extent and meaning of the past, the beauty of nature and the substance of love.'

Barnett was not alone among Victorian reformers in believing in the power of art to 'elevate' the people. Both William Morris and John Ruskin, whose reforming philosophies were otherwise diametrically opposed, had combined to show the way. 'Life without work is guilt', wrote Ruskin, 'and work without art is brutality'. Those words were to become the motto of the 'art movement' in Whitechapel and were inscribed on the catalogues produced for the exhibitions.

The curious quality of Canon Barnett's art appreciation was that it was not based on any overpowering instinct for the beautiful. He was colour-blind and 'secretly', a friend later wrote of him,' regretted that all pictures could not be ethical allegories like Watt's paintings. But he was fortunate, for in Mrs

Barnett he had the ideal complement for his enthusiasm: She was as sentient as he was idealistic, and a true art lover. Raised in a refined and cultured family where 'pictures of Raphael were hung on the nursery wall', it was she who advised him on the choice of pictures for the exhibitions and supervised the hanging of the pictures and the decoration of the rooms.

Setting up the exhibitions was an arduous and complicated affair. For it was of neccessity carried out in a remarkably short space of time, as the schools could only be spared for 16 days and of these four were allowed for preparation. Mrs Barnett has given us a description of their work. 'On the Thursday before Maundy Thursday the school broke up. On Friday and Saturday the pictures were collected. On Saturday afternoon and Sunday the catalogue was written and produced. On Monday the 300–350 pictures were hung; on Tuesday morning the press were admitted and on Tuesday afternoon the public opening was held.'

Persuading the owners of fine pictures to lend their possession was one of Canon Barnett's main concerns. He summed up his conviction that his parishioners would appreciate nothing but the best pictures in the rather unfortunate phrase 'the highest art for the lowest people'. But his desire to prevent cultural condescension, if badly expressed, was very sincere. 'As yet' he wrote, 'the rich do not understand that the poor are their equals in their power of enjoyment. One of the best results that could follow the Whitechapel show would be a conviction of sin amongst picture owners, because the best pictures are never seen and when seen are not interpreted'.

Hanging the paintings must have been extremely difficult, for it was not as if the hanging could be settled along the principles that usually govern exhibitions. To those Mrs Barnett had to add 'the knowledge that people crowded and lingered around a picture with a story and as the floors were weak only one popular canvas could be placed on each wall. Also the means of entrance and exit were small, visitors sometimes drunken and panic easily aroused in crowds'.

Overcrowding was a problem from the start and, with the growth in attendance, soon became critical. In 1885 Canon Barnett wrote: 'Next year we must if possible have new rooms. We need more space and two staircases, for there is always some anxiety now lest an accident might happen.' In the absence of other funds, the donations of friends had helped to support the exhibition from the beginning. In 1887 they raised £2,500 for a new building and three larger rooms were built at the back of the existing schoolrooms. These satisfied Barnett for a while, but it was not long before the continued popularity of the exhibitions and Barnett's mounting conviction of the value of the art shows in Whitechapel set him thinking about the idea of a permanent gallery.

In 1892 a book by the novelist and historian Walter Besant entitled 'All

Sorts and Conditions of Men' had succeeded in persuading the public of the value of buildings for culture in the East End. As an antidote to the debauchery of the beer house and the music hall, he had suggested a cultural centre which would combine education and good music and thereby provide a cure for the 'joyless monotony' of the East End. The idea which was taken up enthusiastically by the well-to-do culminated in 1893 in the now defunct People's Palace in Mile End Road.

Barnett's first idea for the permanent gallery was along similar lines to Besant's. In an interview in February 1894 with the editor of a periodical with the unlikely title 'The Religious Review of Reviews' he outlined his proposals for the scheme: 'It might be a glorified Town Hall, for if an art exhibition is attached to a living body, it would run no chance of being stranded. We propose to get the parochial authorities to keep it up out of the rates, using it indeed for other purposes if necessary.'

Much effort was expended on this 'glorified Town Hall'. It was proposed to convert a Baptist Chapel in Commercial Street for the purpose and sketch plans were drawn up. But the scheme proved fruitless, as the safety requirements demanded by the LCC for the type of building Barnett was proposing were prohibitive on the relatively small budget available. The Whitechapel authorities, too, were not keen to take responsibility for such a building. In the end it was decided to build a separate gallery and place it under a body of Trustees.

In 1896 Mr Passmore Edwards, the newspaper proprietor and philanthropist, came forward with an offer of £5000 to construct a building, provided that a suitable site could be found and an endowment secured. Shortly afterwards, an option on a site adjoining the Whitechapel Library was obtained. It was not in fact a particularly suitable site for an art gallery, being small and hemmed in on all sides. Nor was the asking price of £6000 particularly cheap, but Passmore Edwards who, in his 'ubiquitous munificence' had paid for the construction of the library building some few years earlier was adamant that the site should be the one to accompany his donation and Barnett was left with very little choice in the matter.

Charles Harrison Townsend, the architect of the gallery can scarcely have had this site in mind in his first sketch design for the building. The design, which was shown at the Royal Academy exhibition in May 1896, was for a building almost twice the size of the present gallery. It was an ambitious project, but more in the nature of a design exercise than a serious scheme for its lavishness testifies to Townsend's obvious unconcern for the amount of money which could be feasibly raised for the project. The scheme places great emphasis on the use of mosaic, on which Townsend was something of an expert, having written and lectured extensively on the subject. Townsend wrote of the scheme in the journal 'The Builder': 'The design for the gallery

proposes that the exterior shall make a large use of mosaic, with the hope of adding an element of brightness to the somewhat sombre neighbourhood', and the building was described in 'The Studio', the contemporary magazine of the Arts as being 'a colour study, as demonstrated by the warm yellow tone of the exterior wall work, the bands of Cipolino marble in the centre portion, the reddish-yellow and white marble of the centre doorway and the green slates of the large flanking towers.

Barnett and his advisors determined to negotiate for the site and Townsend – a friend of the Barnett's and the designer of the 'highly original' nearby Bishopsgate Institute – was commissioned to design a more realistic scheme. The design which was completed early in 1897 differs substantially from its predecessor. The flanking towers were much reduced in importance and topped by rather oriental cupolas, which in fact were never built. The gallery was also much reduced in size: what had been a facade of 100 feet in the first scheme became the narrow 43 feet frontage which the gallery now has and the highly elaborate facade was limited to a terra-cotta 'treatment'. The emphasis on mosaic remained unchanged for it was an integral part of Townsend's conception for the gallery. The mosaic panel, designed by the artist Walter Crane was never executed and in a sense therefore, the gallery was never really completed.

On the whole, the final design for the gallery had a mixed reception from the press. Many did not know what to make of it, for it was quite unlike any other building in England, and was referred to alternatively as a 'gaunt shed' and a 'house beautiful'. While the architectural historians are unanimous in rating Townsend as a notable rather than great architect, he was exceptional in being really the only architect in England to design in the style of the art nouveau, a style which although it received its impetus from the English Arts and Crafts movement, was to have its real flowering in Scotland and the continent.

Once a feasible design had been provided and the site thereby proved suitable, Canon Barnett set about raising funds for the gallery. In addition to Mr Passmore Edwards' £5000, he calculated that another £12,000 would be required to purchase the site and pay for Mr Townsends' scheme.

Accordingly at the opening of the spring exhibition of 1897, he launched an appeal for the money. The exhibition, which that year contained 80 pictures by Mr Watts, was well attended by the press and Barnett's appeal was reported in all the national papers. All were unanimous in their glowing commendation that the gallery project should be supported. The popular half-penny 'Echo', under its proprietor Passmore Edwards – who was naturally a partisan – wrote of 'the humane spirit which uses educative and ameliorative agencies to improve and elevate the people.' The 'Daily News' spoke of the 'vulgar and silly people who used once to say that only the