

**Ostentation, Exhibition and Decoration:  
Cultures of Display in Britain from the Medieval to Modern**

*23 February 2011*

1:00 **Welcome: Dr. Sarah Turner, Director of the British Art Research School**

**SESSION 1** (Bowland Lecture Theatre, Berrick Saul Building) **Chair: Professor Mark Hallett**

1:10 Meg Boulton (University of York), *(Re)Building Jerusalem: Symbolic Significance within the Anglo-Saxon Church*

The Church in Anglo-Saxon England employed a culture of display from its very beginning, using architecture and imagery to make the heavenly present to the faithful. However, it was not just the method, mode and choice of symbolic objects employed by the Church which allowed for the development of a sophisticated interplay of disparate earthly and heavenly spaces. Rather, it was the particular way of viewing objects characteristic of indigenous Anglo-Saxon culture. This paper seeks to relate the culture of religious display and the Anglo-Saxon tradition of viewing to explore how the space of the 'Heavenly Jerusalem' was actualised within the Anglo-Saxon Church.

*Questions*

1:30 James Legard (University of York), *The Ambiguities of Architectural Display in Augustan England: The case of Blenheim Palace*

Gargantuan in scale and grandiloquent in manner, Blenheim Palace is surely one of the most prodigious examples of architectural 'display' in Britain. Yet the creation of such conspicuous ostentation required its patron, the 1<sup>st</sup> Duke of Marlborough, his architects, Sir John Vanbrugh and Nicholas Hawksmoor, and their principal artisans, such as the Strongs and the Paisleys, to run substantial professional, political, and financial risks. This paper aims to explore the motivations which justified taking such risks, showing how the palace's progenitors negotiated the treacherous waters of Court and Parliament in their attempts to realise varied and sometimes conflicting social, economic and aesthetic ambitions. In doing so, this paper will illuminate the complex nexus of cultural and material factors that shaped the Palace's design and construction, and attempt to throw new light on its form and meaning.

1:40 Lucinda Lax (University of York), *Fusing the 'High' and the 'Low': Edward Penny's The Blacksmiths and the Royal Academy Display of 1769*

This paper will consider the theme of 'display' in relation to the Royal Academy's important inaugural exhibition of 1769. From the moment the Academy was conceived – in mid-December 1768 – it was proclaimed a national triumph. For the first time, Britain possessed an art school and exhibiting society that promoted the highest and most learned forms of grand manner art and operated at the forefront of artistic culture. Yet, for all its purported exclusivity and high-mindedness, the Academy's opening show in Pall Mall was a decidedly mixed and heterogeneous affair. Through focusing on the unabashedly vernacular and localised exhibit that was produced by the Academy's first Professor of Painting, Edward Penny, this paper will demonstrate that the Pall Mall display provided a spectacle that, rather than privileging an elevated mode of Italianate practice, mingled the 'high' and the 'low' in equal portions.

1:50 Arlene Leis (University of York), *Cutting, Arranging and Pasting: Displaying Graphic Culture in the Collection of Sarah Sophia Banks*

This paper will focus on the display of printed ephemera in the collection of Sarah Sophia Banks, the sister of the celebrated botanist and patron of the natural sciences, Sir Joseph Banks. Comprising an early form of scrapbook, Sarah Sophia's repository contains a rich assemblage of commercial materials, including playbills, admission tickets, broadsheets, newspaper clippings and trade cards – works which, although never displayed within the exhibition arena, hold considerable art-historical value. However, even as the scrapbook approach that Sarah Sophia employed for systematizing her collection makes it seem a particularly personal enterprise, we should also view it as a mechanism that brought the public domain into the domestic sphere. Not only did this important collection play a significant role in the construction of genteel ideals of femininity, it simultaneously exhibited traces of the wider graphic culture from which it was born.

*Questions and short break*

## **SESSION 2** (Bowland Lecture Theatre, Berrick Saul Building) **Chair: Dr. Sarah Turner**

2:25 Cicely Robinson (University of York), *Exhibiting Imperialism: The Foundation of the National Gallery of Naval Art, 1795-1845*

The National Gallery of Naval Art, initially proposed in 1795 and finally installed in 1823, was the first 'national' collection to be opened to the public, preceding the foundation of the National Gallery by a matter of months. Situated within the Painted Hall at Greenwich Hospital, it exhibited a collection which consisted primarily of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century maritime paintings showing scenes of naval action from Elizabethan times through to the Napoleonic Wars. This paper will examine how the gallery's important nineteenth-century display was constructed as an on-going narrative of imperial expansion and dominance. Significantly, this space was also the site where Nelson was laid in state, and the exhibition of naval relics that accompanied the painted works on show invites us to consider how a mythology of national duty and martial martyrdom was projected to the public.

2:35 Eion Martin (University of Warwick), *Displaying Majesty: Queen Victoria and the Freestanding Portrait Statue*

There are only two freestanding portrait statues of Queen Victoria in the Royal Collection: the first, by John Gibson, was completed in 1849 and displayed at Osborne House; the second, by Josef Edgar Boehm, was completed in 1872 and displayed at Windsor Castle. Adhering to the conventions of what is arguably a peculiarly complex genre, both Gibson's and Boehm's portraits represent the image of a sitter familiar to millions, whilst also communicating a suggestively formalised iconography of monarchical authority. Like other royal portraits, these works were widely disseminated, having been displayed in the illustrated press and at several international exhibitions before they went on permanent display within the royal residences. This paper will seek to examine these iconic portraits in relation to the various settings in which they were displayed, in order to investigate the complex semantics through which royal iconography articulated power and majesty.

2:45 Jasmine Allen (University of York), *Glazing the 'wretched shed': Stained Glass and the International Exhibition of 1862*

The nineteenth-century International Exhibitions were spectacular displays of objects and cultures from all around the world. London's second International Exhibition, held in the Royal Horticultural Society's gardens in South Kensington in 1862, included a large-scale, ephemeral display of stained glass. This display featured exhibits set into the internal walls of the Exhibition building. This paper will investigate the problems, politics and technologies involved in these 'architectural displays'. How were the stained glass windows incorporated into the building's structure? Did the architectural display of stained glass in this 'wretched shed', as the space was unflatteringly described by the *Art Journal*, affect observers' perceptions of the medium? What were the precedents for such a display, and what impact did it have on future secular displays of stained glass in Britain?

2:55 Catherine Spencer (University of York), *Gustav Metzger and John Latham's Displays of Destruction*

Gustav Metzger and John Latham practiced what can be described as the 'display of destruction' in their 1960s performance pieces, creating works that foreground – and frustrate – documentation and dissemination. The apparent violence of their practices has provoked negative reaction: Metzger and Latham's attention-seeking displays, however, aimed to challenge fixed dogma and restrictive epistemologies. Focusing on Metzger's *South Bank Demonstration* (1961) and Latham's *Still and Chew (Art and Culture)* (1966), this paper proceeds from the central paradox of process-based art – the ephemeral happening or event's reliance on displays of material evidence, written, photographic, or filmic – to argue that Latham and Metzger undercut the link between display and document through transformative destruction, even as they established their own systems of personal and political knowledge dispersal.

*Questions and short break*

### **Keynote Lecture**

3:25 Dr. Kate Nichols (University of York), *Reconstructing Exhibitions – Questions and Experiments*

This paper will consider the controversial display to a new mass audience of Greek and Roman plaster casts at the Crystal Palace, Sydenham. My particular focus will be how these exhibits shed new light on both classical sculpture and the way it was conceived in the nineteenth-century. The Sydenham Palace was proudly viewed by the 1850s British public as a spectacular recreation of varied past cultures, from ancient Egypt to the Renaissance. Inspired by this self-conscious artifice, and the attitudes towards the past that it implies, the final part of the paper will offer a more experimental approach, intended to open up critical perspectives on the motivations that might lead art historians to attempt to reconstruct exhibitions from the past. What sort of questions are we asking of past displays? What sources might we look to? What might an attempt to recreate a visit to the Palace add to our understanding of how mid nineteenth-century viewers saw and related to sculpture, both physically and psychologically? Does this approach imply a shift in interest from the object to the viewer? And what is the relation between such creative writing and history writing more generally?

*Questions and break for afternoon tea*

### **SESSION 3 (Treehouse, Berrick Saul Building)**

4:40 Round-Table Discussion: *Cultures of Display and the Display of Culture – Continuities and Contradictions*

This will consider issues arising from the totality of papers, likely to include the following broad themes and the ways they have evolved over time:

- Public and private forms of display
- Formal and informal approaches to display
- Material, political and ideological motivations for display
- Factors facilitating or limiting certain kinds of display

5:40 **Launch of the BARS E-bulletin and Blog**

5:50 **Closing Remarks: Dr. Sarah Turner**

6:00 *End of Symposium*

**A drinks reception will be held from 6-7pm in the History of Art Department lounge to draw the symposium to a close and to launch the new British Art Research School Blog.**