

THE PUBLIC CATALOGUE FOUNDATION



by Fred Hohler

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Dr. Fred Hohler, founder and Chairman of the Public Catalogue Foundation, spent 17 years in the Foreign Office before a period in banking in the late 1980s. From 1989 to 1997 he was Chief Executive of the Whitney Group. More recently he has been involved in the management of a number of private companies.

No one visiting Venice or Florence would ever suppose that these great Italian cities, with their galleries full of tourists, were well-kept secrets - cities whose gems were known only to a few cognoscenti or to travellers who had gotten lost on their way to Rome. You could make the same comment about 100 other cities and towns throughout Europe and beyond.

Yet, visitors to Britain focus overwhelmingly on collections in London and know little about the great galleries that exist in profusion throughout the rest of the country. Worse, we British ourselves know little about them either. Nor apparently does our Government. When, outside that city's limits, let alone in Boston or Buenos Aires, did you last see an advertisement for Birmingham City Art Gallery? Or the Laing in Newcastle or the Southampton City Art Gallery, or the galleries in Leeds or York or Chichester or Penzance or a fistful of other locations where, without charge, you can see collections of oil paintings every bit the equal of or superior to most of what is available anywhere else in the world?

The fact is that Britain contains the largest, most wide-ranging, richest collection of oil paintings in public ownership in the world. It is a National Collection without peer, containing (probably) some 200,000 paintings. Yet it is almost entirely unknown. It is not recognised as a National Collection. It is not recorded or catalogued or indexed. Eighty percent or more of the paintings it contains are in store and rarely, if ever, seen. It does not feature as part of this country's National Heritage. This Aladdin's cave, a superlative resource for Britain and the

world beyond our shores, is treated by us in general as a liability. Any other nation would embrace it as a treasured national asset. It is a most curious state of affairs. It is all the more curious given the importance attached by recent governments to the Arts, to the funding of them and to the promotion of free public access to our galleries – yet without, it must be noted, too much of an idea of what is in them.

Which is why the Public Catalogue Foundation (PCF) came about: a charity whose purpose is to publish, on a county-by-county basis, a fully-illustrated series of catalogues of all oil paintings in public ownership in the UK. Through the sale of the catalogues, the PCF raises funds to restore and re-hang the paintings now in store (and often, alas, deteriorating).

If there is anything more curious than this problem, it is the fact that the remedy has taken so long to be identified and has needed a private, not a public, initiative to put into effect. The PCF, as a project, is neither sophisticated nor complex. It is recognised not just as long-needed but as one of the most significant national art projects in the UK today. Setting it up required not just the idea (the easy bit) but, every bit as importantly, someone to have the vision and the courage to back the project as a concept – the difficult bit. This latter element was provided in significant part by Christies.

The Foundation's core objective is to complete its work as rapidly as possible – within 5 years. To this end it is, importantly, not an academic project although its academic value, when completed, will be substantial. Its work is lapidary and foundation-laying and it will be for others to build on it.

The idea for the PCF began when my wife and I were staying in Melbourne with our newly-wed daughter, and, to get us out of the house, we were dispatched to tour the mining towns of Victoria. By the time we reached Ballarat, my appetite for mining museums was sated and I went off alone to explore the town. Curious about a sign indicating an Art gallery, I followed the trail to find myself admiring a small but unexpectedly good collection of paintings, mostly of 19th Century European origin. It struck me as odd that, in the late 19th Century, the City Fathers of Ballarat had felt such an urge to acquire a collection of paintings – an urge, as it transpired, shared with a number of other gold rush towns.

Returning to the UK, I wanted to see what had been happening back here during that period. To my surprise and pleasure, I soon learned, as I journeyed around, that not only did this country's towns and cities contain a seemingly inexhaustible supply of public art galleries, but that many of the collections they owned were very good indeed. I also learned, as I

attempted to shore up my overfull memory by buying catalogues to assist it, that few, if any, galleries had a catalogue and that those few that did, rarely had a good one.

The crisis came on a visit to Cambridge, accompanying one of my daughters to an interview. Being an Oxford man, Cambridge was a rather remote concept. A sign advising me to visit the Fitzwilliam Museum suggested I might while an hour or so away in a provincial Ashmolean. My Oxford arrogance was swiftly put to shame. The Fitzwilliam's collection of oil paintings is quite astonishing and stands, with every justification, as the fourth most visited gallery in the UK.

Humbled but exhilarated, I went to the Museum shop to buy the catalogue of the paintings I had marvelled at. To my amazement, there was none. The explanation for this, I was told, was that there was no market for such a product. That I could not believe and, drawing attention to myself by some banging and clapping, I asked the rather surprised visitors assembled in the shop whether they would buy such a catalogue if it were available. When a possible majority slowly raised their hands, I asked to be taken to the Curator. The conversation I then had with David Scrase led ultimately to the creation of the Public Catalogue Foundation.

It led also to Alan Borg (then Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum) and to Charles Saumarez-Smith (then Director of the National Portrait Gallery), both of whom became Founding Trustees. It led too, through Christopher Balfour, to Christies, initially for technical advice on the rapid production of catalogues, but subsequently to something more tangible – financial help.

From a fund-raising point of view there were two key problems in the model for the PCF. Whilst few doubted the need for the catalogues the Foundation aimed to produce, there was no evidence at all that the Foundation could produce them. We had yet to produce a single one. Worse, set up as a charity, there was no chance of an investor making a financial profit. We needed help from a source that not only saw the value to

the Nation of the project, but one that was also sufficiently public-spirited and committed to support for the Arts and to our National Heritage to convert that into hard cash. I again approached Christie's.

Having been a banker, I recognise a brave investment decision. Christie's decision to give us a substantial philanthropic loan at the very outset was a wonderful demonstration of corporate vision and public benefaction. Without that loan, the Foundation's first steps would have been timid and faltering and our road would have been longer and harder.

We have travelled quite a distance since that Fitzwilliam conversation. We launched the PCF in 2003. Twenty-one catalogues have now been published, amongst them catalogues of The Fitzwilliam (Cambridge), the Imperial War Museum, The Victoria and Albert Museum and the Government Art Collection. Nearly 25% of the country has been recorded – some 50,000 paintings and some 12,000 artists. Over 14 catalogues are currently in production. Our project-completion date is 2012, funds permitting.

Funds permitting too, the whole catalogue series should begin to be put on the internet starting in 2009. And we are hoping to begin a series of exhibitions from regional collections in London to raise national and visitor interest, within 12 months.

It is a wonderful project to be involved in. It generates pleasure and interest for an increasingly large number of people, from an increasingly wide audience. Probably the question we get asked most is: What is our greatest discovery? The answer is far bigger and more inspiring than the simple naming of a lost painting or two. It is the discovery that, despite the fractured ownership that currently bedevils it, what the PCF is cataloguing is not a series of county catalogues, but a National Collection: a truly magnificent and, to date, unrecognised part of this country's great heritage. For their share in this, Christies are due this country's gratitude and applause.

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