



Robert Wenley

Barber Institute of Fine Arts

Robert Wenley is the Acting Director of the Barber Institute of Fine Arts at the University of Birmingham, having joined in May 2010 as the Head of Collections and Learning. He was previously Curator of European Art, 1600–1800 and Acting Head of Research (Art) for Glasgow Museums (2003–10), and Curator of Sculpture and Works of Art at the Wallace Collection, London, where he worked from 1991 to 2003. He was a member of the editorial team for the *Sculpture Journal* (2000–2010), and a co-founder of the international French Bronze Study Group (1999). He has published extensively on sculpture, especially French bronzes, and on the history of collecting.

THE BARBER INSTITUTE OF FINE ARTS AT 80

The magnificent Barber Institute of Fine Arts at the University of Birmingham was founded by Lady Barber's Deed of Settlement on 13 December 1932. The Barber is marking the 80th anniversary of this momentous event with an ambitious series of exhibitions, loans and events through the ensuing 12 months and the publication of a richly illustrated commemorative book.

Today, the Barber possesses one of the most extraordinary collections of its size in the world, together with a splendid concert hall, and two well-stocked specialist libraries, all within one of the UK's finest Art Deco buildings. Intended "for the encouragement of art and music", and as a cultural resource for the benefit of staff as well as students across the campus, the Institute hosts both music-making and art of an international standard. The concert hall has witnessed performances by a who's who of musicians of global repute, while the art collection includes old master and modern paintings, works on paper, sculpture and decorative arts by many of the greatest European masters. It is the finest broadly representative public collection of European fine art assembled during the 20th century.

WHO WAS LADY BARBER AND WHY AND HOW WAS HER EPONYMOUS INSTITUTE FOUNDED AND DEVELOPED?

Martha Constance Hattie Onions was born in Worcestershire in 1869, the daughter of a prosperous bellows manufacturer, and was to enjoy a comfortable childhood including education at the prestigious Cheltenham Ladies' College. She proved herself to be a talented pianist and studied at the Royal Academy of Music in the 1880s. In 1893 she married (William) Henry Barber (1860–1927), a solicitor and very successful Birmingham property developer. He had brilliantly exploited the opportunities offered by the rapid growth of the city during the 1880s and 1890s to the extent that he was able to retire while still in his mid-30s. Shortly after their marriage, the couple moved, as tenants, to the house and prime estate of Culham Court near Henley-on-Thames.

Lady Barber's contribution to both house and garden during their occupancy was substantial. Her most significant addition to the exterior was a large and fashionable alpine rock garden, constructed from huge boulders of Derbyshire stone and planted with the labour of 16 gardeners. It was described by *The Times* in 1933 as "one of the best in England" and was a source of great pride to its creator. To the interior, it was largely she (it would seem) who was responsible for the selection of many if not all of the works of art that filled its elegant Georgian state rooms. Outstanding among these was a small group of sometimes very fine 16th to 18th century Flemish and French tapestries, which presumably were acquired during the earlier years of their occupancy. In addition there was a rare English 'Sheldon' tapestry cushion cover of c.1600, bought in the early 1920s, and a superb set of 17th century English crewel-work bed-hangings, which the Barbers chose to display prominently on the walls of their drawing room. Lady Barber's passion for textiles extended to historic and modern European lace, and she accumulated an important collection of several dozen items.



The Barber Institute
of Fine Arts

But the most remarkable feature at Culham, and one in which Lady Barber certainly played the major role, was the picture collection. Despite their wealth (Sir Henry, knighted in 1924, was worth over £275,000 at his death in 1927), the only old master or modern painting of note that they acquired was *The Peacock Feather*, a study of a Neapolitan boy by Antonio Mancini, bought at a charity auction in 1916. This they relegated to the staircase at Culham, while the principal ground floor rooms (dining room, drawing room, billiard room, morning room, study and hall) were lined with recent portraits – exclusively of Lady Barber herself. Between 1914 and 1923 more than 20 portraits were commissioned from the obscure Belgian artist Nestor Cambier (1879–1957), representing Lady Barber in a bewildering variety of poses, costumes, formats and styles. These sometimes emulated the manner of fashionable contemporary society portraitists like de László and Lavery, and sometimes that of historic masters like Gainsborough and Van Dyck. Cambier, who

effectively served as court painter to Lady Barber and resided at Culham for long periods, setting up his studio in the main drawing room, was evidently a compliant artist and later, after her husband's early death, an important confidant for her.

The portraits are surely evidence of the childless Lady Barber's wish to perpetuate some part of herself, and the founding of the Barber Institute would appear to be in part a comparable action to preserve her name and that of her late husband. Negotiations with the senior officers of the University of Birmingham, specifically the Pro-Chancellor, Sir Gilbert Barling, who happened to be her cousin, and the Vice-Chancellor, Sir Charles Grant Robertson, had begun soon after Sir Henry's death and culminated in the 1932 agreement. This was made shortly after she sent a letter to them explaining that "My husband and I always shared the wish that we might build, equip and endow, and present to the University, such building or buildings, as would create a nucleus for an Art Museum or Gallery, and so form an Art Centre for the University; – and to be incorporated with this, I always wished to include a moderate sized Concert Room, specially adapted for Chamber Music and Recitals."

What made Lady Barber's philanthropic initiative distinct from similar earlier or contemporary bequests that founded art institutes, such as the Whitworth in Manchester, the Courtauld in London, the Clark in Williamstown, Massachusetts and the Speed in Louisville, Kentucky was the combination of higher education with not just art but music as well. Also, while there was a modest founder's collection, the significant element of the gift was the one hundred thousand £1 shares in the successful company that Sir Henry had founded in Birmingham, the Town Properties Investment Corporation Ltd. It was the shares that generated the income to fund the building to house the new institute, and to buy paintings and works of art of "that standard of quality required by the National Gallery and the Wallace Collection", as Lady Barber stipulated.



Thomas Gainsborough (1727–1788)

The Harvest Wagon

about 1767

oil on canvas

120.5 x 144.7 cm.

The Barber Institute of Fine Arts (Inv. No. 46.8)

All images © The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham

A relationship between the University and the Barbers first emerged in 1922 when the Solicitor's Act passed that year included the requirement that articled clerks should attend at least one year at a university. Birmingham took up the challenge by founding a Department of Law, and its Chair was generously endowed by Sir Henry Barber, who became a Life Governor of the University. The key figure here was the Vice-Chancellor Grant Robertson who, throughout his eighteen-year term of office, stressed the importance of the arts.

The University of Birmingham would be "the first of the modern universities to give effective expression to the claim of the Fine Arts ... [as] ... an academic discipline and an indispensable element in humane and liberal studies". He found his perfect patron in Lady Barber, who

gave him the means to turn his vision into reality. Her terms were that "the income (approximately £12,000 a year; equivalent to about £750,000 in 2012) may not be applied to the general purposes of the University". It would, rather, be used to construct an institute of fine arts and music, and to endow the chairs of a Professor of Music and a Professor of Fine Art, who would also be the gallery's director. The continuing income was to be reserved to pay for the acquisition of an art collection.

Within five months of making her original offer, Lady Barber was dead. Grant Robertson was named as one of her executors, and soon appointed as architect Robert Atkinson, a distinguished practitioner of Art Deco architecture with offices in Manchester Square, London, a few doors from the Wallace Collection. He also helped appoint the flamboyant Irishman Thomas Bodkin as the first Barber director-professor, and together Bodkin and Atkinson travelled across northern Europe to visit and learn from the best of modern museum architecture and display. The result was an Art Deco masterpiece with a concert hall and galleries that have won plaudits ever since the building was formally opened by Queen Mary in July 1939.

In the four years between his appointment in March 1935 and the royal opening, Bodkin had acquired no less than 16 important paintings, about 40 works on paper and several sculptures and items of furniture and silver. He was able to exploit the very favourable market conditions following the Wall Street Crash of 1929 with a comparative fortune at his disposal – indeed, so large were his funds that there was a concern that they could distort the market. There were very few other major players at the time in the UK, with Bodkin's level of purchases perhaps exceeded only by the National Gallery's. Among the paintings he bought were several of what are now regarded as the Barber's greatest works, including masterpieces by Simone Martini, Cima, Poussin, Hals, Steen, Monet, Manet and Whistler. These were joined during and after the war by further key paintings by Giovanni Bellini, Botticelli, Rubens, Murillo, Gainsborough, Degas and Gauguin. There were major drawings by Rembrandt,



Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665)

Tancred and Erminia

about 1635

oil on canvas

75.5 x 99.7 cm.

The Barber Institute of Fine Arts (Inv. No. 38.9)

Van Dyck, Guardi, Ingres, Turner and Degas; and fine sculptures by Mauch, Fanelli, Susini, Barye and Rodin – as well as the splendid life-size bronze equestrian group of George I from the workshop of John Nost the Elder that was brought back from Bodkin's native Dublin in 1937 at the bargain price of £500. It now has pride of place in the forecourt of the Barber building, the earliest monument in Birmingham. Bodkin expended about £20,000 *per annum* on average during his period as Director (1935–52), although in 1946 he spent £20,475 on Gainsborough's majestic *Harvest Wagon* alone. He mostly bought from London dealers and never bargained once he had asked for their lowest price.

Bodkin was unique among the Barber's directors in acquiring non-Western works of art, including Chinese, Egyptian, Persian, Indian and West African objects, as well as classical and medieval sculptures and a very broad range of decorative arts. Evidently he felt it important to provide a generous and encompassing context for the core of the collection. His four successors to date (Ellis Waterhouse, 1952–70; Hamish Miles, 1970–90; Richard Verdi, 1990–2008; and Ann Sumner, 2008–12) have focused on filling gaps in this core group of paintings and works on paper, with only the very occasional foray into sculpture. As prices rose sharply from the late 1940s, the pace of acquisitions slowed considerably even within this more limited field. While later purchases have included outstanding paintings by Cosimo Rosselli, Jacopo Bassano, Claude, Van Dyck, Rossetti, Vigée-Lebrun, Van Gogh, Derain, Léger and Magritte, and a magnificent bust of Alexander Pope by Roubiliac, major additions now come along once every few years as opposed to the five or six annually under Bodkin. Moreover, whereas the Henry Barber Trust originally and for the first few decades funded purchases outright for the Barber Institute, by the 1980s this was no longer tenable. In recent years, a range of additional external sources has always been required to help finance an increasingly large proportion of any important purchase. To date, the Barber has benefited from just one acquisition via the Acceptance in Lieu scheme. This is Renoir's charming *Young Woman Seated* (or '*La Pensée*') of about 1876–77, a study of a favoured professional model, Nini Lopez, which was allocated to the Barber in 1984. This necessitated an alteration to the original terms of the Deed since gifts had been excluded. It is very much to be hoped that the Barber will find further success with this scheme since it is now its best chance of filling the really major (i.e. expensive) holes in its collection, which otherwise would be beyond its range. This is particularly the case with 20th century paintings and sculpture, where the holdings are comparatively weak, a reflection of Lady Barber's founding stipulation that works of art of a date later than 1899 were to be excluded from the Barber.

This very limiting condition, so unfortunate for a major teaching collection, was also overturned, in 1967, although in this case the Trustees attempted to respect her wishes by imposing another restriction confining acquisitions to works at least 30 years old at time of purchase. The net result of these terms is an almost complete absence of works of art post-1920, and good examples by the major masters of the early to mid-20th century, though a high priority, are now mostly well beyond range. While the Barber now benefits from generous loans from public and private collections in respect of earlier periods (at the time of writing the Barber displays on loan paintings by Garofalo, Jacopo Bassano, Abraham Janssen, Champagne, Lely and Wright of Derby), there continues to be a dearth of mid-20th century works, with the exception of a small Howard Hodgkin. As with the AIL allocations, it is fervently to be hoped that more high quality loans or gifts will come the Barber's way, to help round out what is – with only around 150 paintings – already an extraordinarily and intensely rich collection.

The programme for the 80th anniversary year is exceptionally full and excitingly diverse. It kicks off appropriately enough with *Portrait of a Lady* (14 December 2012 to 24 February 2013), a special display on the life and passions of Lady Barber. This will provide a chance to see *some* of the (in)famous Cambier portraits of her, together with highlights from her personal collection of lace and textiles, which is also rarely displayed. Running alongside that will be a display on Atkinson and the Barber building. February 2013 will see the opening of *Close to the Heart* (1 February to 5 May 2013), an exhibition of around 50 portrait miniatures from two celebrated private UK collections, which will feature examples by many of the major 17th to 19th century British exponents of this most intimate of art forms. At this time we will also co-launch with Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery *New Art West Midlands* (8 March to 19 May 2013), a new Arts Council-funded initiative to display the best work by recent graduates from local fine art schools in a scheme that we hope will help young artists from the region develop their careers.

A second wave of exhibitions and loans will break in May/June 2013. This will include a loan show from the National Portrait Gallery of 20th century portrait drawings (June to August 2013), co-curated by some of our postgraduate MA students, and forms the second of a three-year academic partnership with the London gallery. Marking Lady Barber's birthday on 16 May will be the opening of a series of high-profile loans at the Barber of European portraits under the umbrella title of *About Face* (to 1 September 2013). Among these will be about a dozen 17th century portrait miniatures and drawings from the Royal Collection, which will help contextualise our own small but remarkable holdings in this area, and Sir Peter Lely's splendid *The Concert* from the Courtauld Institute, lent in exchange for our Gauguin, *Bathers at Tahiti*, once owned by Samuel Courtauld. Even more prestigious will be four masterworks from the National Gallery, London, by Lucas van Leyden, Rembrandt, Goya and Cézanne, which in each case we will pair with a major portrait from our own holdings across our four galleries, thereby creating some interesting dialogues and a narrative of the development of European portraiture while also benchmarking our collections very directly with one of the models directly expressed by Lady Barber. To the other, the Wallace Collection (which does not permit loans out), we will be lending a small group of our very finest sculptures and works of art. Perhaps the culmination of our programme will be the loan to the National Gallery, London between May and September 2013 of our first 12 paintings acquisitions, to commemorate the fact that they were all sent to London in the 1930s for storage or display while the Barber was being constructed. This will provide a brilliant showcase for the Barber in the capital and, we hope, convey its strengths and fascinating history to a large and appreciative international audience.

All these loans and displays, together with yet others on a smaller scale, to say nothing of a very lively public programme of study days, lectures, talks, workshops and other events, will undoubtedly raise the profile of the Barber Institute during its 80th anniversary. These will be further complemented by a freshly researched multi-authored anniversary publication, *Foundations of a Collection* (Scala Publishers Ltd, December 2012), which will explore for the first time the conception, birth and formative years of the Barber (and on which this essay draws shamelessly). These opportunities to promote the Barber we hope will bring significant benefits as we look to raise funds for a major redevelopment of the building, the most substantial since it opened in 1939. Scheduled to take place in 2016–17, the project will finally equip the Institute with the world-class visitor and collection facilities to match its world-class works of art. With not only a new director, but also new Barber Professor of Music and new Head of Department of History of Art all starting within a few months of each other in late 2012/early 2013, this is undoubtedly a critical moment in the Barber's history.

Robert Wenley
Barber Institute of Fine Arts