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Recovering Robert Ross: Criticism, Commerce and Networking in the Edwardian Art World

Sophie Hatchwell

He discovered Aubrey Beardsley, was immensely interested in the Pre-Raphaelites, in early Italian paintings and ritual history, and beyond his own preferences gathered a wide knowledge and cultivated a scrupulous judgement.

D.S. MacColl, 1918¹

Robert Ross is remembered now chiefly as the friend of Oscar Wilde.

Margery Ross, 1952²

Ross's particular claim to a place in the hall of fame is neither as a journalist and writer, nor as a competent artistic administrator, but for his instinct for friendship.

Maureen Borland, 1990³

The quotations presented here sum up the level of discrepancy between contemporary and historical accounts of the writer, dealer, literary critic, editor and art-historian Robert Baldwin Ross (1869-1918). A prominent and well-respected figure in the Edwardian art world, Ross remains largely overlooked in art-historical literature, which continues to favour critics who fit easily into modernist-orientated narratives, notably Ross's friend Roger Fry (1866-1934), critic, theorist, artist and touch-stone for most historical assessments of early twentieth century British art writing. This chapter aims to reposition Ross within a revisionist account of the Edwardian period, acknowledging the importance of his contribution to the promotion of English art at the start of the twentieth century.

Thus far, Ross has been associated primarily with the work of Oscar Wilde, for whom he served as literary executor. His on-going affiliation with nineteenth-century aestheticism (such as that of Wilde), coupled with his untimely death in 1918, has made him an easy figure for art historians to ignore or misjudge. As Margery Ross presciently noted in 1952, most studies have viewed him almost exclusively as simply the friend and supporter of Wilde.⁴ As his

¹ D.S. MacColl, 'Robert Ross', *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, 33:189 (December 1918), 232.

² Margery Ross, *Robert Ross, Friend of Friends* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1952), 9.

³ Maureen Borland, *Wilde's Devoted Friend, a life of Robert Ross 1869-1918* (Oxford: Lennard Publishing, 1990), 15.

⁴ Ross met Wilde in 1886, likely through his brother Alex, a literary critic. From the late 1880s, he became part of Wilde's circle, and following a brief attendance at King's College Cambridge, embarked on a career in journalism. Beginning with the *Scots Observer*, he contributed literary criticism to a number of papers and

principal biographer Maureen Borland indicates, his ‘instinct for friendship’, his personal relationships and involvement in numerous social circles have become his defining feature, overshadowing his professional activities and leading to his characterisation as an amateur rather than a professional in the arts.⁵ Due to his relationship with Wilde, Ross has often been associated with the culture of the late nineteenth century and excluded from art-historical surveys of the twentieth century. Where he does appear, as in S. K. Tillyard’s *The Impact of Modernism* (1988), he is presented as a conservative and out-dated Aesthete, at odds with developing Modernist tendencies.⁶ In this sense, his historical reputation aligns with that of other overlooked Edwardian artists and writers, whose divergence from the subsequent modernist/formalist canon (epitomised by Fry’s seminal 1910 Post-Impressionist exhibition, or by the Vorticist art of Wyndham Lewis) places them firmly (and often erroneously) within an outmoded post-Victorian tradition.⁷ Such modernist-focused approaches, however, neglect to address a range of important art-historical issues relating to the formation of the modern art market, the role of social networks, and the simultaneous developments of varied critical approaches to the viewing experience.

This chapter will argue that Ross’s contribution to critical and commercial developments, the variety of his activities, and his wide network of contacts, make him the ideal point of focus for an investigation into the promotional networks of contemporary English art of the Edwardian period. I contend that his contribution to the promotion of such art was effected in two ways: practically, through his dealing practice, and rhetorically, through his art criticism. In the former case, I shall demonstrate how his idiosyncratic utilisation of social networks directly supported the work of emerging English artists. In the latter, I show how he outlined a complementary theory of aesthetic experience based on sensory engagement. I do not suggest that Ross’s critical approach became dominant, rather that it contributed to the general atmosphere of debate and experimentation common to Edwardian art writing. I start by assessing his contribution to critical practice and aesthetic debate, moving on to outline his commercial innovations and support for emerging artists at the Carfax & Co. dealership and gallery in London. I conclude by considering his professional relationship with Roger Fry,

journals and became immersed in the literary and artistic circles of London, developing important friendships with writers such as Edmund Gosse and artists such as Aubrey Beardsley, M Ross, 1952.

⁵ Borland, 1990.

⁶ SK Tillyard, *The Impact of Modernism 1900-1920: Early Modernism and the Arts and Crafts Movement in Edwardian England* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 91-99; 119-20

⁷ Along with artists such as Charles Conder and William Nicholson, for example.

using newly uncovered historical sources to reveal some of the alternative, non-formalist networks that ran through Edwardian art practice.

Reclaiming Ross as a subject of art-historical enquiry follows the aims of recent surveys and this volume in particular, in providing a more balanced and inclusive view of Edwardian culture.⁸ Ross's connections with such a wide range of art professionals serve to challenge the traditional boundaries of 'Victorian' and 'Modern' (and more widely, the usefulness of periodization as a tool for art-historical analysis). Barbara Pezzini has demonstrated how his commercial and critical activities provide an insight into the 'ethical and social aspects' of connoisseurship at the start of the twentieth century.⁹ Similarly, I argue that while his art criticism shows a clear overlap of ideas and practices from the nineteenth century – including the work of Wilde and Walter Pater – his activities as a whole are suggestive of a distinct approach which was particular to the Edwardian art world: an eclecticism born of a pragmatic response to economic and cultural shifts. Ross's eclecticism provides a crucial insight into the relationships between criticism, networking and commercial activities. As a polymath within the arts, Ross profited from the ways in which such a characterisation blurred the boundaries between the professional and non-professional, and took advantage of the commercial and critical opportunities afforded by the operations of dynamic and influential social networks.

Sensuous and Aesthetic Aspiration

As D. S. MacColl's 1918 tribute indicates, Ross held a prominent position in artistic circles during the Edwardian era, a period in which the art world underwent a number of significant changes. Some staples of the late-Victorian period remained: the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society continued its operations, and the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition remained popular with the public and general press alike.¹⁰ At the same time, however, a number of influential critics, dealers and artists (Ross among them) became increasingly engaged with modern stylistic developments, new display practices, and new exhibition venues, supported by the rise of new dealer-galleries, as discussed in recent studies by Pamela Fletcher, Anne

⁸ See, for example, Morna O'Neill and Michael Hatt (eds) *The Edwardian Sense* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010); the Special Issue of *Visual Culture in Britain*, ed. Andrew Stephenson, 'Edwardian Art and its Legacies', 14:1 (2013)

⁹ See Barbara Pezzini, 'The Value and Price of the Renaissance: Robert Ross and the Satire of Connoisseurship' (publication forthcoming). I would like to thank Barbara for generously sharing her research.

¹⁰ See Pamela Fletcher, 'Narrative Painting and Visual Gossip at the Early Twentieth Century RA', *Oxford Art Journal*, 32:2 (2009), 243-262 and Wendy Kaplan (ed.) *The Arts and Crafts Movement in Europe and America: Design for the Modern World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004).

Helmreich and Barbara Pezzini.¹¹ The turn of the century also saw a generational shift as the old Victorian vanguard passed away (William Morris in 1896, Edward Burne-Jones in 1898, John Ruskin in 1900, James McNeill Whistler in 1903 and George Frederic Watts in 1904), and a new generation of artists assembled in London, including a number of graduates of Slade School of art (Augustus John, William Orpen, Spencer Gore, and later CWR Nevinson), along with artists working outside official institutions (Walter Sickert, William Rothenstein, Charles Conder, Max Beerbohm, Jacob Epstein). These artists were connected by loose and fluctuating networks, which offered them the means and opportunity to promote their work along social and commercial lines. As a member of the same social circles, Ross was equally able to take advantage of the promotional opportunities they afforded, and to engage in debate with fellow critics and writers.

Ross fostered a vast knowledge and experience of both contemporary and historic artistic practice. As manager of Carfax and Co., a small commercial gallery, from c.1900-1908, he became a noted picture dealer specialising in British art. He was a well-regarded art critic, writing for *The Burlington Magazine*, *The Academy*, and *The Morning Post*, where he was a regular correspondent from 1908-1912. In the latter role, he produced articles covering a breadth of art-historical topics, from the market for old masters to public statuary to new exhibitions by artists such as Roger Fry.¹² This was complimented by scholarly articles for *The Burlington Magazine* on art by William Blake, Aubrey Beardsley and Dante Gabriel Rossetti.¹³ Later, he was appointed Valuer of Pictures and Drawings for the Inland Revenue and also held advisory positions at the Johannesburg Art Gallery and the National Gallery of Victoria before his death in 1918. Throughout this period he was an active member of a number of committees and societies for the promotion of the arts, notably a founding member and executive of the Contemporary Arts Society in 1910 and the British War Memorials Committee in 1918. Such multi-faceted activity was characteristic of the Edwardian art world, which thrived on the work of individuals who assumed multiple roles. Other examples include Roger Fry, an artist, critic, editor, curator and connoisseur; Walter Sickert, an artist, critic and

¹¹ See Pamela Fletcher and Ann Helmreich (eds.) *The Rise of the Modern Art Market in London 1850-1930* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2011) and Barbara Pezzini, 'InterNational art: the London 'old-masters' market and modern British painting (1900-1914)' in *Art Crossing Borders: the Birth of an Integrated Art Market in the Age of Nation States* (Europe, c. 1780-1914), (Bril, forthcoming, 2015).

¹² See Ross in *The Morning Post* (12 January 1909), (3 September 1909) and (23 March 1909) respectively.

¹³ For example, Ross, 1906, 150-167; 'Rossetti, An Observation' in *The Burlington Magazine*, 13:62 (May 1908), 116-119; and *Aubrey Beardsley* (London: John Lane, 1909).

committee-man; and D. S. MacColl, an artist, critic, committee-man and campaigner.¹⁴ These Edwardian ‘polymaths’ – examples of whom can be seen throughout this collection of essays – benefited from the equivocal professional status of roles such the art critic, and the relative interconnectedness of the London art world, allowing them to engage profitably in a greater variety of activities.

Ross’s work for *The Morning Post*, borne partly of his reputation as a knowledgeable dealer, provided the ideal opportunity for public intervention in the art world. He began as the paper’s art critic in July 1908, following an invitation from the editor, Fabian Ware.¹⁵ His theoretical approach was quickly established: writing in December 1908 in response to an article by Walter Sickert, he defined painting as a ‘visual expression of intellectual, sensuous, or aesthetic aspiration’.¹⁶ Soon after, writing in response to a lecture by William Rothenstein in March 1909, he defined the role of the critic as ‘reveal[ing] the misunderstood artist to the public’, just as ‘the artists [*sic*] reveals newly-found forms of beauty’.¹⁷ These two statements and the articles from which they are taken indicate the dual tenets of Ross’s aesthetic: the centrality of beauty in art, and the desire to present art as accessible and enjoyable to a wide audience of mixed ability. They also show two key characteristics of Ross’s approach: his practice of responding directly to the words of other critics (Sickert’s article, Rothenstein’s lecture), and his belief in the public’s capability to appreciate art. In the latter case, he differed both from his Edwardian contemporaries and his Victorian predecessors.

In his assessment of painting, Ross focuses, with subjectivity and intuition, on the processes of appreciation. Clearly influenced by the ‘art for art’s sake’ traditions of earlier decades, he rejected the systematic analysis favoured by the ‘New Art Critics’ such as D. S. MacColl and George Moore, concentrating instead on the sensory experience provoked by paintings and art objects, specifically the relationship between beauty and pleasure.¹⁸ In this sense, he diverges

¹⁴ For a wider discussion of such figures see Barbara Pezzini, ‘The Burlington Magazine, The Burlington Gazette and the The Connoisseur: the Art Periodical and the Market for Old Master Paintings in Edwardian London’, *Visual Resources*, 29 (September 2013): pp.154-183’ and Samuel Shaw, ‘Scarcely a scholar’: William Rothenstein and the Artist as Art-writer in English Periodicals, ca.1890–1910, *Visual Resources*, 31 (April 2015) p.50-51

¹⁵ Letter from Ware to Ross (31 July 1908), in M Ross, 1952, 150.

¹⁶ Ross ‘Art and Artists’ in *The Morning Post* (7 December 1908)

¹⁷ Ross, ‘Art and Artists’, *The Morning Post* (7 December 1908), 2; (23 March 1909), 4. Ross is responding to Sickert’s ‘A New Life of Whistler’, *Fortnightly Review* (December 1908) and Rothenstein’s Cambridge lecture ‘A Basis for the Appreciation of Works of Art’.

¹⁸ Anna Greutzner Robins has identified the ‘New Art Critics’ as Walter Sickert, DS MacColl, RAM Stevenson and George Moore: critics united by their support for impressionism, and focus on material and technique over subject matter; see *A Fragile Modernism: Whistler and His Impressionist Followers* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007).

from contemporary critics such as Sickert, who drew heavily on the New Art tradition.¹⁹ Ross's use of the term 'aesthetic' connotes both the philosophical concept of perception, and the temperament of the Aesthetic Movement of the late-nineteenth century. The influence of Wilde and Walter Pater is evident in his pre-occupation with beauty and pleasure, his concern with sensory (and sensuous) experience: that for Ross, art is in part 'sensuous aspiration'. For Wilde, a personal response, a 'recognition of the primary importance of the sensuous element in art', was wholly centred on the perception of beauty.²⁰ Throughout his critical writing, Ross frequently referred to the ideas of both Wilde and Pater, and the idea that occurred most often was that of Pater's 'contact with "comely things"'.²¹ In championing the need to be surrounded by or in contact with beautiful objects, Ross follows the Wildean notion that 'right ideas concerning [design] can only be obtained by those who have been accustomed to rooms that are beautiful and colours that are satisfying.'²² Wilde's expanding preoccupation with beauty included conditions of synaesthesia, incorporating the idea that 'the true designer is [...] he who designs in colour, creates in colour, thinks in colour'.²³ Visual pleasure is presented as analogous to aural pleasure, with Wilde praising the artists James McNeill Whistler and Albert Moore for 'the effect of their work being like the effect given to us by music.' A sensory aesthetic based on a synthetic model of experience emerges through repeated reference to tactile 'contact', analogies with music and other physical forms of sensory experience and the idea of 'sensuous pleasure'. Such experience is emotional and therefore more widely accessible than experiences based on knowledge of painterly practice (as advocated by Sickert and MacColl) or aesthetic theory (as suggested by Fry and central to a formalist approach).²⁴

Drawing on and developing this concept of synesthetic experience, Ross places value on sensuous pleasure as a valid response specifically because it does not require the viewer necessarily to be informed or intellectually engaged with the object. Here, he is not only diverging from the approach of his contemporaries, but also from Wilde and Pater, whose focus on sensory experience was more about combating moralist approaches to art (notably that of Ruskin), rather than striving for a form of appreciation available to the general public.

¹⁹ For an example, see Sickert 'The Language of Painting' in *Walter Sickert, Complete Writings of Art* ed. by Anna Greutzner Robins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 264-267.

²⁰ Wilde, 'L'Envoi' (1882), in *Art and Decoration: Being Extracts from Reviews and Miscellanies* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1920), 120. Wilde asserted that 'A picture has no meaning but its beauty.'

²¹ Ross, 'Art and Artists' in *The Morning Post* (21 August 1909).

²² Oscar Wilde, 'House decoration' (1882), in *Art and Decoration* (London: Methuen, 1920), 7.

²³ Wilde in 1920, 7.

²⁴ See Fry, 'An Essay in Aesthetics' in *Vision and Design* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1920), 11-25.

Ross's oeuvre responds to this dichotomy by presenting two conjoining forms of experience: one is available to an 'informed viewer' ('intellectual'/ 'aesthetic' appreciation), the other comprises subjective enjoyment available to the 'uninformed' and centred on pleasure derived from contact with beautiful objects ('sensuous' appreciation). This alternative form of experience, as he outlined when discussing the work of William Blake, is based on the idea that 'a natural perception, a taste [...] is inherent in many people without education or cultivation', and centred on sensory responses to beauty.²⁵ With such assertions, Ross was championing a democratic form of vision that challenged the predominant views of critics and artists, such as Sickert and MacColl, who advocated informed appreciation based on technical knowledge of the subject and restricted to the select few.²⁶

This aesthetic approach developed by Ross clearly owes a large debt to nineteenth-century tradition. In effect his criticism continued Aesthetic debates about the nature of artistic expression and its reception.²⁷ By referencing the approach of his nineteenth-century forbears, Ross was able to re-fashion their arguments for a post *fin-de-siècle* environment. He drew on the spirit and tone of the public disputes between Whistler, Ruskin and Wilde, whose open disagreements and 'acrimonious correspondence' raised and developed the core issues of critical authority, the nature of aesthetic experience, and the theoretical restriction of access to art appreciation.²⁸ Rejecting the elitism of Wilde and the mysticism of Whistler (the latter, for example, evident in Whistler's characterisation of the artist as a 'dreamer apart'), Ross developed a critical approach that considered the possibility of educating and engaging with the 'the general public'.²⁹ In doing so, he provided a counter-argument to his contemporaries, who, following the example of both New Art Criticism and aesthetic philosophy more generally, were developing increasingly materialist and formalist theories of art. A practical, materialist approach is evident, for instance, in the writing of Sickert, whose ideas about 'the language of painting' (to which Ross responded in *The Morning Post*) outline a theory of art based on the material components of painting.³⁰ The subsequent (and dominant) formalist approach is typified, meanwhile, by the writings of Roger Fry and Clive Bell, particularly the

²⁵ Ross, 'The Place of William Blake in English Art' in *The Burlington Magazine*, 9:39 (June 1906), 150.

²⁶ See, for example, Sickert, 1908 and DS MacColl, 'Art: Subject and Technique', *Spectator* (25 March 1893), 15-17.

²⁷ See the writings of Pater, Whistler and Wilde, for example.

²⁸ See Linda Merrill *A Pot of Paint: Aesthetics on Trial in Whistler v Ruskin* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992). Ruskin of course never corresponded with Whistler, but their conflict was publically and dramatically re-stated by Whistler in *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (1890).

²⁹ For a full discussion of this see Hatchwell, 'Collective Action, Individual Vision' (2015)

³⁰ See Sickert 'A New Life of Whistler' in Robins (2000), 178-188 and Ross in *The Morning Post* (7 December 1908)

latter's concept of 'significant form'.³¹ Placing Ross's writing alongside that of his contemporaries illuminates the variety of critical views that co-existed during the Edwardian period. This challenges historical approaches which see formalism as dominant and recovers the correct critical context for assessing Ross's reception. .

Promoting English Art

Ross's criticism rarely focuses on analysis of specific art works. He was preoccupied instead with the nature of the viewing experience, and how this was affected by the work of artists, critics and galleries. Such discussion was often harnessed to a nationalist agenda, as Ross pursued his other concern: the promotion of British art, both past and present. The *fin-de-siècle* was marked by an increasing awareness of the relationship between art and national culture, a view no doubt informed by the rise of Imperialism over the late nineteenth century.³² Manipulating rather than sharing this growing interest in nationalism, Ross seized the opportunity to outline a canon of English art, something he attempted in his writings on Blake. Ross, like his contemporaries such as Fry, was specifically interested in the relationship between art and culture and the role of the state in promoting the arts.³³ In 1911, he gave a lecture on 'Past and Future Prospects for English Art' in Liverpool in which he directly addressed the question of state sponsorship.³⁴ His view of the relationship between art and society, as outlined in this lecture, corresponded with his interest in democratising access to art. Cumulatively these concepts demonstrate his broader vision: to encourage the development of a culture of artistic engagement. Crucially, his interest in widening access to art was accompanied by a concern for the economic problems evident in the contemporary art world, and he was vocal about the need to support young and emerging artists as opposed to engaging in the trade of old masters.³⁵ The economic basis of Ross's argument is central to his understanding of the relationship between art and society: while art should be made available to all for the enrichment of culture as a whole, economic conditions unavoidably restrict this

³¹ See Clive Bell, *Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1914).

³² See, for example, Grace Brockington (ed.), *Internationalism and the Arts in Britain and Europe at the Fin de Siècle* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009) and Michelle Facos and Sharon Hirsh (eds), *Art, Culture and National Identity in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

³³ See, for example, Roger Fry 'Art and Socialism' *Vision and Design*, 1920.

³⁴ Robert Ross, *Past and Future Prospects for English Art* (Liverpool: Sandon Studios Society, 1911).

³⁵ See Ross, 'Art and Artists' in *The Morning Post* (12 January 1909).

process. He cited the Arts and Crafts movement as an example of how a collective approach to commerce could facilitate the production and wide dissemination of accessible art.

Yet none could deny the excellence of the work performed by individual members of the Arts and Crafts Society and the enormous benefit that may derive from their collectivism in the future. They proved that useful objects need not necessarily be ugly or unsightly. They stimulated the desire for beauty, which is the next best thing to possessing it.³⁶

While he was critical of the material quality and high pricing of some Arts and Crafts products, that he credited them with stimulating 'the desire for beauty' is high praise: for Ross, beauty was the touch-stone of a democratic viewing practice. In the case of the Arts and Crafts movement, this practice was linked to co-operative activity, and suggested future economic benefit based on the precedent of their collective approach to exhibition, sale and promotion. Importantly, economic benefits are here aligned with aesthetic appreciation: the stimulation of 'the desire for beauty'. Ross united his dual interest in mercantile and critical promotion by focussing on a branch of art that, through its commercial dissemination, addressed itself to the sensory and emotional comprehension of the buying public. As such, he used the the commercially-aware, cooperative approach of the Arts and Crafts movement as an example for how the fine artists of the Edwardian period could adopt commercial tactics that responded to contemporary economic challenges, without detracting from the aesthetic integrity of their work.

Ross and Carfax: 'Disinterested' Commercialism

Ross's critical interest in English art and cooperative commercial practice stemmed from his work as a dealer and his practical promotion of emerging and independent English art at Carfax & Co. This gallery was a focal point for modern and 'decorative' art throughout the Edwardian period. Characterised by its co-founder William Rothenstein as a 'centre for art of a certain character', it held exhibitions of work by artists such as Charles Conder, William Rothenstein, Augustus John, Gwen John, John Singer Sargent, Roger Fry, Neville Lytton, DS

³⁶ Ross, 'Art and Artists', *The Morning Post* (21 August 1909).

MacColl, Charles Ricketts and Ambrose McEvoy, going on to become the commercial home of the Camden Town Group and its associates.³⁷ Carfax occupies an interesting place in the history of dealer-galleries in London. On the one hand, it belongs to the tradition of the newly-established commercial venues for art that appeared from the 1850s to the 1900s. As Pamela Fletcher has argued, these galleries were part of a new ‘network of spaces and associations that created the conditions for the reception of modern art in London’.³⁸ On the other hand, its distinctive character singles it out as a less-than-formal meeting point for the agents involved in the production and dissemination of the modern British art in which it specialised, its equivocal nature testament to the alternative commercial tactics common to the Edwardian era.

Samuel Shaw’s recent study of the gallery has explored its complicated approach to commerce, outlining the vagueness of its general character and practices in its early years. He argues that these can be seen in the very name of ‘Carfax’ (the precise origins of which remain unknown), which functions as an ‘identity created to deny an identity’.³⁹ The gallery was run initially with an ‘element of chaos’: evidence of an alternative agenda to provide not a traditional gallery experience but a ‘small and informal space where art and artists gathered and sometimes, when no one was looking, a bit of money changed hands’.⁴⁰ In fact, the boundaries between commercial and non-commercial practices blurred so greatly during Carfax’s formative years that it remains difficult to establish a clear sense of economic enterprise. The picture nonetheless changes in later years when, under the sole management of Arthur Clifton, the gallery became the main outlet for the Camden Town Group. I contend that it was during the intervening years of 1901-1908, under the management of Robert Ross, that definite commercial idiosyncrasies began to emerge. These tactics are most evident in two areas: advertisement, and Ross’s pragmatic use of a wide-ranging network of professional and social contacts.

³⁷ William Rothenstein, *Men and Memories vol. 2 1900-1922* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932), 343. For a discussion of Carfax and the Camden town group, see Samuel Shaw, ‘The Carfax Gallery and the Camden Town Group’ in Helena Bonett, Ysanne Holt, Jennifer Mundy (eds.), *The Camden Town Group in Context* (May 2012), <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/camden-town-group/samuel-shaw-the-carfax-gallery-and-the-camden-town-group-r1104371>, [accessed 15 August 2014].

³⁸ Pamela Fletcher ‘Shopping for art: the rise of the commercial art gallery, 1850-90s’ in Fletcher and Helmreich, *The Rise of the Modern Art Market in London 1850-1930* (2011), 47.

³⁹ Samuel Shaw, ‘The New Ideal Shop: founding the Carfax Gallery 1898-1902’ in the *British Art Journal*, 13:2 (September 2012), 38.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

A public portrayal of a consciously non-commercial attitude is evident at Carfax. In his art criticism, Ross expressed his dislike of the commercialism of the company's name with its inclusion of '& Co', which 'seem[s] to classify the work at once among solid, indestructible, dismal objects destined for a glass case on the side board.'⁴¹ There is an evident wariness of being seen to deal in 'dismal' popular commodities as opposed to serious art. This was reflected in William Rothenstein's aversion to referring to the dealership as a 'shop'.⁴² Accompanying this attitude was the construction of a physical gallery space that propagated a 'disinterested' form of experience through its intimate scale and focus on modern and decorative work. As discussed elsewhere, Carfax's initial home at Ryder Street consisted of a couple of small rooms which housed a rotating series of temporary exhibitions as well as some art on permanent display.⁴³ Visitors often included friends, artists and critics, and an atmosphere of informality prevailed. Pierre Bourdieu's assessment of the economic function of disinterestedness is particularly useful in unpicking this idiosyncratic approach to commercial display. He associates disinterestedness with both the 'pure', exclusive vision common to the 'isolated artist', and with the idea of 'the autonomy of art'.⁴⁴ Bourdieu asserts that art business is predicated on the practice of trade by negation, where value is accrued by a 'disavowal' of the 'economic'.⁴⁵ This 'refusal of the commercial' and associated portrayal of 'visibly disinterested behaviours' are shown to be tactics by which commercial capital is accrued.⁴⁶ These behaviours comprise 'a form of economic rationality, and in no way exclude their authors from [...] economic profit'.⁴⁷

The apparently 'disinterested' commercial approach at Carfax, therefore, was just a tactic, an acceptable aesthetic veil masking a pragmatic approach to business. This pragmatism was evident in Ross's behind-the-scenes activities. His clear awareness of the economic benefits of sound commercial practice aligns with the increasing professionalisation of the art world during the *fin de siècle*. As Julie Codell has argued, a slump in the art market towards the end of the nineteenth century led to the purposeful construction of an association between

⁴¹ Ross, 'Art and Artists', *The Morning Post* (28 September 1909).

⁴² Shaw, 2012, 38.

⁴³ See Pezzini, 2012; Shaw 2012; Hatchwell, 2015, pp. 171-176

⁴⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. by Randal Johnson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 34 and 39. The latter context is in line with Fry's use of the phrase in his 1909 'Essay in Aesthetics' see *Vision and Design* (London: Chatto and Windus 1920)

⁴⁵ Bourdieu, 1993, 75.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

professionalism and economic soundness.⁴⁸ New dealer-galleries, along with artists' exhibiting societies, aimed to regulate the art market by validating particular styles and practices. Although Ross publically pronounced his dislike of the populist associations of the phrase, he nonetheless recognised that the 'magic words' '& Co.' actually 'inspire confidence' in buyers and explicitly indicate the commercial validity of a dealership.⁴⁹ Under his management, Carfax became an increasingly professional venture. His tenure saw the introduction of advertising, through the use of product placement in the West End, and by traditional notices placed in the art press, notably in *The Year's Art* from 1903 onwards.⁵⁰ He also oversaw the first comprehensive stock takes and a more professional approach to book-keeping.⁵¹ Unlike Rothenstein, he had no problem referring to Carfax as a shop.⁵² Perhaps the most telling application of this term is *The Times*' reference to it as a 'little shop', a quaint description which acknowledges the commercial element of the gallery yet tacitly indicates the limits of its adoption of traditional economic practices.⁵³ Carfax under Ross's management struck a balance between projecting the 'disinterestedness' associated with 'art of certain character', and establishing a reputation as a professional and economically respectable venture. Networking was the key to this balance, and the prominence of this practice serves to foreground both the social focus of the gallery and its pragmatic approach to attracting committed patrons. As such the Carfax provides a useful illustration of a characteristically Edwardian approach to business: controlling the projected image to retain an emphasis on the cultural and social pleasures of viewing art while earnestly professionalising the commercial aspects of the business beyond the public gaze.

Social Networks

When Ross took over Carfax, he was able to build its social foundations, focusing on what Bourdieu has termed the 'softer, more discrete forms of "public relations"' in order to drive the business forward.⁵⁴ He was already closely associated with the group of friends involved in the gallery's founding (Rothenstein, Clifton, John Fothergill and their associates), having

⁴⁸ Julie Codell, *The Political Economy of Art: Making the Nation of Culture* (New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 2008).

⁴⁹ Ross, 1909.

⁵⁰ See *The Year's Art* (London: Virtue and Co., 1903, 1904 and 1905). In terms of product placement, Carfax lent art works to George Bernard Shaw for use in his play *The Doctors' Dilemma* in 1906.

⁵¹ See letters from Ross to Rothenstein in Borland, 1990, 82.

⁵² See Margery Ross, 1952, 172, where in reference to Carfax, Ross states 'I used to keep shop'.

⁵³ See the obituary for Arthur Clifton in *The Times* (7 October 1932), TGA 8712.

⁵⁴ Bourdieu in 1993, 77.

moved in the same circles with them during the 1890s.⁵⁵ He also brought in a variety of other contacts to aid him in selling and promotion.⁵⁶ The lack of financial records from the gallery makes it difficult to form a complete picture of Carfax's sales and range of customers. Notes in memoirs and occasional annotated sales catalogues do reveal that its circle of patrons, while relatively small, was also remarkably prestigious: for example, Ross names Sir William Eden, Lord Mayo and Lady Dilke as visitors to the gallery.⁵⁷ Eden, an amateur artist, had long-established links to many members of the London art world. He corresponded with Conder on the subject of his exhibitions, was friendly with George Moore who dedicated *Modern Painters* (1893) to him, and knew Sickert, who along with Max Beerbohm had visited Eden in his country home.⁵⁸ Borland has also identified Edward Marsh as another important patron. She suggests that Ross had met Marsh, a civil servant, through his friendship with Herbert Asquith.⁵⁹ Marsh was a 'prolific' collector of art and was advised in his acquisitions by Neville Lytton, a painter who went on to exhibit in one man shows at Carfax in 1904 and 1909.⁶⁰ Ross personally approached Marsh about certain sales, on one occasion offering him first refusal on the private sale of Herbert Horne's collection.⁶¹

Annotated sales catalogues from Conder's shows in 1899, 1900 and 1901 reveal that other customers included George Moore, Edmund Davis and the artist Arthur Blunt, along with Ross himself.⁶² As well as being regular social visitors, artists were also frequent patrons. Fred Brown of the New English Art Club, for example, purchased Sickert's *The Rag Fair* in 1899 at the suggestion of Rothenstein.⁶³ John Singer Sargent also bought a painting by Philip Wilson Steer at Carfax, a sale sufficiently newsworthy to prompt a report in *The Morning Post*.⁶⁴ The artists themselves benefitted from the gallery's utilisation of social networks.

⁵⁵ See Rothenstein, 1932.

⁵⁶ See Barbara Pezzini More Adey, the Carfax Gallery and 'The Burlington Magazine' in *The Burlington Magazine*, 153:1305 (November 2011), 806-814

⁵⁷ See letter from Ross to Conder (1902) in John Rothenstein, *The Life and Death of Conder* (London: Dent, 1938), 213. Lord Mayo, an Irish peer, was a fellow of the Royal Photographic Society, and Lady Dilke was an influential writer and art historian.

⁵⁸ For Eden's correspondence with Conder see John Rothenstein, 1938, 219.

⁵⁹ Borland, 1990, 90-91.

⁶⁰ For more on Marsh see Ysanne Holt, 'Eddie Marsh: a picture collector's "lust for possession"'. *Visual Culture in Britain*, 6 (2). (2005) pp. 125-137

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² See Tate Gallery Archive (hereafter TGA) 9121.8.

⁶³ Matthew Sturgis, *Walter Sickert, A Life* (London: Harper Collins, 2005), 268-9.

⁶⁴ See *The Years Art* 1903 advert for Carfax which quotes from *The Morning Post* (4 August 1902): 'Mr JS Sargent RA has just paid Mr Wilson Steer a high compliment by purchasing one of his pictures at the Carfax Gallery'.

Orpen's show in 1901 is a prime example of this, as it led directly to a commission for a family portrait for the Swintons', who were also notable friends of Sickert.⁶⁵

Private Dealing

One of the most significant aspects of Ross's career at Carfax is his use of social networking for the purposes of private commercial activity. Unpublished letters between Ross and Roger Fry in the archives of King's College, Cambridge tell the story of how the two men worked together to procure sales for the gallery outside of the regular exhibition rota, and often outside of the gallery itself. Given the absence of Carfax's financial records, these documents are important in understanding the nature of the business conducted at the gallery. They also offer an insight into the world of private sales and the ways in which dealerships conducted business around and outside of the sales ledger. In the first instance, a number of letters show that Ross regularly approached Fry for his connoisseurial skills. Around the time of Fry's one man show at the gallery, April-May 1903, Ross asked him to provide a 'probable attribution' for a work the gallery had sold.⁶⁶ Again, in an undated letter, he asked Fry to analyse twelve early Italian works for condition and attribution.⁶⁷ This was prompted by the brokerage of a private collection and he was eager 'to be able to tell the purchasers that I have submitted them to an expert'. This was to be done in a relatively underhand fashion: Ross, presumably wary of offending the seller, a 'well known collector', stated that 'I don't want the owner to know however that you are doing so. I am selling his things for him but I cannot guarantee his ascriptions'.⁶⁸

Ross also utilised Fry's knowledge of Italian art frequently for both exhibitions and acquisition. Fry was asked to advise on display and in 1902 assisted with the reframing and hanging of Piero di Cosimo's *The Battle of the Centaurs* (c.1500-1515 National Gallery), an important work and prestigious holding for the gallery.⁶⁹ Ross also took advantage of Fry's European contacts by commissioning him to purchase works for the dealership. In an undated letter from Venice, most likely written in 1902 during his travels in Italy, Fry wrote to Ross

⁶⁵ Bruce Arnold, *Orpen, Mirror to An Age* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981), 105. Sickert developed a close relationship with Mrs Swinton, having met her at a reception for Rodin given by Mrs Charles Hunter, following his return to London in 1905, see Sturgis, 2005, 347-359.

⁶⁶ Letter from Ross to Fry (30 April 1903), Papers of Roger Elliot Fry, King's College, Cambridge (hereafter KCC), REF/3/143/4. I would like to thank Kings College Archives and the estate of Roger Fry for their kind permission to quote from his unpublished correspondence.

⁶⁷ ND (24 February) KCC, REF/3/143/10.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ 26 May [1902] KCC, REF/3/143/11.

recommending a list of works for acquisition, and offered to carry out these purchases on behalf of the gallery.⁷⁰ All were Italian and included works by artists such as Pietro Longhi. He listed the given prices and his own estimates as to quality, attribution and real value. As with attributions, however, his involvement in acquisitions was not always straightforward or transparent. An undated letter records Ross's concern over the ownership of some works by Bellini, questioning whether Fry felt they should belong to Fry himself, to Carfax or 'some unknown'.⁷¹ Ross noted that from the point of view of Carfax, 'I would much prefer that we pretended the pictures were ours', as such an acquisition would evidently enhance the reputation of the gallery. However, he also states that, 'as amico de Fryo', a private sale would be personally more suitable. In the event of such a sale being agreed on, Ross would accept no commission, although 'if sold through Carfax that is a different thing'.⁷² Ross's willingness to conduct business along personal lines in this case perhaps results from his awareness of the commercial help Fry had given to the gallery on other occasions. Referring back to his dealings with Edward Marsh, it also seems to be part of wider policy of dealing pragmatically amid a select circle of patron-friends.

Fry's early association with Carfax paved the way for his later role as buyer for the Metropolitan Museum, and his subsequent commercial involvement with Post-Impressionism. A letter from Ross in 1901 indicates that Fry was, at times, taking on the role of unofficial dealer. In this case he was advising a wealthy American (nick-named by Ross 'the Golden Calf'), and escorting him around London's commercial galleries.⁷³ Ross asked him to bring the buyer to Carfax, where he could show him a Degas, some Constables and other works. The two men were apparently working together on this, as Ross had drawn an itinerary for Fry and the buyer incorporating studio visits to Carfax artists Augustus John, William Rothenstein, Fry himself and Philip Wilson Steer. Fry is urged 'not to press him with anything at Carfax' but to 'keep preference for Steer and Rothenstein [...] and make sure he buys one of your oils.' The mutual benefits are evident here, as Fry is encouraged to promote the sale of his own brand of art in order to please a patron who was to become 'a most valuable asset in the future'.⁷⁴ Ross would see material returns from garnering sales for his own artists, and a potential reputation boost for Carfax among wealthy American buyers. This is a prime example of Ross's practical approach to the promotion of English art. His

⁷⁰ Transcript of letter from Fry to Ross, ND, KCC, REF/11/34.

⁷¹ ND, KCC, REF/3/143/5.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ ND, KCC, REF/3/143/3.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

partnership with Fry demonstrates the manner in which he used his position in the social circles of some of the most important Edwardian critics and patrons as a basis for developing his aesthetic and economic agenda.

Dealers and Critics

As with sales and acquisitions, Ross recruited the services of friendly art critics to help promote Carfax and its artists. In doing so, he was implicating his gallery in what Cynthia and Harrison White have termed the ‘dealer-critic system’.⁷⁵ As Fletcher and Helmreich have stated, this system accounts for the ‘mutual dependence between the art market and the press’.⁷⁶ They have charted its development in Victorian England, and argue that ‘as the art market expanded and became less centred on the RA, the press played a visibly partisan role, with critics and journals acting as advocates for particular schools or artists’.⁷⁷ As the art press continued in this role throughout the Edwardian period, it is clear that Carfax benefited on multiple occasions from such promotional support. Pezzini has explored the relationship between More Adey, Ross’s partner at Carfax and Co., and *The Burlington Magazine* from 1908 onward and similar relationships existed under Ross’s tenure.⁷⁸ Letters from 1901 document the appeals made to MacColl, requesting his help in promoting the gallery through his role as art critic on the *Saturday Review*.⁷⁹ MacColl would have had a vested financial interest in providing the gallery with further advertisement as it represented him for his watercolours, later staging a one-man show of his work in April 1906. Max Beerbohm, his colleague at the *Saturday Review* likewise promoted the gallery in his articles, and like MacColl, shared a vested interest in the gallery, which represented him for his drawings and caricatures.⁸⁰ In addition to lobbying colleagues, Ross also utilised his personal connections:

⁷⁵ Harrison and Cynthia White, *Canvases and Careers: Institutional Change in the French Painting World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

⁷⁶ Fletcher and Helmreich, ‘The Periodical and the Art Market: Investigating the “Dealer-Critic system” in Victorian England’, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 41:4 (2008), 323.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ See Pezzini, 2011.

⁷⁹ See letter from Ross to Fry (8 December [1901]) KCC, REF/3/143/9. A one-man exhibition of his work was held in 1906.

⁸⁰ Max Beerbohm, ‘Mr Shaw’s Roderick Hudson’, *Saturday Review*, 102 (24 Nov 1906), 639-10. One-man exhibitions of Beerbohm’s work were held in 1901, 1904 and 1908.

Borland has noted Ross's appeals to Edmund Gosse, a writer and regular contributor to *The Times*, for help gaining press coverage for Carfax's activities.⁸¹

Ross would go on to embody the idea of the 'dealer-critic' in his move from Carfax to *The Morning Post*. At the gallery, however, in the years 1900 to 1905, the 'partisan role' of sympathetic critic was largely filled by Fry. Fry at that time was lecturing regularly on Italian art, as well as working as an art critic, first on *Pilot* in 1900, then *The Athenaeum* from 1901 and finally *The Burlington Magazine* from 1902, which he co-founded.⁸² Between the years 1900 and 1905, he reviewed at least nineteen exhibitions for Carfax.⁸³ His level of promotional activity was perhaps at its highest in 1902 when he reviewed six of the gallery's exhibitions. These reviews were largely favourable and provided an important source of public promotion and critical validation for the gallery. Letters between him and Ross reveal their mutual complicity in this arrangement. Ross wrote to thank him for favourable notices, as in the case of his reviews for 'Drawings by old masters at Carfax Gallery' (1902) and 'Aubrey Beardsley's Drawings' (1904).⁸⁴ He also wrote to encourage Fry to review shows, as in the case of the exhibition of '100 Caricatures by Max Beerbohm' (Nov 1901), where he stressed that 'it is important that you [...] could discuss them favourably or unfavourably as you liked'.⁸⁵

For the most part, Fry's articles function as exhibition reviews, advertising the dates, content, and location of the shows. In the case, however, of a *Burlington Magazine* article on 'Three Pictures in Tempera by William Blake', the promotional function of the piece is somewhat masked.⁸⁶ Timed to appear concurrently with the Carfax exhibition of Blake's work in March 1904, Fry's article at no point refers to the exhibition or to his involvement with the firm. However, one of the 'Pictures on Tempera' reproduced, *David and Bethsheeba* (c.1799-1800, Tate) was noted to be in the possession of Carfax. For Fry, a clear benefit from his relationship with Carfax was the access he gained to images and reproductions, which was a necessity for the heavily-illustrated *Burlington Magazine* in particular. His reviews for Carfax are also significant because they demonstrate that his interest in modern art pre-dated his 'discovery' of Post-Impressionism. The regularity and content of his articles on such

⁸¹ Borland, 1990, 83.

⁸² See Frances Spalding, *Roger Fry: Art and Life* (London: Granada, 1980).

⁸³ For a comprehensive list of Fry's critical reviews see Donald A Laing, *Roger Fry, An Annotated Bibliography of the Published Writings* (New York: Garland, 1979).

⁸⁴ KCC, REF/3/142/6 and REF/3/143/12.

⁸⁵ KCC, REF/3/143/9.

⁸⁶ *The Burlington Magazine* (March 1904), 204-11.

exhibitions reveals that his interest in new and progressive British art was ongoing from at least 1900. These reviews were not always simply favours rendered to the gallery: often they resulted, at least in part, from a genuine interest in the work on show and on occasion, exhibitions aligned with Fry's own scholarly practice. His involvement in the 1902 exhibition of Piero di Cosimo, for example, coincided with a lecture he gave on the artist.⁸⁷ Two of his reviews, 'Three Pictures in Tempera' and 'Aubrey Beardsley's Drawings' went on to be included, with minor edits, in his collection of essays *Vision and Design* in 1920.⁸⁸ The relationship between Carfax and *The Burlington Magazine* was not simply one way. Implicit promotion within its articles aided the gallery, validating its stock through association with a respected journal and connoisseur in a seemingly objective manner. As well as providing photographic reproductions for the journal, Ross also authored a number of articles, notably those on Blake and Rossetti, the former again corresponding with an exhibition at Carfax.⁸⁹ Ross's association with the journal continued long past his tenure at Carfax, and he contributed to it until his death in 1918. As both critic and dealer, he was able to provide authoritative and professional analyses of historical art, benefiting a journal aimed primarily at connoisseurs.

The significance of Ross's critical practice lies in his development of an aesthetic approach that placed a sensory appreciation of beauty at the centre of the viewing experience. His re-fashioning of nineteenth-century theory provided an (albeit historically overlooked) alternative that made room for the uninformed viewer, in contrast to the formalist and materialist approaches of his contemporaries. His art criticism, combined with his picture-dealing, aimed to widen the audience for English art. He was able to put theory into practice through his work at Carfax, a firm that supported a number of important emerging and independent British artists throughout the Edwardian period. He stressed the need also for additional economic support (both public and private) in fostering the development of an English artistic tradition.

While at the gallery, Ross pragmatically utilised his wide network of social and professional contacts to promote and sell work, building on the friendly basis of his connections to develop

⁸⁷ Archival records at King's College Cambridge, attached to a lecture by Fry on di Cosimo, date the lecture as c. 1902. See REF/1/75.

⁸⁸ For the Beardsley review, see *The Athenaeum* (5 November 1904), 627-8.

⁸⁹ In *The Burlington Magazine*, 9:39 (June 1906) and 13:62 (May 1908) respectively.

an informal and 'disinterested' form of commerce. This was manifested in his working relationship with Roger Fry at both Carfax and *The Burlington Magazine*. Such activity has wide art-historical significance. First, it is evidence of the trend towards co-operative action emerging in the independent art world during the Edwardian period, where seemingly disparate individuals or groups began to recognise the shared economic or cultural benefit of working collectively. Second, the level of this co-operation serves to break down the established delineation of the Edwardian art world along the lines of pre- and post-formalism, revealing the extent to which individuals with vastly different approaches to art and aesthetics found themselves aligned by shared commercial interests. Ross and Fry are prime examples, subsequently occupying opposing ends of the modernist spectrum (Aestheticism versus Formalism) yet at this early moment united in their desire to enhance the reputation of new English art.