Encouraging Visual Literacy

EARLY-VICTORIAN
STATE SPONSORSHIP OF THE ARTS AND THE GROWING NEED FOR EXPERT ART COMMENTARY

Early nineteenth-century Britain witnessed a revolution in state sponsorship of the arts. After decades of discussion, the National Gallery of London was finally founded in 1824—well after similar institutions developed in Italy, Austria, and France in the eighteenth century. While a permanent building for the National Gallery was being constructed in Trafalgar Square, a Select Committee on the State of Arts and Manufactures (1835–36) sought to support both academic painters and designers so that they could compete with their European counterparts. As a result of these hearings, the government created the first British schools of design, which provided art education to women and working-class artists.1 In addition to the National Gallery, another large building project encouraged government intervention. After the Houses of Parliament burned in 1834, an 1841 Royal Commission decided to adorn the new gothic building with large-scale fresco murals depicting English historical and literary themes. In a public and popular competition, prominent British artists sought the right to decorate the new Houses of Parliament.

Despite this unprecedented state and public interest, the arts remained defined by traditional class and gender roles. Though ostensibly a public venue, the National Gallery was not open when many in the working class...
could attend. Likewise, most of the artworks installed in the new Houses of Parliament were off-limits to the general public. Moreover, because public artworks were usually displayed in the early-Victorian period without any accompanying verbal information, they tended to alienate less educated viewers. The 1835–36 select committee hearings and the resulting schools of design betrayed both sexist and class-based ideologies. Most prominently, the select committee ignored the women artists and art commentators who were practicing during this time; not a single woman testified among the many artists, collectors, and other experts called as witnesses. Although the schools of design included women and those from the working class, they also segregated narrowly based on class and gender.

These class and gender biases notwithstanding, state sponsorship of the arts in the early-Victorian period created some very significant changes that fostered careers for both men and women. Most prominently, the government’s increasing advocacy of public venues, expertise in specific areas of the arts, and verbal mediation for visual art created a greater need for specialized art commentary. While some of the women writers whom I will discuss in this book had already begun their careers by the 1830s, they benefited from the greater emphasis on educating a broader public in the arts.

In discussing these developments, I complicate recent scholarship, which often argues that nineteenth-century art commentary simply repeats elitist notions from the eighteenth century. The committee’s recommendations—especially its injunction to provide written guidance for viewers within museums—marked a decisive turn from the eighteenth-century assumption that viewers could appreciate artworks without verbal direction. Because there was no centralized art authority such as that found in France, art institutions in Britain also tended to work against the use of the arts for social control. By challenging the primary art institution (the Royal Academy) and the traditional arbiter of taste (the aristocratic connoisseur), the committee fragmented what had already been a fairly decentralized British art world. During the Victorian period, art institutions proliferated in Britain, and the proper figure to judge art was widely debated. In many respects, the art critic was a perfect solution to the problem of providing art education without the controlling bureaucracy that so many Victorians feared. Because art critics varied widely in the instruction that they provided, they could not be accused of creating what liberal thinkers such as John Stuart Mill most feared about state centralization: narrowness of opinion.

The 1835–36 parliamentary hearings, dominated by progressive ideas and liberal Members of Parliament, helped diffuse institutional control
over the arts by attacking such authorities as the government and the Royal Academy. Benthamite William Ewart of Liverpool, well-known for his previous challenges to the Royal Academy, the Bank of England, and the East India Company, created and chaired the committee (King 6). In a letter to the history painter Benjamin Robert Haydon (October 2, 1836), Ewart informed him that the report was “as liberal a one as it was possible for me to draw under the control of the Committee” (qtd. in Bell 57). In reality, the 1836 committee seems to have provided little “control” over Ewart’s liberal tendencies. The 1835 committee had at least sixteen radicals out of forty-eight members; the 1836 committee of fifteen contained nine radicals (King 6). As Parliament became much less radical in subsequent years, many of the specific recommendations proposed by the committee were not fully instituted. Still, the ideas expressed in these hearings had a profound effect on the Victorian art world.

Working within an ideological framework of classical liberalism, the committee sought solutions to the problems that plagued British artistic production but argued for as little government involvement as possible. Thus, in principle, the committee agreed with J. S. Mill’s representative warning that “every departure from the laissez-faire principle, unless required by some great good, is a certain evil” (qtd. in Green 253). In its 1836 report, the committee clearly believed that the development of the arts was a “great good” and thus worth limited government intervention: “the interposition of the Government should not extend to interference; it should aim at the development and extension of art; but it should neither control its action nor force its cultivation” (v). Witnesses and committee members complained that prior government interference—in the form of taxes on bricks, plate glass, and paper (which was said to depress periodicals on the arts)—had impeded the competitiveness of British design. The 1836 report argued that the market would supply most of the stimulus for improving the arts, but the government should provide financial assistance when absolutely necessary (for example, to support large history paintings or very expensive illustrated books). In order to avoid too much control by the national government, the 1835–36 committee entrusted the development of a network of art schools to local governments. Local control over schools was the norm in British education—not just in art instruction—until the late-Victorian period.

Despite endorsing a limited and decentralized form of government involvement to encourage the arts, the committee also demonstrated its belief in more purely free-market principles. According to the committee’s 1836 report:
From the highest branches of poetical design down to the lowest connexion between design and manufactures, the Arts have received little encouragement in this country. . . . In many despotic countries far more development has been given to genius; and greater encouragement to industry, by a more liberal diffusion of the enlightening influence of the Arts. (iii, emphasis mine)

Britain, a democratic and industrialized country, had not accomplished what countries with less-developed political and economic systems (i.e., autocratic, not free-market) had managed. The diffusion of the “enlightening influence of the Arts” would improve the nation’s economy and cultural standing by elevating both the supply of and demand for British products. Workers would learn to create better-designed products while consumers would begin to appreciate this craftsmanship.

The liberal members of the 1835–36 select committee were surprisingly unequivocal about the importance and preferred method of art education. Ewart, his colleagues, and most of the witnesses called before the committee were well convinced that the free distribution of such knowledge would improve workers’ contributions to society. The paternalism of this view was inherited from older liberal conceptions of education. Describing the benefits of education more generally, Smith’s Wealth of Nations argues that popular education increases the morality and productivity of workers, in large part because they learn not to challenge the government: “An instructed and intelligent people . . . are always more decent and orderly than an ignorant one” (qtd. in Green 249). Indeed, liberal thought often envisioned workers as children who needed education before they could participate in the political system, participation that was often delayed indefinitely (Mehta 59). Accordingly, some witnesses and writers in the popular press argued against widespread arts education, worrying that such instruction could lead to immorality or subversion of the social order.3 These detractors believed that workers might visit art galleries instead of working or view art that was socially or politically transgressive.

Witnesses suggested that not only would arts education improve morality, but it would also benefit workers who were less skilled with verbal language. For example, J. C. Robertson, editor of Mechanics’ Magazine, testified, “It is a common saying among them [workers], that they can comprehend any form of construction better from a drawing than from the best written description. . . . They can read drawings, if I may so speak, and understand them thoroughly, though they cannot themselves draw”
Robertson’s tentative notion of visual literacy—“read[ing] drawings”—would become well accepted by the mid-Victorian period, when narrative painting became the most popular genre. But while increased visual literacy may have helped workers understand drawings, it may have also delayed a fuller push for verbal literacy. Moreover, much as parents would speak for their children in the paternalistic mode of liberal education, Robertson and other witnesses represented the views of the working class. Witnesses suggested that increased education in the visual arts would play into the learning strengths of workers and give them what they needed and wanted, but no workers testified to corroborate these assertions.

**THE ROYAL ACADEMY**

As I note previously, the 1835–36 select committee challenged the Royal Academy’s (RA) status as the central arbiter of taste. In its emphasis on the arts as both economically useful and morally enlightening for a broad public, the committee found that the RA was serving only a few artists and a narrow section of the public. The committee was particularly concerned that the RA had done little to encourage the design of British manufactures. While the RA had been challenged prior to 1835, the select committee’s practical aims heightened complaints about the institution’s privileges and exclusivity.

The RA operated as a virtual monopoly before 1835. While some popular artists were not academicians, those who were members and/or exhibited at the annual show generally enjoyed greater success. The appellation “RA” was the most sought-after title for artists, a fact that did not change in the Victorian period. But, while the RA maintained a limited membership, an increasing number of successful artists were not academicians. Rival galleries and shows were created throughout the nineteenth century, and these catered to diverse audiences. For example, as I discuss in chapter 7, the Grosvenor Gallery (founded in 1877) attracted both avant-garde and more established artists, including James McNeill Whistler and Sir John Everett Millais. The RA’s annual exhibition itself began to draw a more varied crowd. Because of this improved access to a greater number of galleries, the public began to rely on art critical commentary for guidance. Reviews of exhibitions appeared in all the major periodicals as well as in a number that focused exclusively on art—the Art Journal and Art-Union.
Monthly Journal—among others. These commentaries structured the experiences of readers who visited the exhibitions and allowed armchair visitors to participate in what was becoming a popular British pastime.

Complaints about the Royal Academy occupied much of the 1836 hearings, and the institution’s detractors were the primary forces behind the creation of the initial committee in 1835. Witnesses argued that the RA had failed for three major reasons. First, the RA had educated neither the general public nor the great mass of artists who did not practice the fine arts, many of whom were designers. Second, the public did not need such an institution to tell it which art and artists to appreciate. Third, members and nonmembers were not given equal opportunity to participate in the RA’s shows (King 22). Faith in the value of competition informed all three complaints. “Political economists have denied the advantages of such institutions” because, remarked the 1836 report, “the academic system gives an artificial elevation to mediocrity” (viii). The report expressed the hope “that the principle of free competition in art (as in commerce) will ultimately triumph over all artificial institutions” (viii). Instead of one central institution, the committee wanted various arts societies to compete with each other. The assumption that an art institution could be assessed based on contemporary economic theory went largely unquestioned during these hearings—with the notable exception of the president of the Royal Academy, Sir Martin Archer Shee, who claimed that “the principle of commerce and the principle of art are in direct opposition the one to the other. . . . The moment you make art a trade you destroy it” (1836, 162). But most witnesses asserted that the market, not an institution, should decide on the merits of artists and artworks. As the art commentaries and novels discussed in this book will make clear, the notion that an educated public could judge art for itself was increasingly accepted in the Victorian public. However, as this public became more confident in its judgments and, at times, in its ability to buy some of the art under discussion, art critics worried that the new art market would erode standards of taste.

For many of the nonaffiliated artists who testified at the 1835–36 hearings, the RA had already corrupted public taste through its tacit support of portrait painting, which supposedly demonstrated the institution’s rampant commercialism. However, these artists seemed most concerned with their own lack of access to the economic opportunities enjoyed by academicians. If the artists had genuinely believed in the public’s ability to judge, they would not have worried about the RA’s detrimental effect on national taste. Such contradictions appear in many of the period’s writings on art—
complaints about vulgar commercialism are usually informed by capitalist ideology and, despite professing the contrary, betray a lack of faith in individual judgment.

The dramatic shift in early-Victorian art patronage helps explain artists’ twin concerns about national taste and their own economic survival. In the eighteenth century, most artworks shown at the RA had already been sold to wealthy individuals. By contrast, much of the art exhibited during the Victorian period was for sale. Victorian artists often painted what they thought would appeal to the middle-class buyer, the figure who increasingly drove the nineteenth-century art market. Notes Alan Staley, “Eighteenth-century patrons came to the artist and told him what they wanted; nineteenth-century patrons saw pictures exhibited and purchased what they liked” (8). The portrait was the most popular form of painting still created upon request in the nineteenth century; more than half of the 1,278 artworks at the 1830 Royal Academy exhibition were portraits (Wood 274). The genre was not only popular but also lucrative for artists. Traditional history painters, whose style was unpopular with the middle class, often shunned portraiture. Many of these history painters were not Royal academicians and thus lacked certain privileges that would have helped them sell their works. The works of academicians were frequently hung “on the line”—the most favorable location at eye level around the main gallery—while paintings of other artists, if they were accepted, were often placed too high (“skied”) or were otherwise difficult to see. Haydon testified before the select committee that his Dentatus was moved to an inferior position in order to make room for a portrait. He ostensibly complained because the RA, by belittling his painting, was ignoring its founding mission: the encouragement of history painting. But Haydon also worried about the economic effects of this snub. Haydon claimed that he “never had another commission for 16 years” after this incident (1836, 90).

Like Haydon, John Martin testified that the academy’s preference for portraits “misleads the public altogether; it gives a fashion to portrait painting, and depresses the higher branches of art” (1836, 72). But while singling out this particular genre as overly commercial, witnesses did not reject the larger idea that they needed more aggressive marketing of their own works. Martin testified that he started to exhibit at the British Institution, not because of a philosophical objection to portrait painting, but because his works were better hung in that venue. His Joshua was not placed “on the line” at the Royal Academy and was thus little noticed; the same picture was displayed properly at the British Institution, and Martin said he
“received the principal premium of that year” (1836, 71). In effect, artists wanted to make their own genre of painting as fashionable with consumers as portraits had become.

In addition to the problem of visibility for nonacademicians, witnesses argued that academies, because of their systemic nature, prevented the development of individual artistic innovation. Such ideology—the advocacy of invention over the artificial control of rules—was borrowed from classical economic and educational theory and reflected a modern conception of the subject as developing apart from institutions (Kaiser 15). Eighteenth-century writers on education such as Joseph Priestley and William Godwin argued against monolithic academies, which they saw as the bastion of standardization (Green 245). Similarly, the 1836 report argued that academies “damp the moral independence of the artist and narrow the proper basis of all intellectual experience—mental freedom” (viii). Consistent with larger British ideas of education, the committee wanted to rely on an apprenticeship system to train artists. The report argued that “the restriction of academic rules prevents the artist from catching the feeling and spirit of the great master whom he studies” (viii). Witnesses asserted that continental art suffered from a depressing uniformity as a result of following these academic rules. This belief in the individual genius of the artist would be powerfully echoed by later art criticism. Most famously, Ruskin complained about the prioritization of mere technique over thought and feeling in Modern Painters, Volume 1. Other writers, in thinly veiled propaganda for contemporary progressivism, celebrated the supposed freedom of the artist in the Renaissance.

But in their haste to attack the RA, witnesses and committee members failed to acknowledge the variety in its curriculum. In fact, as Staley has noted, commentators on the academy often viewed its relatively weak standardization of instruction as a strength because British artists were allowed to develop their own styles. Because students were taught by “a rotating series of Academicians,” they learned diverse styles rather than a uniform model (Staley 10). The committee was clearly against the idea of academies in general, as evidenced by its unfavorable parallels between the RA and old literary academies. The 1836 report compared the stultifying academic rules of art academies with “the regulations of those literary institutions of former times which set more value on scanning the metres of ancients than on transfusing into the mind the thoughts and feelings of the poet” (viii). The model of artistic appreciation advocated by the report seems based on the Shaftesburian notion of right reason; rational individuals will easily understand great poetry without the teachings of an institution.
Contrary to the committee’s individualistic view, some prominent Victorian intellectuals believed that the masses needed institutional arbiters of taste. While Matthew Arnold’s later defense of high culture has been read as conservative if not ultimately antidemocratic, his views on literary academies attempt to balance personal freedom and institutional control. In “The Literary Influence of Academies” (1864), Arnold argues that good criticism displays the kind of style and original ideas that a more centralized academy would accept: “Where there is no centre like an academy, if you have genius and powerful ideas, you are apt not to have the best style going; if you have precision of style and not genius, you are apt not to have the best ideas going” (50). Just as the select committee addressed consumers as well as producers, Arnold asserts that academies can educate readers to appreciate good prose. He partly forgives the extravagances of writers who feel themselves to be addressing an ignorant public. In the same way that the select committee faulted consumers for buying inferior designs, Arnold suggests that some writers are merely catering to their uneducated audience.

Shee, the president of the RA, provided an Arnoldian definition of the institution’s founding mission as one intended to educate public taste by distinguishing only the best artists. During the 1835–36 hearings, Shee defended the distinction bestowed on artists by the appellation “RA” by arguing that “every man does not show his wisdom in his face, nor are his virtues blazoned on his breast; a mark of honour or distinction, therefore, is a stamp set upon merit, for the purpose of pointing it out to those who have no other means of ascertaining it” (1836, 154). Contrary to much of the testimony before the committee, Shee asserted that the public could not satisfactorily judge a work of art. The label “RA” would tell viewers that a particular work was worthy of notice. Further, Shee testified that the Royal Academy educated the public about the importance of the arts: “It enables an ignorant and uncivilized population to acquire some respect for the arts; it gives them an idea that they are objects of some consequence . . . and that they produce a serious influence on the whole scheme and structure of society” (1836, 160). While the moral importance of art was widely accepted in the early-Victorian period, Shee’s contention that Britain’s “uncivilized population” could not understand this significance without the “honors and distinctions” of the RA was vigorously contested. The RA maintained an important influence on Victorian taste, but art critics such as Ruskin and Anna Jameson assumed the central role in educating gallery visitors. Still, while unrealized, Shee’s basis for defending the Royal Academy—that it served the public—marked an important conceptual shift in envisioning the role of art institutions.
THE NATIONAL GALLERY

The committee’s emphasis on the arts as a practical enterprise (that is, one that would provide both economic and moral improvement) helped create a wide variety of art institutions that were designed to educate a broad public. New institutions, most prominently the National Gallery, were created to educate this expanded audience. Much of this new emphasis fit squarely into the Victorian “self-help” doctrine; witnesses and art critics argued that workers and the middle class could improve both themselves and their careers by viewing artworks and by being trained in the arts. In addressing the National Gallery’s role in public art education, the select committee and its witnesses highlighted the need for a new, specialized kind of expertise to guide decisions about acquisitions, arrangement, and restoration. Such decisions had previously been made in private, by individuals who often lacked the requisite knowledge. Many witnesses believed that the current holdings were inadequate and that gallery officials were doing little to acquire the best works. According to the testimony of the gallery’s architect, the collection contained only 126 paintings in 1836 (133). The situation would soon change. The 1853 Parliamentary Select Committee on the National Gallery struggled to organize a rapidly exploding and heterogeneous national collection (Siegel, *Desire and Excess* 133). By 1888, Ruskin remarked that the National Gallery was “without question now the most important collection of paintings in Europe for the purposes of the general student” (qtd. in E. T. Cook, *Handbook* vii). But the gallery in the 1830s was uncertainly conceptualized and had a very anemic collection compared with the public galleries of Europe. Most witnesses before the 1835–36 committee advocated the acquisition of works from two areas: the High Renaissance and contemporary British art. But while there was agreement on the most important schools and time periods, there was much disagreement over individual works of art. In the past, donated works had been accepted without any sort of professional judgment. Witnesses, many of whom were art dealers or artists, argued that a body of experts such as themselves—not the gallery’s board of trustees—needed to judge these works. Art critics were not called as witnesses and so did not have the opportunity to promote their emergent expertise. Nevertheless, while artists and dealers continued to shape public taste, art critics would increasingly fill much of the need for specialized knowledge created by these parliamentary discussions.

In addition to judging the artistic value of potential acquisitions, art experts became more and more influential in debates about the maintenance and restoration of artworks. Witnesses testified during the 1835–36
hearings that paintings had been improperly maintained in the National Gallery. The committee spent much time questioning William Seguier, the keeper of the National Gallery, about the condition of the gallery’s pictures and the need for restoration. In an attempt to embarrass Seguier, Ewart asked the keeper about a specific painting—the *Sebastian del Piombo*. Seguier admitted that the painting had worms around its edge, but asserted that relining was unnecessary because the insects posed no threat to the work as a whole. Ewart then produced a letter from “a person celebrated for his knowledge in this particular branch of the lining of pictures,” who argued that the painting was infested with a variety of insects and was in danger of complete destruction (1836, 130). By quoting this expert, Ewart implied that Seguier lacked the specific knowledge to judge the painting’s condition. Ewart also suggested that Seguier had neglected to restore paintings that had been darkened by dirt and varnish. For Ewart, the state of these pictures caused the public to be “insensible to the merits of Italian pictures, and [to instead] prefer more modern and more gaudy [that is, brighter] pictures of inferior masters” (1836, 131). Supposedly, the lightening of these old paintings would make them more popular and thus elevate public taste.

At stake in this debate about restoration was a larger Victorian epistemological question about the possibility of uncovering originary fact. Ewart believed that such facts could and should be determined in building the nation’s collection. He asked Seguier whether the gallery’s most important (that is, older) works “do not possess the real original colours which the masters intended to bestow upon them” (1836, 131). Ewart suggested that these colors were facts merely waiting to be unearthed by the proper cleaning. But as recent controversies surrounding the restoration of old masters by modern experts and technologies suggest, cleaning is a subjective process. Ewart’s belief seems influenced by the early nineteenth-century craze for ancient artifacts, what Jonah Siegel has described as “the turn of the century characteristic response to the heterogenous art objects uncovered by archaeology . . . [which was] the desire to look beyond them, to identify some coherent lost original” (*Desire and Excess* 135). Reflecting this quest for originary fact, Ewart asked Seguier, “Is it not very desirable indeed to form a national collection, not through the mere instrumentality of connoisseurship, but by an historical investigation [into] whether the pictures are the works of the men to whom they are attributed, and have been handed down as such since their original first painting?” (1836, 131). Ewart hoped to replace the subjective judgments of art dealers and collectors with the objective facts of a historical investigation. Although contested, Ewart’s
demand for historical evidence over traditional connoisseurship indicated a significant change in the way that art was evaluated. Some prominent art experts began to use historical research and new technologies (most prominently photography) to question the attribution of artworks, which sparked the development of modern art history. As I discuss more fully in chapter 3, women writers were at the forefront of this art historical movement.

In order to make the best use of the gallery’s holdings, the committee discussed ways to maximize public education. Witnesses generally agreed that the gallery should be open on Sundays and holidays so that workers could attend. But simply getting workers to the gallery was not sufficient; how to instruct an audience with little knowledge about the arts was debated in these early hearings and throughout the nineteenth century. Ewart viewed the gallery’s arrangement as crucial to its educative function and thus an issue of national importance: “Is this building (which ought to be on a great and comprehensive plan, to be an eternal monument of the arts in this country), to be merely a gallery where pictures are to be placed without due distribution, and not a gallery worthy of this nation?” (1836, 133). Dr. G. F. Waagen, the well-respected director of the Berlin Gallery, suggested a “historical arrangement” in order “to combine taste with instruction” (1836, 5). Waagen’s juxtaposition of taste and instruction would have seemed strange to many eighteenth-century commentators, who would have assumed that good taste was naturally obtained.

Most significantly for my purposes in this chapter, the committee and witnesses also suggested the use of written aids to help viewers understand the logic of these arrangements. Waagen recommended providing viewers with two kinds of catalogues so that they would understand his historical organization: one that would give the title, date, and artist of a painting, and another that would provide brief lessons on the history of art (1836, 12; King 15). Further, Waagen testified that, in the Berlin Gallery, he also hung up “a little paper, containing the pictures in each division, with the name of the artist and subject of the picture, and the date, arranged under the head of the school” (1836, 12). These catalogues and wall signs would, in Waagen’s words, allow the visitor to “see the historical development of art” (1836, 5, emphasis mine). For Waagen, seeing was enhanced by written information, an increasingly accepted idea that helped Victorian art criticism proliferate. Waagen was himself instrumental in developing this written guidance for viewers. As I discuss in chapter 5, Waagen wrote A Companion to the Official Catalogue for the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition of 1857, which was designed to supplement the somewhat uneven official catalogue. Waagen’s notion of catalogues and wall labels seems
commonplace to us, but the practice of furnishing such information was a
new idea in Britain at the time of these hearings and, as King notes, dem-
onsstrates an altered conception of gallery visitors: “When art was intended
to be seen only by connoisseurs, there was no need for these kinds of aid”
(15). In his 1880 “A Museum or Picture Gallery: Its Functions and Forma-
tions,” Ruskin argues for the importance of written information, coupled
with a logical organization, for teaching the public about art and museum
exhibitions. Taking animals at the British Museum as his example, Ruskin
writes, “If every one of these had . . . a plain English ticket, with ten words
of common sense on it, saying where and how the beast lived, and a num-
ber (unchangeable) referring to the properly arranged manual,” visitors
would leave the museum much more knowledgeable (Works 34: 248).

Ruskin’s comments in 1880 show that these written aids were slowly
and unevenly distributed in galleries and museums. Their use was partic-
ularly controversial in mediating the fine arts. Some witnesses before the
1835–36 committee clung to the traditional notion that works of art should
stand alone. Royal academicians often told their students that they should
not provide any written information with their paintings (Altick, Paint-
ings 186). As a result of this elitist notion, wall placards were not widely
used until the twentieth century (Waterfield 101). A detailed catalogue
designed to assist the general public in the National Gallery was not pub-
lished until 1844 (Gillett 276n). Earlier catalogues tended to rhapsodize
about the national importance of the arts and included “minimal histori-
cal or explanatory information” (Taylor 43). This lack of comprehensive
information in catalogues meant that the guides written by art critics were
essential. William Hazlitt and P. G. Patmore, for example, published well-
known guides to the National Gallery in 1824 (Waterfield 101). Jameson
and other Victorian critics also published such aids, often correcting the
attributions that romantic critics unquestioningly took from earlier writ-
ers. When they were available, catalogues were frequently too expensive for
working-class visitors. Some witnesses before the 1850 select committee on
the National Gallery even suggested the mandatory purchase of a catalogue
as a way of keeping out undesirables (Gillett 227). In the Royal Academy
exhibition, the catalogue effectively doubled the price of admission (from
one shilling to two). The catalogue was necessary for most visitors because
artist and title were not listed next to the picture on the kind of placard
recommended by Waagen (Gillett 222). Those sufficiently educated to do
without the catalogue could probably afford to buy it. In short, catalogues
could assist the masses, but they also tended to exclude those unable to pay
for them.
An 1870 edition of the Descriptive and Historical Catalogue of the Pictures in the National Gallery demonstrates how this written guidance had developed by the middle of the Victorian period. Already in its fifty-fifth edition, the 1870 catalogue was “approved by the director” and written by the keeper and secretary of the gallery, Ralph Wornum. However, priced at one shilling, the catalogue was too expensive for the visitors who most needed it. Noting the importance of “historical knowledge” about art, Wornum writes, “The information thus offered, without superseding individual predilections, may sometimes assist in the formation of correct judgment, which is the basis of correct taste” (3). While (significantly) acknowledging some leeway for individual opinions, Wornum suggests that only those fully educated or in possession of his catalogue could really have “correct taste.” In addition to his own authority on these historical matters, Wornum cites in his guide “the opinions of eminent critics on the merits of particular masters” (3). Implicitly, Wornum thus argues for the preeminence of the specialist writer on the arts, which would have seemed unusual to readers less than a half century earlier. In a dynamic that we will see throughout the Victorian period, specialist opinions trump those of the general public, even as the public is allowed some right to judge art.

Despite this elitism, the 1870 catalogue is representative of serious attempts to educate a broader public. The catalogue notes that there was time for some in the working class to view the gallery’s collections: on Saturdays from 10:00 to 5:00 (Wornum 4). According to an engraving from the Illustrated London News dated August 6, 1870, workers did in fact attend (fig. 1). Brandon Taylor writes that “rare but uncoordinated visits to the National Gallery were planned in the late 1860s and 1870s by the Working Men’s Club and Institute Union,” which was designed to acculturate workers and thus keep them out of the pubs (79). While the catalogue was too expensive for most working-class visitors (the workers in fig. 1 rely instead on a guide), it was useful for a middle-class audience. In a section on “The Schools of Painting” in the 1870 catalogue, Wornum defines the term “school” for a more general audience and proceeds to list major artistic movements and their distinctive characteristics (12). Moreover, the discussions of individual artists and their works are meant to both inform and engage viewers. In describing Fra Angelico, who was an important figure for the renewed Victorian interest in early-Italian art, Wornum relates his biography as well as an interesting anecdote: “Fra Giovanni Angelico, says Vasari, was a man of such fervent piety, that he never commenced painting without prayer” (24). Writing several years before the adaptation of Vasari in Pater’s The Renaissance, Wornum already registers the Victorian art
critical fascination with legends. But, in discussing Fra Angelico’s individual paintings, Wornum also notes appropriate Bible passages and descriptions so that viewers will apprehend both the story depicted and the work’s iconography. Moreover, Wornum lists such technical facts as medium, size, and the provenance of the painting. In its attention to legends about artists, stories about individual artworks, and researched art historical knowledge, Wornum’s catalogue is representative of the hybrid form that much Victorian art commentary took.
THE WESTMINSTER COMPETITIONS AND THE SUPERIORITY OF BRITISH ARTISTIC TALENT

As my analysis of such written guides should make clear, even mid-Victorian art critical discourse was somewhat ambivalent about the extent to which taste could or should be taught to a general public with an increasing interest in the visual arts. I have argued that these conflicts were present at the very beginning of the period, especially during the 1835–36 hearings. Indeed, this ambiguity about educating popular taste applied to conceptions of the country’s working-class designers as well as to its viewing public. Asserting that British artists were naturally better than their European counterparts, the committee rejected the kind of state-controlled education system that could have provided workers with an even more comprehensive education in the arts. The hearings suggested that British designers required only a level playing field to compete with, and beat, their European counterparts. Like many of the witnesses called before the committee, J. C. Robertson argued that designers had the raw ability but lacked the exposure to good art that would improve their skills: “The English artisan [can] do anything you can put him to as well, if not better, than any other artisan in the world” (1835, 126). The repeated insistence of ingrained British talent betrayed considerable anxiety about the status of the country’s art and design.

The assertion of native artistic ability recurred during important events and exhibitions throughout the Victorian period; the most studied example is the Great Exhibition of 1851. During that event, commentators felt particularly threatened by French and American designs. This compensatory strategy was also employed to deal with a problem contemporary to and much influenced by the 1835–36 hearings. The Houses of Parliament burned in 1834 and were subsequently rebuilt in the gothic style by Sir Charles Barry and A. W. Pugin. An 1841 Royal Commission formed by Sir Robert Peel, headed by Prince Albert and with the painter Sir Charles Eastlake as secretary, addressed, as Peel put it, “whether the Construction of the New Houses of Parliament can be taken advantage of for the encouragement of British art” (qtd. in Treuherz 42). Large-scale fresco murals depicting English historical and literary themes were chosen, in part to demonstrate that British artists could handle both a difficult medium and grand subjects. Although British artists were not well-trained in fresco, the commission believed that they could learn; fresco would thus prove a perfect technique to demonstrate the native superiority of the British artist.
In defending the commission’s decision to exclude foreign artists from the competition, Eastlake remarked:

To trust to our own resources should be, under any circumstances, the only course. Ability, if wanting, would of necessity follow. Many may remember the time before the British army had opportunities to distinguish itself, when continental scoffers affected to despise our pretensions to military skill. In the arts, as in arms, discipline, practice and opportunities are necessary to the acquisition of skill and confidence. . . . but nothing could lead to failure in both more effectually than the absence of sympathy and moral support on the part of the country. (qtd. in Cole, “Decoration” 182)

Just as the military had shown skeptics—“continental scoffers”—the character of the British soldier, British artists would similarly triumph in this cultural war. Supporting British artists, Eastlake suggested, was a question of national and, therefore, moral importance.

Victorian art critics often took a similarly bellicose tone in championing British art. Ruskin’s defense of J. M. W. Turner and British landscape painting—the project that sparked his writing of *Modern Painters*, Volume 1—is the most famous example. “Now, what Turner did in contest with Claude, he did with every other then-known master of landscape, each in his turn,” writes Ruskin in an 1853 lecture. “He challenged and vanquished, each in his own peculiar field” (*Works* 12: 127). As Eastlake’s soldier metaphor and Ruskin’s list of defeated foreign male artists reveal, British masculinity as well as cultural superiority was at stake in mastering certain artistic forms. Similarly, Cole defended the use of fresco for the Westminster decorations by explaining that “in fresco painting, what is to be done must be done, once for all, correctly; there is no remedy for errors. In oils, you may touch and retouch until you reach your standard of perfection. Michael Angelo used to say oil-painting was only fit for women and children” (“Decoration” 187). Like Ruskin, Cole demonstrates that art and art commentary were highly gendered in the early-Victorian period. Cole and Ruskin sought to define the practice of serious art and art criticism as male. But the boundaries of these practices were often shifting—for example, while Cole labels oil painting as feminine, the medium was usually stereotyped in the nineteenth century as more masculine than the supposedly feminine watercolors. What changed little throughout the period were the attempts by male commentators to belittle women’s artistic practice. Yet as women critics and artists were already making clear by
the 1830s, this equation of maleness with serious practice was an assumption, not a reality.

Despite and perhaps because of the sexist and nationalist rhetoric surrounding the Westminster competitions, the proposed designs attracted considerable public interest. Paula Gillett writes that the “cartoon drawings for the frescoes that were to decorate the new Houses of Parliament attracted twenty to thirty thousand viewers a day” (223) at the Royal Academy. The show was eventually opened free to the public, apparently without incident. Moreover, planners made provisions for catalogues to assist viewers in interpreting the artworks. In what would become a fairly standard practice throughout the nineteenth century, these catalogue entries often contained relevant quotations from British literary works. The painter Charles Eastlake remarked that such “catalogues in the hands of so many thousands would be the first introduction of many to an acquaintance with our best poets and writers” (qtd. in Altick, Paintings 185). Of course, Eastlake assumes that most gallery visitors could read; while Britain’s literacy rate rose throughout the Victorian period, many workers would still have had limited reading skills in the 1830s and 1840s. Catalogues and placards would have been most useful to a middle-class audience that could read but that had gaps in its knowledge about art. Still, the planners hoped to make both art and literature more accessible through these catalogues, an aim that would have been unlikely before the 1835–36 select committee.

The public interest in the competitions notwithstanding, the classical history paintings advocated by the 1835–36 committee and by Cole, Eastlake, and others during the Westminster competitions proved much less accessible to the general public once the artworks were actually executed and installed. Cultural preferences and the British government’s sporadic support of the arts contributed to the eventual unpopularity of these works. The deaths of Prince Albert in 1861 and Charles Eastlake in 1865 left classical history paintings and the Westminster project in general without their main proponents (Wood 28). Unlike France, Britain had no tradition of state or church support of such large-scale historical works. While the French government sponsored competitions to reward the best history painters (for example, sending the best artists to Italy through the Prix de Rome), Britain provided no such encouragement. By the 1840s, most middle-class viewers would have sympathized with William Makepeace Thackeray’s assessment of academic history painting as “representing for the most part personages who never existed . . . performing actions that never occurred, and dressed in costumes they could never have worn” (qtd. in Wood 26). The Victorian middle class wanted smaller, “anecdotal”
paintings that could be hung in their homes (Wood 24). By contrast, the themes, locations, and fresco medium selected for these Westminster paintings made them unappealing to the middle class. Though the problem of the middle-class art market as arbiter of taste was much debated during the 1835–36 hearings, the question was effectively answered, at least in practice, by the 1840s.

Central to their lack of popularity, these paintings proved difficult to interpret. For example, Daniel Maclise’s *The Spirit of Chivalry* (oil, 1845; fresco, 1847) relies upon iconography that would have required explanation for even educated Victorian viewers. The painting is an abstract allegory of chivalry with little narrative action. In his catalogue for a 1972 exhibition of Maclise works, Richard Ormond describes the figures in the oil version of the work: “In the centre, the Spirit of chivalry, represented by an ideal Madonna-like figure . . . stands beside an altar supported by carved angels, the centre of chivalric devotion. On either side of her are figures personifying the military, religious and civil powers” (85). While the painting would have appealed to the Victorian interest in the Middle Ages and the chivalric code, it does not depict familiar events (for example, stories about King Arthur). Although split in their overall opinion of the work, reviewers in the popular press noted its highly abstract quality. The *Art-Union* (1845, 257) reviewer applauded “the refined intellect which lights each set of features,” while the *Athenaeum* (July 5, 1845, 664) remarked, “This is one of the most mannered and least original works by its master. . . . We fear he is cheered by ‘a congregation’ who are dazzled by his brilliant hand-work into forgetting that an arabesque is one thing—a painter’s composition another” (qtd. in R. Ormond 85). This writer’s implication that Maclise was too focused on mere technique was commonly used by other Victorian art critics to denigrate paintings. Reviewers were more uniformly complimentary of Maclise’s later *The Spirit of Justice* (1849), noting improvements in the way he conveyed his subject. But this painting was similarly abstract. Maclise’s highly decorative and architectonic style, which was heavily influenced by German painting, was unlikely to appeal to popular Victorian tastes. While some frescoes by Maclise and other Westminster artists were more accessible in subject matter, they were not physically available to most of the Victorian public. A set of William Dyce frescoes, for example, depicts scenes from Sir Thomas Malory’s well-known *Morte d’Arthur* but was placed in the Royal Robing Room of the Houses of Parliament. At a time when public exhibitions were becoming more widespread, these publicly funded works were not located in places that would attract a large audience and thus instruct them in classical history painting.
In addition to the inaccessible themes and locations of many of these parliamentary works, the fragility of the fresco technique contributed to this project’s failure. While proponents hoped to complement the high themes of these paintings with a classical medium, the wet climate of London quickly degraded the murals. Interest in these public commissions waned by the 1860s and, as Wood has remarked, “The Westminster Decorations, the most grandiose public commission of the Victorian era, came to an ignominious and disappointing end” (29). Although Britain would follow Continental Europe’s lead in public art education and exhibitions, state or religious commissions for works of art were never much of a factor in the Victorian art world. In advocating such state-sponsored projects, the 1835–36 select committee was already out of step with the rise of middle-class patronage. It was thus unable to achieve one of its central goals: educating the public about traditional methods of painting.

Despite the eventual failure of the Westminster project, the interest in the arts sparked by the competitions surely encouraged at least some viewers to visit the other art venues that would proliferate during the Victorian period. What was true of the Westminster project was true more generally of the 1835–36 select committee’s influence: though some of its projects failed or were hopelessly sexist and class based, the committee’s advocacy of verbal mediation for visual art and creation of the schools of design created profound, long-term changes. Though currently faced with deep cuts, many government schools of design still exist in Great Britain. As the remaining chapters of this book should make clear, the art critical mediation encouraged by the committee permanently changed how art was interpreted by a growing public audience. Though many of these critical writings retained the class-based and sexist ideologies inherent in the 1835–36 hearings and Westminster competitions, they also encouraged a broader public to appreciate and understand art.