Helen Huntingdon’s initial skepticism about accepting guidance from others and eventual acceptance of only Gilbert’s advice reflect a familiar Victorian tension between reliance on authority figures and a commitment to one’s own critical faculties. Not surprisingly, Victorian artists were not the only figures to confront this problem. This chapter considers how this tension between authority and more subjective interpretations affected viewers as they confronted a bewildering array of artworks. While dependence on the descriptions provided by art critics was inevitable in 1848 when engravings were not cheap, the opening of public galleries and the proliferation of illustrated periodicals made personal encounters with art increasingly possible. After the establishment of the National Gallery in 1824, public galleries and exhibitions steadily grew throughout the nineteenth century. Amassing artworks in these public venues was viewed as an issue of national importance—large collections in the National Gallery and elsewhere, it was thought, would show the rest of Europe that Britain was finally serious about the arts. Moreover, many art critics and government figures believed that these exhibitions would, with proper organization and written guidance, help elevate public taste by teaching a growing audience which artworks to appreciate. While artworks in
eighteenth-century venues were usually hung randomly, with no written assistance, most Victorian public exhibitions attempted to arrange chronologically or by school and sometimes included wall placards and catalogues to educate a general audience.

The reality of these Victorian public venues, however, was much less tidy than the ideal imagined by advocates for public art education. The desire to amass large permanent collections and gigantic temporary exhibitions often clashed with the goal of proper arrangement. The available space in the National Gallery—even in the institution’s current location in Trafalgar Square—proved too small to organize a growing collection properly. Temporary exhibitions, such as the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition of 1857 or the Great Exhibition of 1851, tended to overwhelm visitors with the sheer number of artworks on display, despite organizers’ attempts to categorize works. As in pre-Victorian galleries, paintings often covered walls from floor to ceiling, with some hung so high that they were impossible to view. There was simply not enough space to hang all the artworks “on the line,” or at the eye level of viewers. Crowds at these exhibitions further prevented the close inspection of artworks and provided a competing demand on the attention of viewers. As Kate Flint asserts, looking at pictures was often a secondary activity in art galleries: “Depictions of art shows, whether in paintings or periodical publications, ultimately serve to reinforce the point that spectators are participating in social rituals” (Victorians 176). Moreover, written information could not always be counted on to direct the attention of viewers. Some exhibitions provided no written guidance, while others bombarded visitors with wall placards, catalogues, and the often contradictory comments of contemporary art critics, which were increasingly available in periodicals and guidebooks. In short, Victorian art venues frequently encouraged that “distraction” which Jonathan Crary has seen characterizing nineteenth-century viewing practices.

Victorian art critics recognized this problem and employed various strategies to mitigate the problems posed by too many artworks, sources of guidance, and other visitors. Most prominently, their commentaries sought to limit the number of artworks on which a viewer would need to focus. They did so in two major ways: (1) by making the correct attributions of artworks a key concern and (2) by encouraging viewers to select for themselves excellent works toward which to direct their attention. The first approach was developed by such influential art historians as Anna Jameson and A. H. Layard. The second, most famously advocated by Ruskin, asked viewers to unravel the difficult truths in just a few of the best paintings. Despite these well-developed schemes for managing attention in public gal-
alleries, however, critics throughout the nineteenth century reveal a nostalgia for the sorts of private spaces that dominated the British art world before the Victorian period. Though advocating art collections more accessible to the public, these critics suggest that venues mimicking private, even elitist, spaces provide the best opportunity for viewing artworks, a desire that would be repeated by such later Aesthetic critics as Oscar Wilde.

**IMAGINING THE IDEAL GALLERY**

The National Gallery’s original home, at 100 Pall Mall, was tiny. Opened in 1824, the gallery was located in a few rooms of John Julius Angerstein’s home after his collection was purchased by Parliament. Paintings were hung on almost every available inch of wall space. The gallery averaged fifty visitors an hour and held up to two hundred people (Taylor 37). After two new collections were added to Angerstein’s, the gallery moved to 105 Pall Mall in 1834. Although the space was larger, Anthony Trollope complained that it was “a dingy, dull, narrow house, ill-adapted for the exhibition of the treasures it held” (qtd. in Taylor 37). Trollope’s wish—that the building better accommodate a national collection—was echoed throughout the period.

The new National Gallery building in Trafalgar Square, opened on April 9, 1838, suffered from some of the same problems that bedeviled its temporary Pall Mall locations. It was already clear in the late 1830s that Trafalgar Square would lack the space for a comprehensive arrangement—largely because the Royal Academy occupied half the building. Critics and other visitors found the Trafalgar Square location deficient in proper lighting, without room for larger paintings, and crowded with people. A May 1850 commission headed by the painter Sir Charles Eastlake, then keeper of the National Gallery, reported that more than three thousand people visited the building per day in 1848 and 1849. As a result of increased visitors to London for the Great Exhibition, that number was almost twice as high in 1851 (Taylor 59, 70). According to most official accounts, the crowds at the Great Exhibition and National Gallery in 1851 were orderly, which “confirmed an earlier reforming belief that exhibitions managed by the state were ‘good’ for the population and that the experience of all the arts would lead to better national superiority in design and manufacturing skill” (Taylor 70). However, while the Great Exhibition was generally considered a national success, the National Gallery was seen as too limited in its appeal to educate manufacturers and the public.
An 1840 drawing by Richard Doyle, “In the National Gallery,” illustrates some of the imagined challenges to and one possible solution for the gallery’s educative mission (fig. 3). Doyle shows the barriers to close examination of the artworks but also provides one example of effective spectatorship: upper-class male stands at an appropriate distance from a popular portrait of a girl and focuses his attention on it. Doyle’s Trafalgar Square gallery is crowded with visitors and paintings. A rail protects the portrait; however, one man (who appears to have stereotypical working-class facial characteristics) touches the frame while another stands right in front of it, partially obstructing the artwork from viewers within the gallery. Moreover, these figures block the portrait even from viewers of Doyle’s sketch, suggesting the immediacy of lapses in gallery etiquette for his audience. The two women in the drawing stand behind the male viewers and are thus unable to see the portrait. One of the women directs her gaze entirely at her catalogue, as does another male who is closer to the painting. Some of the other visitors, including one of the women, are gauging the attentive gentleman’s reaction to the artwork. Doyle implies that visitors to galleries should learn from this gentleman’s disposition toward the painting. Doyle’s ambivalence about written information as possibly too absorbing (judging from the woman and man who are buried in their catalogues) is greater than most art critics, but he similarly hopes for an ordered attention based on that modeled by an upper-class viewer.

As early as 1847, a Select Committee on Works of Art was formed to study plans to expand the National Gallery’s exhibition space to accommodate more art and visitors. Proposals for entirely rebuilding the gallery were considered until 1879. And although the original building, albeit redesigned and with multiple additions, remains in Trafalgar Square to this day, and although none of the schemes for rebuilding the National Gallery was ever adopted, these plans demonstrate Victorian ideals of exhibition spaces. Through their writings on the subject in the popular press, art critics advocated their own designs and those of others and delineated the deficiencies of the Trafalgar Square building. In proposing to solve problems of inadequate artworks and room, art critics hoped to elevate and display British taste. While both aims (education and amassing artworks) served nationalist tendencies, they also tended to clash with each other. For most critics, teaching the public required limiting the number of artworks so that they could be easily seen and digested. But some writers believed that a large collection would demonstrate British cultural prowess. At certain times in the National Gallery’s history, proper arrangement and hanging were at odds with the desire to amass artworks in elaborate exhibition spaces.
Figure 3
Ruskin, who wrote much on the organization and function of galleries and museums, hoped to focus viewers on a few, logically arranged artworks: “In all museums intended for popular teaching, there are two great evils to be avoided. The first is, superabundance; the second, disorder. . . . Any order will do, if it is fixed and intelligible” (Works 26: 203). While, as Jonah Siegel notes in Desire and Excess, Ruskin does not provide advice about specific arrangements, he is adamant about the need for an unchanging order. In “A Museum or Picture Gallery: Its Functions and Its Formation,” Ruskin asserts:

The first function of a Museum . . . is to give example of perfect order and perfect elegance . . . to the disorderly and rude populace. Everything in its own place, everything looking its best because it is there, nothing crowded, nothing unnecessary, nothing puzzling. Therefore, after a room has been once arranged, there must be no change in it. (Works 34: 247)

While Ruskin ostensibly considers the epistemological benefits of “order” in a museum, the term here is primarily a political one. Written in 1880, when Ruskin was himself becoming less sanguine about the general public’s ability to appreciate art, these remarks nevertheless express the prevailing belief that organization was crucial for educating “the disorderly and rude populace” (Works 34: 247). Like other critics, Ruskin believed that most viewers had short memories and attention spans; permanent order would help them find and study specific works. More importantly, such regimentation would provide them with an example of how to conduct themselves both within and outside of the museum space, an emphasis on moral instruction that we see surrounding temporary exhibitions—such as The Great Exhibition of 1851 or the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition of 1857—as well as permanent ones. However, because of their sheer size and uncertain organization, temporary exhibitions particularly worried Ruskin and other critics who hoped to provide spectators with examples of orderly attention.

Writing to his father in 1852, a year after the death of J. M. W. Turner, Ruskin described an ideal gallery to house the artist’s works:

I would build it in the form of a labyrinth [. . . so] that in a small space I might have the gallery as long as I chose—lighted from above—opening into larger rooms like beads upon a chain, in which the larger pictures should be seen at their right distance, but all on the line, never one picture above another. [. . .] Thus the mass of diffused interest would be so great
that there would never be a crowd anywhere: no people jostling each other to see two pictures hung close together. Room for everybody to see everything. (qtd. in Siegel, Desire 222)

Paradoxically, Ruskin hopes to fix attention—to allow spectators to contemplate individual pieces of art—by spreading interest throughout his museum. The size of Ruskin’s gallery would obviate the necessity for hanging paintings floor-to-ceiling. Viewers would not have to compete with or even talk to each other and could thus focus on individual artworks. Ruskin imagines the ideal spectator as solitary but not free from being directed by the design of the building itself. While visitors to this labyrinthine space would conceivably have some choice as to how they walked through the museum, Ruskin clearly wants viewers to see artworks in a certain way—for example, “all on the line” and the larger pictures “at their right distance.” As in Ruskin’s vision of an exemplary gallery, “diffused” interest and direction would often create tensions in Victorian art commentary. Critics tried to provide some direction while realizing that viewers could not be completely controlled.

In an 1852 letter to the editor of the *Times* (London), Ruskin proposes his ideal Turner gallery as a suitable way to rebuild the entire National Gallery. His plan would improve the current layout by allowing viewers to see all the works of one artist in a room and then to proceed to a contemporary artist in the next room. Ruskin believes that the “fatigue” of visitors in the current gallery arrangement “is indeed partly caused by the straining effort to see what is out of sight, but not less by the continual change of temper and of tone of thought, demanded in passing from the work of one master to that of another” (*Works* 12: 413). Ruskin and other like-minded critics were working against the British tendency toward random “organization” in galleries and museums—a state of affairs that can be compared to the descriptions of shop contents in Charles Dickens’s *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–41) or in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65). Concentrating on one artist at a time would help instruct those without formal knowledge of the arts: “Few minds are strong enough first to abstract and then to generalize paintings hung at random. Few minds are so dull as not at once to perceive the points of difference, were the works of each painter set by themselves” (412). Organizing paintings in this way would provide the kind of order that Ruskin advocates in “A Museum or Picture Gallery.” In addition, it would allow visitors to compare an ancient master with a contemporary British painter. For Ruskin, many of these British painters were worthy of the comparison (Turner, above all); the arrangement would thus show
the public the potential of British art. Both artists and consumers would be instructed and inclined to improve the arts after seeing paintings properly grouped.

Despite his interests in limitation and proper arrangement, Ruskin remained enamored of extensive continental European collections. In his letter on the National Gallery to the *Times*, Ruskin remarks, “In the last arrangement of the Louvre, under the Republic, all the noble pictures in the gallery were brought into one room, with a Napoleon-like resolution to produce effect by concentration of force; and, indeed, I would not part willingly with the memory of that saloon” (*Works* 12: 411). Ruskin suggests his desire to manage attention, to convince the public of good taste, by more powerful means of acquisition than available to Britain. Nor was Ruskin the only commentator to hope that the National Gallery would serve nationalistic ends. Sir Henry Cole wanted the building itself to serve as a testament to British taste. He notes, for example, that the central staircase in a redesign plan he approves would be “of nobler proportions than that at the Louvre” (“National Gallery Difficulty Solved” 351). The galleries themselves would be arranged in an awe-provoking manner: “Openings would lead each way into an uninterrupted series of rooms [and] . . . an effective vista the entire length of the building . . . would be obtained, which might be decorated with columns and arches, as in similar openings in the galleries of the Vatican” (351). Further, the plan’s entrance hall roof of “light glass and iron” (351) seems influenced by the Crystal Palace, a building associated with British artistic ingenuity. Thus, for Cole and Ruskin, public art education is advanced by both proper arrangement and awe-inspiring buildings and collections. Ultimately, however, challenging continental claims to cultural dominance were for the most influential art critics more important than the best schemes for improving the taste of individual viewers.

In his comments on picture galleries, Ruskin betrays a similar elitism. Testifying before the National Gallery Site Commission in April of 1857, Ruskin proposes two galleries: one accessible to the public with second-rate pictures and one at some remove from the city center with the best pictures. This second gallery would, in theory, limit visitors to those truly interested in art. Ruskin remarks, “Pictures not of great value, but of sufficient value to interest the public, and of merit enough to form the basis of early education . . . should be collected in the popular Gallery, but . . . all the precious things should be removed and put into the great Gallery, where they would be safest” (*Works* 13: 547). Though Ruskin states that placing artworks outside of London will protect them from pollution, he seems worried about
the “the precious things” being injured by the public as well. As in his comments at Manchester, preservation and class elitism are intertwined. Thus, he desires a public gallery that mimics a private art venue, an uncrowded space removed from the city center. Ruskin expressed this elitist wish again in his 1880 “A Museum or Picture Gallery: Its Functions and Formations,” where he opined that the ideal exhibition room would “be a lordly chamber like Prince Houssain’s” (Works 34: 260). Taken out of the context of his other writings, Ruskin seems here merely to be making a convenient comparison. But his pervasive desire for an aristocratic space becomes clear in the body of his art criticism.

While Ruskin’s blend of elitist and democratic aesthetics has been well documented, Anna Jameson is usually regarded as a straightforward popularizer of the arts. To be sure, as she began to specialize in art writing in the 1840s, Jameson reached a broad audience through her handbooks to London’s public and private galleries and her articles in periodicals. Both general visitors to galleries and experts found her writings useful. Jameson’s A Handbook to the Public Galleries of Art in and Near London, published by John Murray in 1842, would have been very accessible to general readers. She notes in her preface that her aims are three: (1) that the book be compact enough to carry into a gallery, (2) “that the matter should be printed and arranged as not to fatigue the eye while the reader was moving or standing in varying lights,” and (3) that the information be arranged to follow exactly how pictures are hung in the galleries (vi–vii). Similarly, her introduction defines such terms as “history painting” and “sacred vs. profane” so that nonexperts can follow her thoughts. By attempting to elevate public taste, Jameson was following the major trend of 1840s art writing, and reviewers praised her Handbook for this emphasis (J. Johnston 156). Indeed, in her section on the National Gallery, Jameson hopes that the collection will grow quickly so that art can be more accessible and arranged to educate the public: “The number of pictures should be at least doubled before any such arrangement could be either improving or satisfactory, though undoubtedly the purposes for which the National Gallery has been instituted demand that it should be taken into consideration as soon as possible” (12–13). Significantly, Jameson advocates the acquisition of important paintings by women—“a Lady Carlisle, a Lady Wharton, or a Lady Rich” (12)—as well as those by men, an emphasis rarely found in contemporary art criticism by men or women.

Jameson was also less worried than many of her contemporaries that the public would loiter in art galleries and possibly injure the art: “The fears once entertained that the indiscriminate admission of the public would be
attended with danger to the pictures, or would prove otherwise inexpedient, have fortunately long since vanished; no complaint has ever been made” (16). These concerns about the public certainly persisted in the mid-Victorian period, despite Jameson’s democratic claims. Moreover, Jameson betray an enthusiasm for the private space even as she hopes that art galleries will become more accessible to the public. In her *Handbook to the Public Galleries*, Jameson lauds the sort of venue that Ruskin imagined for his great gallery outside of the city. While criticizing the Dulwich Gallery’s second-rate pictures, she approves of its location away from London: “Over the city we have left broods a perpetual canopy of smoke and fog, and care heavier and darker than either” (442). Jameson’s vision is more democratic than Ruskin’s—her Dulwich Gallery affords a space where “the charmed attention of the most fastidious amateur,” an attention further elevated by her guidebook, will find intellectual solace. There is no split here between serious connoisseurs and dilettantes as in Ruskin’s criticism. Still, Jameson values public venues that restrict the size of crowds with some sort of admission system. Defending the requirement at Sir John Soane’s Museum that visitors ask for admission, Jameson remarks, “Some security against mischief so easily done . . . seems indispensable in this great metropolis, whose inhabitants are not particularly conspicuous among civilised nations for their high reverence for art” (550). Her earlier comments on the safety of artworks in the National Gallery notwithstanding, Jameson seems here concerned with the conduct of those in the lower classes, thus reflecting the early-Victorian emphasis on teaching a greater respect for the arts. But she is not particularly cognizant of the very real barrier that the need to request admission might mean for working-class visitors: “The mere obligation of asking admission, which is never refused, is surely no great hardship” (550). As was the case with much Victorian art criticism, Jameson’s comments assume readers with at least some financial and social means.

Indeed, both Jameson and Ruskin believed that ownership fostered art appreciation. In one of his public lectures at the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition, Ruskin claims that owners have the opportunity to study their works in detail, “much more being always discovered in any work of art by a person who has it perpetually near him than by one who only sees it from time to time” (*Works* 16: 81). Jameson’s similar admiration for private ownership comes as something of a surprise in her popular *Handbook to the Public Galleries*. Jameson values upper-class collectors, not the middle-class purchasers advocated by Ruskin, as the most likely to appreciate art fully. Charles I is for Jameson a representative model because he “did not merely consider his pictures as a part of his royal state, or as objects of personal
ostentation, but really loved them, and fully, and with the discrimination of an accomplished connoisseur, [and] appreciated their intrinsic beauty and value” (191). Jameson’s emphasis on “intrinsic beauty” suggests a Kantian notion of art appreciation rather than one that requires teaching. For Jameson, it seems that the upper-class art owner has a different kind of respect for art than viewers in the lower classes.

Her 1844 *Companion to the Most Celebrated Private Galleries of Art in London* makes clear, thirteen years before Ruskin’s comments at Manchester, that private owners will observe what gallery visitors cannot: “All who possess fine pictures, and really love them, are familiar with minute beauties” (xix). Jameson assails the buying of pictures merely because it is fashionable (a consistent theme in Ruskin’s criticism as well), but she believes that such acquisitiveness will eventually elevate the owner’s taste. In a rare moment of faulty logic in her body of work, Jameson asserts that the “wish to possess is followed by delight in the possession. What we delight in, we love; and love becomes in time a discriminating and refined appreciation” (xxvii). Jameson has so much respect for private collections that she advocates maintaining them rather than amassing too many artworks in a national collection. She believes that private homes are usually the best places for preserving pictures—unlike public collections with their “loiterers and loungers, the vulgar starers, the gaping idlers” who are likely to touch the pictures (xxxiv–xxxv). As in her comments on admission requirements in public galleries, Jameson argues that asking for entrance to private galleries poses no great barrier to the public. While Jameson never proposes the Ruskinian two-gallery system, her conception of one truly accessible national collection and scattered public and private venues seems to work in a similar, discriminatory fashion. In a vision that presages Wilde’s view of the ideal art gallery, the general public gets the crowded space, while the upper classes enjoy more leisurely venues.

**MANAGING ATTENTION AT A TEMPORARY VENUE**

*The Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition of 1857*

The Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition of 1857 featured no permanent building like the National Gallery—or even a moveable one like the Great Exhibition’s Crystal Palace—that might provide a lasting, physical indication of British taste. The exhibition was, however, seen as a model for how to fix some of the problems associated with the National Gallery and with British patronage of the arts in general. “We trust,” wrote the Dublin
University Magazine, that the exhibition “may lead the nation to see the necessity of establishing a national gallery of paintings worthy of the country. It is neither becoming [to] the wealth or greatness of the English people that they should be content with that thing in Trafalgar Square, as contemptible in its architecture, as it is miserable in its collection of works of art” (620). In many respects, the show lived up to expectations. The exhibition, the first comprehensive display of the fine arts in Britain, was “stunningly successful in making available to the new world of art lovers a vast quantity of work that had hitherto been unavailable” (Siegel, Desire and Excess 182). For the first time, the public could see the private collections of Queen Victoria, Prince Albert (who provided much of the impetus for the exhibition), and other important connoisseurs (Steegman 234). Most visitors had never seen and had little knowledge of the early-Italian artworks on display. Critics believed that the exhibition, with its broad collection and attempts at an organized physical space, provided a good example of how to form a national collection. But many commentators complained that the exhibition lacked sufficient written information, organization, and genuine artworks to educate a mass art audience. These concerns—voiced two decades after they were first raised at the beginning of the Victorian period—demonstrate both the pervasive preoccupation with guiding viewers and the slow implementation of the means for doing so.

Notably, the Dublin University Magazine and other periodicals contended that the written information provided at Manchester was not sufficient for guiding the public. Viewers could choose among a variety of publications, including official and unofficial guidebooks and many articles in the popular press. But, similarly to the high volume of commentary that surrounded the 1851 Great Exhibition, these Manchester articles must have confused, as well as assisted, viewers. Manchester guides often contained contradictory information. For example, some guidebooks questioned the provenance of many artworks, while others made no mention of these problems.

In addition to stark differences among various sources, single guides contained disparities in the kinds of information provided. For instance, some sections of the Official Catalogue feature extremely detailed commentary. “Paintings by Ancient Masters” includes a comprehensive history of art that defines important terms and artistic periods and points the viewer to specific paintings. The terms provided indicate that the author of this section, George Scharf (the first secretary and keeper of the Gallery of National Portraits), intended his commentary to help the general viewer. For example, Scharf defines “diptych” (a term that would have been famil-
A new kind of elitism?

Scharf also refers to popular guides such as Anna Jameson’s Handbook to the Public Galleries and Handbook to the Private Galleries and G. F. Waagen’s Treasures of Art in Great Britain. By contrast, other sections of the catalogue, such as “Paintings by Modern Masters,” merely list the artworks by number, title, and contributor. The organizers were not art critics but artists, connoisseurs, and antiquarians; their differing levels of guidance suggest a less uniformly enthusiastic vision of public education than that held by most art critics.

This unevenness is further indicated by the use of wall placards at the show. While the exhibition’s Museum of Ornamental Art section included labels, the Paintings by Ancient Masters division did not. The Manchester Guardian complained that a “few labels upon the [Ancient Masters] pictures, marking both date and the school to which they belong, would have done great service to the uninitiated, and to those who do not so readily turn to their catalogues” (Handbook to the Paintings by Ancient Masters 84). This commentator suggests that wall labels were omitted because they would have undermined the sale of the catalogue. In any event, many working-class visitors probably chose not to buy the one-shilling catalogue and would have benefited from the more widespread use of labels. The decision to do without labels in some sections reveals that the old notion that art should be appreciated without written mediation was still a prominent, though waning, ideal.

Not only does the catalogue demonstrate the problem of disparate information as well as venal consideration, but it also illustrates the overwhelming scope of the exhibition. The Manchester venue was divided into ten sections: Paintings by Ancient Masters, Paintings by Modern Masters, British Portrait Gallery, Collection of Historical Miniatures, Museum of Ornamental Art, Sculpture, Water-Colour Drawings, Original Drawings and Sketches by the Old Masters, Engravings, and Photographs. While the exhibition was praised for its comprehensiveness, the organizers’ attempts to cover such a range of media, time periods, and locales challenged attendees to digest an overwhelming array of art. In this respect, the accumulative impulse of organizers was not in the best interests of public education. Further, the catalogue demonstrates the uncertain arrangement of the artworks within these divisions. In particular, critics complained in Manchester periodicals that the works of each artist were not grouped together. It is in fact difficult for a modern reader of the catalogue to find where a particular work of art by a specific artist was located in the exhibition.
To combat these informational and organizational problems, critics claimed that their guidebooks would help the general viewer discern the most important artworks. In the introduction to *A Walk Through the Art-Treasures Exhibition: A Companion to the Official Catalogue* (1857), G. F. Waagen, the major organizer of the exhibition and then a professor of art history at Berlin University, remarks,

> The following pages are destined not for the small number of connoisseurs, but for the larger proportion of lovers of art who seek both pleasure and instruction within the walls of this Exhibition. My object is, in few words, to point out and to define the characteristics of such objects of art as deserve the attentive observation of all visitors. In so large a collection there is necessarily much of inferior interest, and many erroneous titles occur, by which the visitor may be misled. Moreover, he will gain time by not being obliged to select for himself from this accumulation of objects what is most worth seeing. ("Frontispiece")

Waagen takes a paternalistic stance in seeking to protect viewers from false attributions and from either seeing too much or too little. But he also implies that his comments are not exhaustive because he has focused on the earlier sections: “I therefore confine my remarks to those [artworks] which have most attracted my observation” ("Frontispiece"). Waagen suggests that viewers could value other paintings than those that have interested him. The paradox in Waagen’s remarks—between a commentary that expresses mere personal interest and one that serves as a comprehensive guide for “all” viewers—demonstrates a larger problem in Victorian art criticism. Because many venues displayed a large number of art objects, critics were often limited in what they themselves could examine and discuss. Neatly encapsulating this challenge, the art critic of the 1883 *Saturday Review* asked rhetorically, “Does anyone imagine that the art critic likes having eight hours, at the utmost, in which to inspect and form his opinions about eighteen hundred works of art?” (qtd. in Flint, *Victorians* 191). Despite writing a comprehensive guide to British art—*Treasures of Art in Great Britain* (1854), which provided much of the inspiration for the exhibition—and despite his own role as a primary organizer, Waagen indicates his inability to manage completely what visitors will see.

Waagen’s comments on specific artworks and sections of the exhibition clearly express this ambivalence about directing viewers. His *Treasures of Art in Great Britain* notwithstanding, Waagen refuses to write about individual English paintings “because these objects of art are better known to
the English public than to me; and . . . no foreigner can understand the merits of the English schools so well as the English themselves” (42). Waagen elsewhere cites other art critics as better authorities than himself. For example, he notes that J. B. Waring’s descriptions of the ornamental art in the official catalogue are sufficient: “It would be quite superfluous and presumptuous on my part to enter into any details” (74). But Waagen then recommends an exact order in which a visitor should read the catalogue and see the sculptures: “It is advisable to begin with the many fine antique sculptures in bronze and terracotta . . .; next, to read the observations on sculpture in ivory, p. 152; and then to go on in the following order to look at this quite first rate collection of sculptures in this material” (74). Waagen’s remarks on specific works are representative of those made by other critics at Manchester: they provide direction while noting the insufficiency of their expertise. Critics thus envision viewers as seeking some guidance, but not allowing themselves to be managed fully by any one source—even an official catalogue or its companion handbook.

Because of the uneven written information available at the exhibition, *The Dublin University Magazine* advocated a specific form of public instruction: “To exhibit all the objects that shall be displayed to the eye of the visitor without giving him any information further than catalogues can afford . . . will be somewhat like turning a man without books into a garden to learn botany. . . . The great efficient agent of instruction to be adopted is, in our judgment, the lecture” (620). Invited by the exhibition organizers, Ruskin delivered two lectures at Manchester entitled “The Discovery and Application of Art” and “The Accumulation and Distribution of Art.” As in his later “Traffic” (1864), Ruskin attacks the values of his hosts, arguing in these lectures that the accumulation of artworks is inimical to art education. Ruskin avoids specific commentary about the artworks, providing general principles instead. Most prominently, the individual, not the art critic, is responsible for interpreting artworks.

In order to prompt this work on the part of the viewer, Ruskin advocates focusing on the difficulties presented by a single great work of art. The mass of artworks at Manchester is, by contrast, too accessible for viewers: “Art ought not to be made cheap, beyond a certain point; for the amount of pleasure that you can receive from any great work, depends wholly on the quantity of attention and energy of mind you can bring to bear upon it. Now, that attention and energy depend more on the freshness of the thing than you would all suppose” (*Works* 16: 57–58). Ruskin argues that concentration on a few artworks will prevent them from becoming merely ordinary sights because “fragments of broken admirations will not,
when they are put together, make up one whole admiration; two and two, in this case, do not make four, nor anything like four. Your good picture, or book, or work of art of any kind, is always in some degree fenced and closed about with difficulty” (58). For Ruskin, the “difficulty” that encircles a good work of art can only be penetrated with careful, laborious attention: “Hence, it is wisely appointed for us that few of the things we desire can be had without considerable labour, at considerable intervals of time” (58).² At stake in the interpretive work that Ruskin proposes is a democratization of the arts without lowering standards of taste as a result. Unlike many contemporary commentators, Ruskin does not believe that the mere diffusion of artworks is an effective means of teaching viewers. Instead, such accessibility encourages the public to treat the arts as any other viewable commodity. By contrast, hard interpretive work demonstrates the value of the arts.

Although Ruskin seems democratic in advocating interpretive labor, he could be quite elitist, as his emphasis on orderly attention suggests. His comments at Manchester also betray an upper-class English elitism in his comments on preserving artworks: “Take pride in preserving great art, instead of producing mean art; pride in the possession of precious and enduring things, a little way off, instead of slight and perishing things near at hand” (Works 16: 70). By “a little way off,” Ruskin means Italy and other places in Europe; he hopes Englishmen will take up residence on the Continent in order to do what war-prone foreigners cannot do: preserve their own art. He argues, “Every stake that you could hold in the stability of the Continent, and every effort that you could make to give example of English habits and principles on the Continent . . . would have tenfold reaction on the prosperity of England” (70–71). Ruskin’s emphasis on preservation restricts by national origin and class: only wealthy English landowners have the means and “habits” to care properly for European art.

In addition to Ruskin’s worry about preservation, the Manchester exhibition highlighted a different set of problems concerning the provenance of artworks. As most of the exhibited artworks were from private collections, they had not previously been subjected to scrutiny by a wide array of experts. Because the show put so many artworks together, viewers could now compare works that were supposedly by a particular artist. In their comments at Manchester, critics were especially concerned with matters of attribution. The increased preoccupation in postromantic aesthetics with originality, along with the heightened demand for guidance about a growing number of available paintings, placed special pressures on critics to identify correctly the works of known painters. Properly attributing works was viewed as a way to instruct viewers and strengthen national art venues.
Sir Austen Henry Layard, a friend of Ruskin’s and an influential art critic for the *Quarterly Review*, describes the exhibition’s attributive problems: “Of the long line of great painters who adorned the Florentine and Sienese schools during the fourteenth century . . . we have no worthy example; of most of them none at all, although their names are liberally bestowed by the catalogue” (173). Layard’s comment is representative of a mid-nineteenth-century trend that “reversed the once common practice of ascribing as many works as possible to artists of note. New methods of analysis along with the increasing value placed on scarcity made it more interesting and important not to swell the pages of the catalogues, but to reduce the number of works ascribed to a celebrated author of the past” (Siegel, “Leonardo” 169). Ironically, as Leonee Ormond has demonstrated, and as I discuss in more detail in chapter 6, artworks were frequently reattributed incorrectly.

According to Layard and some other critics at Manchester, not all these questionable paintings are misattributed: some are outright forgeries. Layard asserts that some works are hung at a distance to make exposure difficult. Steegman notes that Layard’s claims were well-founded: “There was an immense demand for pictures of certain Schools, and the demand was met by an assiduous and steady supply. *Expertise* was exceedingly rare, and the great majority of collectors at home and on their travels trusted to their own judgement” (243). Art critics at Manchester tried to fill this gap in expertise by advising the public which artworks were genuine. For example, Layard attributes “the gem of the whole Exhibition . . . the unfinished picture representing the Holy family with four angels” (175) to Michelangelo. Yet he admits that “there is no evidence of its being his work, except those qualities which mark it as worthy of his genius” (175). As Siegel notes in “Leonardo,” identifying such subjective “qualities” was more important to some art critics (such as Walter Pater) than scientific evidence that a certain artist had actually painted an artwork. By contrast, art historians such as Anna Jameson and Elizabeth Eastlake sought to determine attributions with as much factual information as possible. Layard demonstrates a third, hybrid approach—a desire both to identify works of genius through traditional connoisseurship and, in other cases, to fix attributions scientifically.

As my conclusion to chapter 3 indicates, these preoccupations with authenticity and proper attribution have remained pervasive into the twenty-first century. While we now take for granted that art writers will carefully research the provenance of artworks, this approach was not yet standard in the mid-Victorian period. In the older, practicing-artist model of the art commentator in the Sir Joshua Reynolds mold, there was little time to conduct exhaustive historical inquiry. By contrast, the increasing
specialization of late-industrial culture allowed such writers as Jameson and Eastlake both the time and the audience to research the history of art. In addition, this same culture, in its seemingly endless ability to manufacture, created new worries about the authenticity of art. We thus see a new conception of the art specialist as a figure who could protect the public from “false” art. While such an aim was certainly in line with teaching a broader public to appreciate the best art, it also betrayed a new kind of elitism in privileging the art critic’s knowledge. As we will see in chapter 6, George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë were less concerned with such facts than they were with exploiting the possibilities of artworks with more indeterminate titles and authors.