State, nation, and empire in the history of Georgian art

L’État, la nation et l’empire dans l’histoire de l’art britannique de l’époque géorgienne

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Lo Stato, la nazione e l'impero nella storia dell'arte britannica dell'epoca georgiana

El Estado, la nación y el imperio en la historia del arte británico de la época georgiana

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Ever since Nicolas Pevsner’s 1955 radio broadcast on “The Englishness of English Art” (PEVSNER, 1956), historians of English art, or British art for those with a more inclusive bent, have raised the question of whether one can speak of a truly English, or British, aesthetic (see BINDMAN, 2008). For his own case study, Pevsner focused on the Perpendicular Style of architecture, which suited his architectural training, and then turned with alacrity to the painters William Hogarth, Joshua Reynolds, William Blake, and John Constable (PEVSNER, 1956). While the essentializing nature of Pevsner’s thesis now seems dated and highly dubious, these four artists remain central to the field’s understanding of art’s professionalization and, it could be argued, its nationalization between the beginning of Hogarth’s painting career in the 1730s and Constable’s death in 1837, a date that corresponded, moreover, with the passing of King George IV and the accession of Queen Victoria. This essay therefore focuses on scholarship dealing with the Georgian era from the reign of George II to that of George IV. But rather than asking, as did previous generations of scholars, whether England possessed a bedrock national identity with clear visual signifiers, art historians have more recently begun to ask how and to what extent artists and their audiences produced “England” and “Britain” as creative fictions. Benedict Anderson’s description of modern nations as “imagined communities” (ANDERSON, 1983) pervades many of the studies below and has kindled a heightened interest in the ways in which visual art helped to manufacture national identity. This article examines how historians of British art and visual culture over the past decade have engaged with three highly contested and mutable entities: the state, the nation, and empire.

While the four apostles of British art presented in Pevsner’s lectures have now taken their place within an expanded “field of cultural production” (BOURDIEU, 1993), their relative importance to the field has hardly been diminished. Joshua Reynolds, in particular, as the preeminent portrait painter in London and the first president of the Royal Academy of Arts, has become a litmus test for art historians attempting to define how visual art, now operating within a newly professionalized set of markets and institutions, intersected with an equally protean set of structures within the modern nation state. Reynolds’s Discourses, read to the members and students of the Royal Academy of Arts between 1769 and 1790, and published widely, have long been touchstones in the history of British art (REYNOLDS, 1975). Frequently cited for their articulation of cosmopolitan values and a Neoplatonic aesthetic, the Discourses can also be read against the grain for competing values that Reynolds sought to either downplay or marginalize. John Crowley, Holger Hoock, Kay Dian Kriz, Geoff Quilley, and I (CROWLEY, 2011; HOOCK, 2010; KRIZ, 2008; QUILLEY, 2011; FORDHAM, 2010a) have all isolated a single sentence from the first Discourse, the inaugural address to the Royal Academicians and
their invited guests, in which Reynolds declared, “It is indeed difficult to give any other reason, why an empire like that of Britain, should so long have wanted an ornament so suitable to its greatness, than that slow progression of things, which naturally makes elegance and refinement the last effect of opulence and power” (REYNOLDS, 1975, p. 13).

Reynolds is uncharacteristically explicit in this passage about the relevance of “empire” to the arts. Indeed, this is Reynolds’s only use of the term empire in the Discourses; he more commonly refers to either England or Great Britain as “this nation” (p. 14), or “a polite, and a commercial nation” (p. 13). Reynolds’s use of the term, however, does nothing to disrupt the broader contours of his argument that institutions like the Royal Academy of Arts developed slowly and inevitably out of their economic and social base. British art history from the last decade has begun to challenge this claim, arguing instead that “an empire like that of Britain” actively, and in some cases rapidly, transformed the visual arts and even vice versa. Key examples examined below include visual responses to the slave trade, the emergence and promotion of artistic institutions, and the basic trajectory of landscape and history painting. Indeed, William Blake’s sharp retort that “Empire follows Art and not Vice Versa as Englishmen suppose” (see MITCHELL, 2010), made in the margins of his own copy of Reynolds’s Discourses, now feels like an anticipation of Benedict Anderson’s thesis that nations are imaginatively constructed. In studies on the eighteenth-century Atlantic world, in particular, “Englishness” and “Anglicization” are now conceived in relation to the “Empire of Goods,” to quote the title of T. H. Breen’s now canonical essay (BREEN, 1986), which is to say that material goods including prints, paintings, and sculptures helped to unite a disparate set of local identities and interests. Or as Maya Jasanoff suggests, “I see the British Empire itself as a kind of collection; pieced together and gaining definition over time, shaped by a range of circumstances, accidents, and intentions” (JASANOFF, 2005, p. 6).

Ultimately, it’s not enough to ascribe exclusively to either Reynolds’s Whiggish notion of economic, political, and cultural progress or to Blake’s radical creative autonomy. Art-historical studies have largely overturned the lapidary quality of Reynolds’s claim in the first Discourse, suggesting that artistic institutions were politically contingent, historically uneven, and deeply uncertain of their own parameters and aims. Furthermore, these studies have characterized British art as a largely collective enterprise that was, in crucial ways, a function of nation building and state centralization. Stated differently, “British art” was, and continues to be, an imagined community as messy as British state formation itself. This realization, which constitutes what I will call the “political turn” in British art history, is largely the product of the last ten years. Indeed, historians of British art were notably reluctant in previous decades to discuss the arts in direct relation to the state, or to its more chaotic and demotic offspring, politics. This essay begins with a discussion of the “New Art History” and its relative silence on the state, nation, and empire in the 1980s and 1990s. It then examines the explosion of academic interest in national identity, state formation, and imperial representation that has transformed the field since roughly 2000.

The Social History of Art and Stateless Capitalism

The field of British art history was uniquely primed to adopt the Social History of Art that T. J. Clark and Griselda Pollock helped to inaugurate in the 1970s and 1980s. By that time, British art history had already been infused with critical, and particularly Marxist, approaches, with the arrival in the 1920s and 1930s of Continental émigrés who then turned
their attention to British art (see BANN, 2002). Studies of particular note include Francis Klingender’s *Art and the Industrial Revolution* and Frederick Antal’s *Hogarth and his Place in European Art* (KLINGENDER, 1947; ANTAL, 1962), which relied heavily on Marxist thought and aesthetics. The very title of Antal’s book announces the “internationalization” of a painter championed for his sympathetic view of the working classes. This Marxist strand was thoroughly marginalized, however, in mainstream art-historical accounts, as epitomized by Ellis Waterhouse’s *Painting in Britain, 1530-1790* (WATERHOUSE, [1953] 1994), first published in 1953 and remaining doggedly in print. Waterhouse approached the topic through a chronological series of artists’ œuvres, downplaying institutional history despite the close ties of the book’s chief protagonist, Joshua Reynolds, to the Royal Academy. Possibly in reaction to the Marxist strain of British art history, Waterhouse refused to allow any form of collective identity or political ideology to displace personal agency and artistic genius.

These historiographic fissures help to explain the explosive impact of a number of books on English landscape painting published in the 1980s. Works of particular note include *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730-1840* (BARRELL, 1980; fig. 1), in which John Barrell analogized tensions within English pastoral poetry with those of painting; David H. Solkin’s polemical exhibition catalogue on the “father” of English landscape, *Richard Wilson: The Landscape of Reaction* (Richard Wilson, 1982); and Ann Bermingham’s exploration of “the contradiction between the social reality of the countryside and its idealized aesthetic representation” in *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1860* (BERMINGHAM, 1986, p. 11). Compelling essays by David H. Solkin, Neil McWilliam and Alex Potts, and Andrew Hemingway have since examined this historiography and its relation to Thatcherite politics (SOLKIN, 1985; McWILLIAM, POTTS, 1986; HEMINGWAY, 2006). What deserves emphasis here, though, is that class conflict, land enclosure, and capital accumulation provided the lens through which English landscape painting was recast. In these accounts, state formation and political jostling were largely incidental to painting’s superstructural relation to a modernizing economic base.

John Barrell reoriented the field of British art history again in 1986 with the publication of *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt* (BARRELL, 1986), which made use of Foucauldian discourse theory, and especially J. G. A. Pocock’s definition of “civic humanism” to examine English writing about art. Together with David H. Solkin’s *Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England* (SOLKIN, 1993), it powerfully and persuasively established a narrative arc for British art that has persisted until quite recently. Indeed, the combination of Marxist theory with French post-structuralism became known as the “New Art History,” and it has yet to be superseded by any other clearly branded historiographic movement. Over the course of the eighteenth century, Barrell and Solkin argued, British art underwent a polite reformation in which an urban bourgeoisie...
gradually shaped aristocratic culture into its own image, thereby establishing a discursive field for the commodification of art. Ultimately, these two studies heightened the contrast between Ancien Régime French art and proto-capitalist British art. The Royal Academy of Art, founded in 1768 by George III and installed in the neoclassical grandeur of Somerset House, had “arrived too late,” in Solkin’s phrase, to counter the economic division of labor; as a French-style Academy geared towards an elite audience and the promotion of an authoritarian regime, it was incapable of promoting a genuinely public art in commercial London. Despite Barrell’s title, and Solkin’s engagement with artistic institutions, these narratives dealt little with the impact of Westminster politics, nation building, or imperial pressures on the “public sphere,” a concept indebted to Jürgen Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (HABERMAS, 1962) 1989), in which the public sphere constituted a kind of theater in which those excluded from Ancien Régime power structures could participate, albeit indirectly, in public and political life. One paradox of this concept, as it has been deployed in British art history, is that it turns the state into either a stable offstage entity or a marginal actor in high cultural affairs.

The field of British art history as it continued to expand dramatically in the 1990s tended – at the risk of oversimplifying a diverse scholarly output – to reinforce the discourse of politeness established in the previous decade. One crucial expansion came with the growing sophistication of “consumer culture” as an analytic category, which placed greater emphasis on the reception and display of artworks and the constructed identities of cultural consumers (POINTON, 1993; BERMINGHAM, BREWER, 1995; BERMINGHAM, 2000). This scholarship dealt exceptionally well with questions of gender and taste, and it quite naturally eschewed fine art’s relationship to the state. Art historians at the vanguard of the field in the 1990s understandably feared that such a topic would lead to old-fashioned institutional history, a micro-political history indebted to Lewis Namier, or worse. Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* (FUKUYAMA, 1992) captures something of the decade’s Zeitgeist, characterized by a general complacency toward Realpolitik in the face of Western liberal democracy’s ultimate triumph. Kevin Sharpe was something of an exception, writing in his preface to *Selling the Tudor Monarchy: Authority and Image in Sixteenth-Century England* that he began his project in the 1990s in response to the “politics of style” cultivated by New Labour, which was “itself more a rebranding exercise than anything else” (SHARPE, 2009, p. xvi). Sharpe makes the telling observation that “we should rather see a public sphere as emerging from, and as part of, the representational state which (even though it may not have been intended) fostered debate and critical discussion of politics and power” (p. 31). Sharpe’s use of the term “rebranding” nonetheless implied that Western democratic states were fundamentally secure and stable, and it corresponded nicely with the “consumer turn” in early modern scholarship.

It would be entirely too convenient to suggest that this complacency came crashing down on September 11, 2001. It would appear, nonetheless, that the aftershocks from this event strained many of the polite and commercial narratives that underpinned the New Art History. Rather than “The End of History,” as Fukuyama had predicted, the rush to war in the Middle East in 2003 and 2004, and the public rhetoric that accompanied it, added a new historical chapter rich with past assumptions, yet inflected by unique conditions. T. J. Clark and his colleagues, under the collective name Retort, characterized this new historical moment as one defined by “the contradictions of military neo-liberalism under conditions of spectacle” (BOAL et al., 2005, p. 15). Western liberal democracies easily survived the threats of al-Qaeda and its offshoots, but they have had a much more difficult time responding to economic stratification, media saturation, biogenetic engineering, and environmental degradation
which is to say that the first decade of the twenty-first century juxtaposed intractable political problems with an astonishingly incompetent set of political mechanisms. As Retort framed the problem, “We find ourselves, quite suddenly, living in an age defined by a terrible atavism – a plunging backward into forms of ideological and geopolitical struggle that call to mind now the Scramble for Africa, now the Wars of Religion. But this brute return of the past is accompanied – here is the real challenge to understanding – by an equally monstrous political deployment of (and entrapment in) the apparatus of a modern [...] production of appearances. Interests and imagery collide. A bald-faced imperialism is crossed with a struggle for control of ‘information’” (p. 14). The problem of empire, and just as importantly the problem of imperial representation, had become deeply unsettled once again.

While the New Art History had been pessimistic about the prospects of a genuinely public art, it implicitly reinforced a Whiggish account of British history: released from the constraints of the old client economy and state interference, British artists embraced the free market and became self-actuated entrepreneurs “painting for money.” For all of its explanatory power, the discourse of civic humanism and its bourgeois variant politeness had a strange way of reinforcing many of Georgian culture’s own ideological blind spots. The violence of war, the atrocities of the slave trade, the machinations of politicians, and the volubility of public opinion generally fell outside its purview. In contrast, studies belonging to the “political turn,” such as those examined below, suggest that fine art gained authority, purpose, and public prominence in its relation, both deliberate and inadvertent, to state power. And while states operated within certain market constraints, they also acted capriciously, erratically, and at cross-purposes with their stated aims. The same can be said of visual artists. Politics is messier than discourse and ideology, and summarization of the varied studies below is difficult, although certain trends emerge since roughly 2000, when the state, nation, and empire became key terms in the history of British art.

Slavery, Abolition, and the Black Atlantic

Studies on “the Black Atlantic” – to use Paul Gilroy’s pioneering phrase (Gilroy, 1993) – never subscribed to the polite and commercial narratives of mainstream British art history described above, and they therefore offered an important precedent for the political turn in art history, albeit a problematic one. The visual culture of the Black Atlantic was often ephemeral, demotic, and politically contingent, tracking alongside Parliamentary debates and legislation. Abolitionist imagery, in particular, has been easily bracketed out of mainstream art history precisely because of its direct political engagement. There were moments, however, when abolitionist imagery, or at least an associated set of imagery, migrated into the ostensibly autonomous realm of fine art. In the Royal Academy exhibition of 1840, Joseph Mallord William Turner exhibited an explosively colored and provocatively titled seascape, Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhoon coming on (Boston, Museum of Fine Arts; fig. 2). In a masterful analysis by Marcus Wood in Blind Memory:
Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America 1780-1865 (Wood, 2000), the painting becomes both a symptom and an exemplum of Britain’s “blind memory” about the slave trade. Turner’s painting recalled a horrific episode aboard the slave ship Zong in which “dead and dying” slaves were thrown overboard in 1781 in order for the captain to claim insurance reimbursement. The “Zong incident” helped to catalyze abolitionist fervor in England, culminating in Parliament’s abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833. Turner’s painting was produced on the right side, so to speak, of these reforms. Wood argues, however, that the painting remains uniquely disconcerting within British art, as slave limbs protrude from a sublime sea of breathtaking beauty. While the vast majority of abolitionist imagery “works hard to deny the possibility of gaining knowledge of the disaster of the slave trade” (p. 8), Turner’s painting resists this “white mythology” with uncanny force. “Hope, Hope, fallacious Hope! / Where is thy market now?” Turner wrote in a poem appended to the painting. In these lines, tensions between fine art and slave profit became uncharacteristically latent. In Wood’s evocative analysis, politics and the institution of slavery guided and warped artistic form in ways that are difficult to grasp from the period’s own dominant discourses.

Art-historical studies relating to slavery, the slave trade, and the West Indies have expanded dramatically since. While the New Art History scanned the “dark side of the landscape” for the repression and displacement of class tensions and physical labor (Barrell, 1980), “Black Atlantic” studies have noted a repression in the visual record even darker, and with potentially greater distorting effects. An Economy of Colour: Visual Culture and the Atlantic World, 1660-1830, edited by Geoff Quilley and Kay Dian Kriz (Quilley, Kriz, 2003), includes essays related to both British and French sugar islands, and it suggests that, while London and Paris had divergent artistic cultures, both were fueled by plantation profits and a rigorous separation between human expression and human exploitation. As Quilley and Kriz wrote in the introduction, “the significance of commerce in relation to visual culture has overwhelmingly been in terms of its value as an idea or ideology rather than its historical actualization as a transoceanic practice conducted on other continents than ‘the Continent’ and on islands other than Great Britain” (Quilley, Kriz, 2003, p. 4).

colonial hybridity,” they “represent figures on the streets of Kingston: flamboyantly attired performers of dance, drama, and music participating in annual holiday masquerades, as well as itinerant tradesmen and laborers” (p. 1; fig. 3). As thoroughly imperial visual documents, these prints are marked by the economic logic of the triangular trade, by representational traditions imported from England, and by the politics of abolition. The catalogue explains that these images were produced during the period of “apprenticeship,” the rocky, transitional moment between the official end of slavery by order of the British Parliament in 1834 and the actual coming into effect of emancipation on August 1, 1838, remarking, “The figures whom Belisario sketched were thus suspended in a historical and legal limbo – a moment between slavery and freedom” (p. 2). But the contributors to the catalogue are also eager to demonstrate that these prints exceed the demands of the imperial state and indeed counter many of its aims: “Belisario and his collaborator Adolphe Duperly aimed to establish an indigenous form of Jamaican art, one marked by subject matter dissonant with metropolitan convention (such as Jonkonnu) and occasionally overtly transgressive” (p. 4). In their attempt to promote a degree of cultural autonomy for Jamaica, Belisario and Duperly gave voice, albeit a highly mediated one, to Afro-Jamaican culture. We are a long way here from the Orientalist dichotomies that Edward Said noted in the *Description de l’Égypte* (1809-1829), with its centralized production in Paris and its overtly imperialist claims (SAID, 1978); state, nation, and empire appear in *Art and Emancipation* as a concrete set of institutions as well as a looser set of identities, and the authors emphasize just how contested, and even incompatible, many of these affiliations were in the Black Atlantic world.

Kay Dian Kriz who contributed to the Belisario catalogue, expanded the frame of her argument in *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement: Picturing the West Indies 1700-1840* (KRIZ, 2008), which posits “refinement” as a key concept in the articulation of cultural relations between metropolitan English cities and the British West Indies. The title’s pun is all the more effective given how “the culture of refinement” entails the nearly complete suppression of slavery and sugar in visual culture, even in the representation of Jamaican sugar plantations. In a crucial chapter on metropolitan caricature, Kriz argues that graphic satire and racial caricature exceed the comfortable binaries of “planter” and “abolitionist” positions familiar to us from Caribbean history. She undertakes the difficult and precarious task of attempting to determine what viewers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries found funny about caricatures that strike us as deeply offensive today. Humor is capable of drawing upon deep psychological wells, and many of these satires depend upon a notion of classical aesthetics and beauty that render black bodies absurd and grotesque, particularly as the representation of those bodies approach ideal cannons of beauty (fig. 4).
Kriz expands upon David Bindman’s claim in *Ape to Apollo: Aesthetics and the Idea of Race in the Eighteenth Century* (BINDMAN, 2002) that Western aesthetics were shaped in profound ways by encounters with racial and cultural difference. Her analysis of individual caricatures reveals both the utility of Enlightenment aesthetics to a slave trading society and the volatility of this aesthetic in actual artistic practice. Just as abolitionists began to argue for the liberation of slaves from physical bondage, visual culture contributed to a more insidious form of racism in which “blacks” were debased relative to a white classical ideal.

Recent studies on William Blake’s engagement with the problem of slavery by Saree Makdisi, Marcus Wood, and David Bindman and Daryl Pinckney demonstrate how potent, but also how abstracted, Blake’s account of human enslavement could be (MAKDISI, 2002; WOOD, 2003; William Blake…, 2007). His view of slavery as both a flawed institution and a malady of the human spirit offers another instance of how the Black Atlantic could impact British culture and aesthetics. As Simon Gikandi has argued in *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*, “both the institution of slavery and the culture of taste were fundamental in the shaping of modern identity, and […] they did so not apart but as nonidentical twins, similar yet different. […] slavery and taste came to be intimately connected even when they were structurally constructed to be radical opposites” (GIKANDI, 2011, p. xii). Gikandi’s argument also helps to explain how art-historical narratives and Black Atlantic studies in the 1990s paralleled one another, both ostensibly self-sufficient, yet mutually implicated. Much of the work since 2000, cited above, has attempted to make explicit how the visual culture of slavery intersected with, or actively denied, the culture of taste.

Empire and Nation

In the summer of 2001, Tate Britain in London hosted a major conference under the broad rubric “Art and the British Empire.” Contributors to the conference and a subsequent publication of the same name (BARRINGER, QUILLEY, FORDHAM, 2007) demonstrated that “art,” “British,” and “Empire” were all contested terms with a deeply uncertain relationship to one another. One of the key organizers of that conference, Geoff Quilley, has produced a series of books and exhibition catalogues that offer some of the most sustained and trenchant analyses of fine art’s relationship to state institutions and identities. As a one-time curator of the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, London, Quilley worked to resuscitate the reputation of William Hodges in a monumental exhibition and an excellent catalogue, *William Hodges 1744-1797: The Art of Exploration* (William Hodges…, 2004). In his essay for the catalogue, Quilley began, “The artistic career of William Hodges RA (1744-1797) coincided precisely with the decline and foundation respectively, of what have been termed ‘the first and second British empires’” (QUILLEY, 2004, p. 1). Hodges trained as a landscape painter under Richard Wilson, the subject of Solkin’s controversial exhibition in 1982, and then creatively and assiduously adapted those skills to represent the South Pacific (1772-1775), the Western Cape of Africa, and India (1780-1783). Previously, these peregrinations reinforced art-historical perceptions of Hodges as a second-rate artist unable to achieve metropolitan success. Quilley turns this judgment on its head, arguing that these travels made Hodges a paradigmatic artist for a nation struggling to define itself in relation to exploration, conquest, and racial and ethnic difference. If English landscape dominated the New Art History of the 1980s, then landscape and seascape have returned as crucial genres in the articulation of British art history. They do so this time, however, as “the ‘dreamwork’ of imperialism,” to use W. J. T. Mitchell’s evocative phrase (MITCHELL, 2002, p. 10).
In Quilley’s monograph *Empire to Nation: Art, History and the Visualization of Maritime Britain 1768-1829*, the author establishes an important tension between the first two terms: “The title of this book […] is intended in a double – spatial and temporal – sense, to identify both a geographical and a chronological shift from ‘empire’ to ‘nation’. […] it emphasizes the importance of the maritime as the single most material link, and in fact the only conduit, between Britain and its overseas empire in the period; it thus asserts the fundamental necessity to treat the visual and non-visual imagery related to the maritime sphere and its practices as at some level an articulation of that relationship between empire and metropolis” (Quilley, 2011, p. 9-10). One painting, in particular, emerges in Quilley’s work as a complex document of British identity formation as it condenses Hodges’s eyewitness sketches from the second Captain Cook expedition into an ambitious exhibition painting for the London public: *The War-Boats of the Island of Otaheite* (London, National Maritime Museum; fig. 5) was exhibited at the Royal Academy in London in 1777. The Admiralty in fact employed Hodges, which offers an unusually direct relationship between art and the state in the eighteenth century and explains why so much of his work can be found in the National Maritime Museum’s collections. In a penetrating analysis of the carefully composed nature of the work, Quilley argues, “The painting’s openness to an historical or historicizing reading is above all revealed in the way in which it pertains to the dominant political and social discourse in the mid-1770s, to the four-stage theory of human development, to the highly problematic discourse of patriotism, and to the discourse of history itself – the history of human society” (Quilley, 2011, p. 78). The author’s reading thus suggests how a painting such as *The War Boats* allegorizes the very process of imperial expansion and nation building.

Quilley’s focus on the maritime as an expression of empire places his work firmly within a growing body of art-historical literature by Sarah Monks (Monks 2008), Eleanor Hughes, and other scholars of the Black Atlantic who view maritime painting as a key cultural practice.

5. William Hodges, *The war boats of the island of Otaheite (Tahiti) and the Society Isles, with a view of part of the harbour of Ohaneneno, in the island of Ulieta, one of the Society Islands, 1777*, London, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.
In *Empire to Nation*, Quilley contends, “the image of the maritime is almost by definition an image of displacement, in that it treats at a basic level of ‘other spaces,’ the spaces of the sea, conventionally regarded as culturally and materially distinct from, or in opposition to, the bounded landmasses of the nation and its colonial or imperial territories” (Quilley, 2011, p. 10). “Empire” refers in Quilley’s account to a loose assemblage of eighteenth-century ideas about mercantilism, exploration, colonization, human progress, and Anglo-identity that “was superseded, by the 1800s, by a nationalism that absorbed British maritime enterprise as part of an increasingly trenchant and moralized account of national history” (Quilley, 2011, p. 11).

To force the point a bit, Quilley discerns a progression from eighteenth-century maritime “empire” to the patriotic “nation” of the Napoleonic period to a Victorian empire staffed with bombastically grand Indian Viceroyds. He suggests that in the Whiggish impulse to narrate a shift from provincial England to Victorian superpower, historians of culture have tended to overlook the symbolic and structural richness of Britain’s eighteenth-century maritime empire.

One catalyst for these transformations, and for changing notions of the terms empire and nation, was armed conflict. Recent scholarship has emphasized the impact of war and militarism on British national identity, and increasingly on cultural production. Literary scholars have been particularly adept at tracing the relationship between state militarism and cultural form. Notable studies include M. John Cardwell’s *Arts and Arms: Literature, Politics, and Patriotism during the Seven Years’ War* (Cardwell, 2004); Daniel O’Quinn’s *Staging Governance: Theatrical Imperialism in London, 1770-1800 and Entertaining Crisis in the Atlantic Imperium, 1770-1790* (O’Quinn, 2005, 2011); Lynn M. Festa’s *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France* (Festa, 2006); and Carol Watts’s *The Cultural Work of Empire: The Seven Years’ War and the Imagining of the Shandean State* (Watts, 2007). In the field of art history, a collection of essays edited by John Bonehill and Geoff Quilley, *Conflicting Visions: War and Visual Culture in Britain and France c. 1700-1830* (Bonehill, Quilley, 2005), elucidates how imperial rivalry between Britain and France impacted the visual arts of both nations. On a fairly obvious level, these clashes generated subject matter and contemporary heroes for artists eager to capitalize on public interest in armed conflict. But state militarization impacted the visual arts in ways more subtle and profound, including the centralization of cultural and political initiatives, the forging of potent cultural analogies between a nation’s arts and arms, and a renewed willingness for the “public” and “private” sectors to find common (and often mutually beneficial) ground.

The artistic career of Paul Sandby provides an interesting case study for the impact of war on British art. As a teenager, Sandby first gained employment on the Military Survey of the Scottish Highlands, which he began in 1747 following the suppression of the Jacobite Rebellion the previous year. His work marks the point of departure for John Crowley’s wide-ranging *Imperial Landscapes: Britain’s Global Visual Culture, 1745-1820* (Crowley, 2011; fig. 6), in which the author examines the ubiquity of
topographic drawing and painting in Britain’s expanding empire. While Crowley traces a few European precedents for colonial topographic art, he argues that “British artists were disproportionately frequent and original in representing their imperial worlds topographically, and that distinctiveness makes their work inherently interesting from a comparative perspective” (p. 13). The causes for this exceptionalism are less clear, however, and the mechanisms by which Sandby’s topographic innovations spread so far and wide are left largely tacit and unexamined. Was Sandby the catalyst or simply an exemplary figure of Britain’s unique investment in topographic art? Crowley notes that “prior to the Seven Years’ War, there was little sustained interest – either in Britain or in the colonies themselves – in how places in Britain’s Atlantic colonies or Asian trading factories actually looked” (p. 2). Was this new topographic interest driven by consumer demand, or was it led by artistic innovation?

Driven by the need to knit together diverse visual material from across the globe, Crowley occasionally occludes the distinctions that artists themselves were most eager to establish. In 1768, Sandby was appointed Drawing Master at the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich and named a founding member of the Royal Academy of Arts. These royal initiatives, to which could be added the departure of the first Captain Cook expedition to the South Pacific, suggest an increased state investment in the arts and sciences, broadly conceived. But these endeavors shouldn’t be conflated too quickly. Sandby, for one, appears to have carefully segregated his work as a drawing instructor at Woolwich from his role as a landscape painter at the Royal Academy. While the foundation of the Royal Academy of Arts could be viewed as an extension of the imperial state into cultural affairs, with artists “taking advantage of the extension of British power to create an elegant empire” (CROWLEY, 2011, p. 45), the Academy could also be viewed as an institutional bulwark against the cultural and imperial heterogeneity flowing back up the Thames.

The very incompatibility of artistic practice on the imperial periphery with the aesthetic demands of the metropole constitutes a growing literature. It is a major undercurrent in studies by Harriet Guest, Anne Salmond, and Vanessa Smith on the European encounter with, and representation of, Tahiti (GUEST, 2007; SALMOND, 2010; SMITH, 2010). These studies foreground questions of gender and family, which, as Anne McClintock suggests (McCLINTOCK, 1997), have frequently been ignored by historians of nationalism and state formation. Studies on British India, in particular, have explored tensions between metropolitan theory and artistic practice with great interest. While this topic deserves a more extensive review than I can give it here, scholars such as Nicholas Dirks, Natasha Eaton, Sarah Monks, and Romita Ray have all drawn attention to unique representational tensions on the imperial periphery that resulted in skewed or missed readings in London (DIRKS, 1987; RAY, 2007; EATON, 2008a-c; MONKS, 2010). For Sara Suleri and Finbarr Barry Flood, the Warren Hastings trial (1787-1795), in which the first Governor-General of India was accused of corruption, epitomizes the degree to which projection and fantasy informed metropolitan conceptions of Britain’s Indian governance (SULERI, 1992; FLOOD, 2006). Graphic satirists turned to the magic-lantern show as an apt metaphor for the warped and disjointed glimpses that the London public had of India not just through Edmund Burke’s fervid rhetoric in the impeachment trial of Hastings, but also through Royal Academy exhibitions and a flourishing Orientalist print culture.

British artists frequently promoted their work as topographically and ethnographically accurate, while in practice they were buffeted by colonial pressures on the one hand (the needs of East India Company bureaucrats, the taste of Mughal Indian rulers, the physical limits of their own bodies, etc.) and metropolitan standards (of taste, political efficacy, racial
stereotypes, gender roles, etc.) on the other. To paraphrase Anna Karenina, if successful artists are all alike, every unhappy artist is unhappy in his or her own way. Much has been made of the opportunities that empire opened to British-born artists, but recent studies have begun to emphasize the costs of an itinerant career on artists such as Robert Edge Pine and John Aitken (Hooch, 2010) James Wales (Fordham, 2008), and John Septimus Roe (Martins, Driver, 2007). Even the uncharacteristically successful Indian careers of William Hodges (Bonehill, 2004) and Johan Zoffany (Jasanoff, 2011) contain intimations of loss and disenchantment that became acute upon their return to England. These personal struggles are at least as interesting as their cumulative artistic achievement. One suspects that their lives would have been easier had they been willing or able to become simple instruments of the state.

Ultimately, the concept of the nation has moved from a stable offstage entity in art-historical writing to an instrument of critical analysis. Tensions between nationalism and either internationalism or cosmopolitanism have emerged as a particularly poignant set of academic debates for the Georgian period. Christiana Payne, in an introduction to a collection of essays titled English Accents: Interactions with British Art c. 1776-1855 (Payne, Vaughan, 2004), argues that "eighteenth and nineteenth-century art, despite its exploitation for nationalistic purposes, was essentially international in spirit: artists were willing to travel mentally and to look for good ideas from elsewhere, even if they did so by staying at home and looking at prints" (p. 7). This may set up a false dichotomy, however, between cosmopolitan means and national-end ends. Many of the studies examined here suggest that the concept of the nation constitutes an indispensable critical framework, rather than a corruption or exploitation, of visual art produced in the Georgian era. Every work of art, even the most cosmopolitan, found itself embedded in a network of national institutions and assumptions. As Mark Cheetham has recently argued, "practices of artwriting, public art museums and the discipline of art history evolved in Britain and Europe from the late eighteenth century to the present alongside and in dialogue with discourses of nationhood, nationalism and patriotism" (Cheetham, 2012, p. 2). This passage appears in Artwriting, Nation, and Cosmopolitanism in Britain: The "Englishness" of English Art Theory since the Eighteenth Century, in which Cheetham explores the paradoxical nature of English art theory, a form of artwriting that often asserted its Englishness through an ostensible aversion to theory. As Cheetham observes, "We easily forget that thinking through the frame of the nation is more than a simple expedient and not only a bad habit" (p. 2).

Institutions of Art and State

One important step in this critical direction is to determine how specific institutions of art and state interacted. Artists in the early modern period, it is worth noting, often worked directly for the monarch in an overtly propagandistic mode. Kevin Sharpe has published two books in a projected trilogy exploring this dynamic. The titles of the first two volumes clearly announce their main themes: Selling the Tudor Monarchy: Authority and Image in Sixteenth-Century England and Image Wars: Promoting Kings and Commonwealths in England 1603-1660 (Sharpe, 2009, 2010). Like the first two volumes, the third will focus on "both the sacralization and demystification of regality in early modernity" (Sharpe, 2009, p. xxi), taking his account beyond the Glorious Revolution and into the early eighteenth century. No equivalent study exists for the Georgian period, and for good reason. The eighteenth-century state could no longer be viewed as synonymous with the monarchy, although artists continued to draw upon older visual traditions in their representation of the monarchy and of the nation variously defined.
Patronage is one of the key indices of art-state interaction, and the terms public and private have tended to define that relationship. Recent scholarship, however, has cast significant doubt on this dichotomy, arguing instead that Georgian patronage often consisted of a hybrid mix of public interests and private funding. Craig Hanson’s *The English Virtuoso: Art, Medicine and Antiquarianism in the Age of Empiricism* and Jason M. Kelly’s *The Society of Dilettanti: Archaeology and Identity in the British Enlightenment* (HANSON, 2009; KELLY, 2009) provide compelling accounts of the ways in which culture intersected with class and professional standing in the first half of the eighteenth century, and how the visual arts proved advantageous, yet also problematic, for “virtuosi” and “dilettanti.” Both of these terms became tainted with elitism and amateurism later in the century, and it suggests just how rapidly culture became professionalized. A growing literature on travel, classicism, archaeology, and collecting, by scholars such as Philip J. Ayres, Chloe Chard, Viccy Coltman, and Jonathan Scott, has contributed to our understanding of classicism’s modernity (AYRES, 1997; CHARD, 1999; COLTMAN, 2006, 2009; SCOTT, 2003). According to these accounts, conceptions of state, nation, and empire were inextricably bound to a historicized and archaeologized conception of Ancient Rome, including its “Decline and Fall”, as Edward Gibbon famously described it. These studies emphasize the continued influence of elite, aristocratic patronage even within an urban public sphere. Read in conjunction with Peter J. Cain and Antony Gerald Hopkins’s *British Imperialism, 1688-2000* (CAIN, HOPKINS, [2001] 2002), these studies demonstrate the resilience of the English aristocracy, which was a function of both mercantile profits and cultural authority.

In *The King’s Artists: The Royal Academy of Arts and the Politics of British Culture, 1760-1840* (HOOCK, 2003), Holger Hoock reinscribed the monarchy as a major force in artistic patronage, including but not limited to the foundation of the Royal Academy of Arts. Hoock followed that book with *Empires of the Imagination: Politics, War, and the Arts in the British World 1750-1850* (HOOCK, 2010; fig. 7), which zeroed in on the essential role that Britain’s political, military, ambassadorial, and imperial institutions played in the development of key cultural sites and practices. Hoock describes this uniquely British investment as a series of “public-private partnerships,” which subtly, yet unmistakably, demonstrate the state’s investment in cultural affairs. Hoock’s title evokes that of his mentor John Brewer’s wide-ranging *Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (BREWER, 1997), but it owes its sharpest debt to Brewer’s earlier work *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688-1783* (BREWER, 1989). Hoock draws upon Brewer’s definition of the “fiscal-military state” to note that the British state was “more efficient and expansive, yet also more porous and open towards supporting private initiatives than previously assumed, and more so than was the case across most of Europe” (HOOCK, 2010, p. 15). And just as the “British parliamentary monarchy knew no single source of dominant power, there was by the middle of the eighteenth century no single, dominant source of cultural patronage either. The crown, government, Parliament, corporate bodies such as the East India Company, the Established Church, and municipal authorities all influenced the nation’s cultural life in innovative ways” (p. 17). While the New Art History tended to posit private patronage versus public patronage, and commodity culture versus national
patrimony, Hoock suggests that such dichotomies warp our understanding of an array of “public-private partnerships” in the cultural sphere. The complexity of cultural practices in British India provides a particularly good example of Hoock’s argument, with surveying, collecting, translating, painting, administering, and fighting being underwritten by a single institution, the East India Company, which was itself intrinsically hybrid.

It is worth emphasizing just how rare public artistic initiatives, even broadly defined, were in the first half of the eighteenth century. Sir James Thornhill captured one of the only major state commissions in the period for his Greenwich Hospital murals but eventually came to rue his selection due to the chronic underpayment of state funds. Artists were compelled instead to work for private patrons in places that might gain a public viewing, but rarely under ideal viewing conditions. Funerary monuments in Westminster Abbey, for example, were an important source of sculptural patronage, but they also stimulated public debate about national honor and representation. Critics deplored the erection of sculptural monuments in the Abbey on the basis of personal wealth rather than civic virtues or national significance (Baker, 2000; Craske, 2007). The supper box paintings at Vauxhall Gardens and the adornment of the Foundling Hospital beginning in 1746 provide two celebrated examples of an urban bourgeoisie stepping into the role of artistic patron (Solkin, 1993). These important developments nonetheless suggest just how few options London artists had for the public display and promotion of their work. Up until 1760, proposals for a national academy of art and calls for regular contemporary art exhibitions proved to be exercises in futility.

The military victories of the Seven Years’ War helped to change this state of affairs. In British Art and the Seven Years’ War: Allegiance and Autonomy (Fordham, 2010a), I argue that war and political dissent provided potent catalysts for a national school of art. More specifically, an influential group of London artists turned the unprecedented military successes of the Seven Years’ War to their own professional advantage. Rather than “arriving too late” as Solkin maintained (Solkin, 1993), the Royal Academy of Arts was founded at precisely the right moment to promote cultural capital commensurate with the nation’s newfound imperial prestige. While this promotion took numerous forms, heated political debates over a citizen militia versus a professional standing army enabled London artists to promote their own national relevance by equating a hierarchical public academy with a successful, professional army.

One telling indication of this cultural shift came with the dramatic marginalization of William Hogarth. In the 1740s, Hogarth had been a dominant figure in the London art world, leading the adornment of the Foundling Hospital and profiting handsomely from paintings and engravings. As Robin Simon has argued, Hogarth’s opposition to French academic models and artistic practices was well informed and emulous in
certain key respects (Simon, 2007). In collaboration with his friend Henry Fielding, Hogarth pioneered a new artistic genre, Comic History, which gained its greatest articulation in Fielding’s novel *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (London, 1749) and in Hogarth’s painting *The March to Finchley* (1750, London, Foundling Museum; fig. 8). The indecisive grenadier in the center foreground of Hogarth’s painting bears remarkable similarities to Tom Jones, whose sexual adventures kept intersecting with the national trauma of the Jacobite invasion of 1745. In *The March to Finchley*, Hogarth fashions a distinctively English form of history painting grounded in popular print culture and the demotic power of carnival. Hogarth not only represented the nation to itself, but also suggested that the King’s troops, prostitutes, confidence men, husbands, daughters, and wives were the nation. The painting embodied precisely that unity in variety that Hogarth detailed in his radically Lockean aesthetic treatise, *The Analysis of Beauty* (London, 1753; see Paulson, 1997). Comic History offered, therefore, a uniquely English alternative to French academic painting.

Proponents of a public academy of art ultimately preferred French academic standards to Hogarth’s mock-heroic model. On the victorious side of the Seven Years’ War, Comic History began to look frail and provincial. Polite and cosmopolitan genres and themes flourished on the walls of the Academy, and it is important to note that the Academy never viewed itself as an instrument of state power or as an official organ of state propaganda. When Martin Postle refers to the “politics of patronage” (Postle, 2001, 2002) he largely refers to the role that politics often played in the relationship between painter and private patron, rather than any structural political alignment within the Academy. Indeed, when Benjamin West exhibited *The Death of General Wolfe* (Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada; fig. 9) in the Academy’s third annual exhibition in 1771, it was feared that the painting’s popularity and militant contemporaneity might threaten the Academy’s cultural authority. West’s painting has been the subject of tremendous scholarly debate (Wind, 1938; Solkin, 1993; Myrone, 2005; Fordham, 2010a, and others), which shows no sign of slowing. What should be emphasized is that Contemporary History Painting, as the genre became known, contained none of the irony of Comic History and little of the Academy’s Neoplatonic elitism. A series of articles by John Bonehill (Bonehill, 2005, 2007) explores how and why subsequent Contemporary History Paintings by John Singleton Copley and Joseph Wright of Derby further encroached on the Royal Academy’s mission and privilege.

Ultimately, it is possible to frame the entire institutional history of British art in this period through the lens of public-private partnerships with debate centering on where the emphasis should lie. In 1754 a drawing instructor named William Shipley founded the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce, eventually renamed the Society of Arts, which was devoted to a wide

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array of commercial and cultural pursuits. London artists were early members of Shipley’s Society, although they eventually gravitated to the Society of Artists, which was founded as an exhibiting society and is the subject of a fine institutional history by Matthew Hargraves (HARGRAVES, 2005). By the time that the Irish-born artist James Barry painted his ambitious mural series, *The Progress of Human Culture and Knowledge* (fig. 10) for the Society of Arts’ Great Room between 1777 and 1801, the Society was no longer at the forefront of artistic patronage. Barry’s murals, however, have become the subject of renewed attention in an edited volume by Susan Bennett (BENNETT, 2008) and a chapter in Daniel Guernsey’s *The Artist and the State, 1777-1855: The Politics of Universal History in British and French Painting* (GUERNSEY, 2007, ch. 1). Some of the most intriguing insights from these studies concern the intersection of religious and national identity manifest in the series of works, informed by Barry’s Irish Catholic background and his pro-American sentiments.

The Royal Academy of Arts was itself a public-private partnership; the King’s impri- matur offered artists prestige, but very little by way of direct compensation. The proliferation of private portraits in the annual RA exhibitions made it clear who was paying the bills. The King’s endorsement of the Academy nonetheless marked a shift to a more conspicuous form of state support for the arts, which culminated in the foundation of the National Gallery of Art by Parliamentary decree in 1824, a development traced by Jonathan Conlin in *The Nation’s Mantelpiece: A History of the National Gallery* (CONLIN, 2006). A half century earlier, Edmund Burke referred to the great country homes of the landed aristocracy as “the publick repositories and offices of Record for the constitution” (see FORDHAM, 2010b). One suspects that Burke would have viewed the consolidation of courtly and aristocratic treasures onto “the nation’s mantelpiece” as a distinct loss. But as this tension suggests, the emergence of national art institutions and collections were inextricably bound to the centralization of the fiscal-military state.

**London and the Geography of British Art**

The growing literature on art and state institutions in the Georgian period remains overwhelmingly focused on London. Not only did the English capital become the largest urban center in Europe over the course of the eighteenth-century, but it also served as the great nexus of religious, political, and cultural influence and power. From this perspective, Bristol, Glasgow, and Dublin remain as peripheral to histories of Georgian art as do Kingston, Boston, and Calcutta. Indeed, colonial towns have begun to garner more attention than many of their provincial peers situated within the British Isles. One notable exception to this is David H. Solkin’s *Painting Out of the Ordinary: Modernity and the Art of Everyday Life in Early*...
Nineteenth-Century England (SOLKIN 2008), which emphasizes the speed with which communications could travel between London and its provincial satellites and the social implications of this shift, traced through the genre paintings of David Wilkie and others. As this example suggests, eighteenth-century conceptions of state, nation, and empire frequently begin and end in London, helping to orient an otherwise fugitive set of identities.

A bourgeoning literature on British sculpture, and funeral monuments in particular, demonstrates the centrality of London to the memorialization of state, nation, and empire. Excellent studies on monumental sculpture by David Bindman, Malcolm Baker, Joan Coutu, Matthew Craske, and Holger Hoock (BINDMAN, BAKER, 1995; BAKER, 2000; HOOCK, 2003, 2010; COUTU, 2006; CRASKE, 2007) have traced the emergence of a monumental sculptural tradition deeply enmeshed in the politics of patronage and state formation. Coutu’s *Persuasion and Propaganda: Monuments and the Eighteenth-Century British Empire* (COUTU, 2006) is exceptional in its use of the term “propaganda,” which has typically been avoided as too evocative, perhaps, of absolutist state patronage in the early modern period or on the Continent. The distinction between persuasion and propaganda is never really fleshed out in the book, however, which is all the more surprising given the title’s resonance with Garth Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell’s *Propaganda and Persuasion* (JOWETT, O’DONNELL, 1986), which is dedicated to parsing precisely that distinction. Coutu nonetheless identifies a fascinating dynamic in which the London studio of Joseph Wilton, for example, produced personal monuments to be installed in Anglican churches across the globe. A volume edited by Richard Wrigley and Matthew Craske, *Pantheons: Transformations of a Monumental Idea* (WRIGLEY, CRASKE, 2004) establishes the concept of a pantheon as an international ideal that rarely came to fruition in either Britain or France, despite repeated attempts.

London was the center of the English print trade as well as being an active exporter of both printed imagery and skilled printmakers to the imperial periphery. Cultural and political historians frequently illustrate intaglio prints produced during the American and French Revolutions, but the single sheet print remains under-theorized in its relationship to state formation and imperial knowledge transmission, with a few notable exceptions (see GAUDIO, 2008). For the relationship between print and political culture, Diana Donald and Amelia Rauser (DONALD, 1996; RAUSER, 2008) offer distinct and, to some extent, competing models of the role of caricature in public life. The 1790s was a key decade in the visual culture of abolition, and a growing body of literature suggests that it was a transformative moment for print culture more generally. The decade witnessed some of the century’s greatest political cartoons by James Gillray (James Gillray, 2001; PORTERFIELD, 2010; fig. 11) and others responding to the traumas of the French Revolution (*Shadow of the Guillotine….*, 1989; WOOD, 1994; MAIDMENT, 2001). There was also an
efflorescence of commercial painting galleries in these years, such as the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery, Henry Fuseli’s Milton Gallery, and George Stubbs’s Turf Gallery, which depended upon the sale of reproductive prints for their existence. Ambitious narrative painting, always a tenuous undertaking in Britain, was effectively underwritten by the print trade, which could either be viewed as a commercial opportunity or, as the Irish history painter James Barry (himself an innovative printmaker) viewed it, as a national embarrassment (Bennett, 2008). But there is still a great deal of work to be done on the market for these prints, and on the ways in which print culture became co-extensive with, and productive of, the nation and empire.

London was, ultimately, the great seat of artistic display and visual spectacle. In Art for the Nation: Exhibitions and the London Public, 1747-2001 (Taylor, 1999), Brandon Taylor argues that an “overriding concern of art professionals throughout the period from the 1740s to the 1960s was that of public or civic ‘improvement’: improvement of judgement, of discrimination, of morality, of that general posture and attitude that marks out individuals as participants in the nation’s culture and saves them from becoming mere onlookers, or, even worse, dissenting outsiders” (p. xiii-xiv). While the Royal Academy of Arts promoted these aims in its refined yet still spectacular exhibitions in Somerset House (see Art on the Line, 2001), it faced challenges from a variety of quarters. Rosie Dias has argued that commercial galleries in Pall Mall, including the Shakespeare and Milton Galleries cited above, tested the authority and autonomy of the Royal Academy exhibitions in the late eighteenth century (Dias, 2004). In a special issue of the Huntington Library Quarterly, Ann Bermingham and her fellow contributors explored the Romantic penchant for “technologies of illusion,” which both informed and undercut the Lockean claims of fine art (Bermingham, 2007). Only in Georgian London could one find the highest fine art and the lowest Grub Street print, the disinterested claims of the Academy and the overtly commercial aims of the auction house, the ordered landscapes of John Constable and the deceptive pleasures of the diorama. London was also a point of convergence for the representation of empire; a place where drawings and sketches arrived from the periphery, where metropolitan artists interpreted this “raw material” in exhibition oil paintings, and where publishers and engravers worked for an increasingly global market. Here was mercantilism in cultural microcosm.

The dominance of London as a cultural center tends to make any discussion of art produced on the periphery, be it provincial or colonial, deeply asymmetric. In his introduction to the History of British Art, David Bindman declares, “One of the chief aims of these volumes is to reinterpret British art in the light of Britain’s inherent instabilities of identity, which still define it in a global world. British art is not, therefore, limited to artists born in Britain, but encompasses art made in Britain, or made abroad by artists resident in Britain or its colonies” (Bindman, 2008, p. 13). Matthew Reeve takes on this very passage in a pointed book review arguing that “such a characterization of ‘British’ art, and by extension ‘Britishness,’ is challenging: depending on one’s perspective it is either a comfortably liberal and all-encompassing definition or one that still feels embedded in the discourses it claims to question and critique, and if so, it is debatable if not highly contentious” (Reeve, 2010).

The discourses to which Reeve refers are precisely those that have condensed around the terms state, nation, and empire in the scholarship discussed above. “British art” is nothing if not an imperial phenomenon, and its capacity to colonize local difference and marginalize cultural resistance remains strong. But “British art,” like the concept of the nation, cannot be easily discarded. The political turn in British art history has, at the very least, destabilized...
familiar tropes of the state, nation, and empire, upon which Reynolds would claim that the arts were merely “an ornament.” More ambitiously, this scholarship offers an account of representation’s place within the fiscal-military state, national consciousness, and the dreamwork of imperialism. It is an account that remains tentative and partial, but compelling nonetheless in its analysis of the state under early conditions of spectacle.

Bibliography


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academy, empire, history painting, landscape, nation