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R E V I E W

Sven Bruntjen, John Boydell: A Study of Art Patronage and Printselling in Georgian London

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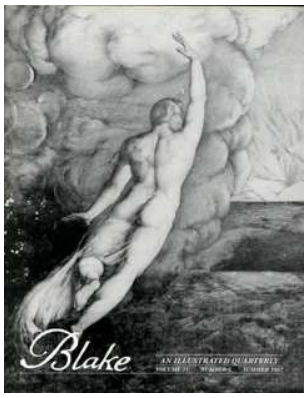

sayings, and particularly if he showed a greater awareness of the critical consensus about Blake and the context provided by Blake's other works. We would then know which of his points he intends as aggressive iconoclasm. But, except at the beginning and end of the book, Bracher has tunnel vision, providing few such glances outside *Milton*.

As might be expected, so close a reading of the poem as Bracher gives us yields some perceptive insights, on a number of particular matters: the various ways in which implicit meanings are introduced into the poem (p. 8), the Sons of Los (pp. 153–54), their creation of units of time (p. 171), and other passages too. As might also be expected in light of his general premises, some other readings are hard to swallow. Bracher himself seems to feel once or twice that he has painted himself into a corner, as when, after explaining that the Elect, Redeemed, and Reprobate classes apply to things as well as people, he admits the difficulty of imagining "the difference between . . . an Elect bar of iron and a Reprobate bar" (p. 147). Still, there is Blake's text to account for somehow: "in every Nation & every Family the Three Classes are born / And in every Species of Earth, Metal, Tree, Fish, Bird & Beast" (25:40–41). (Bracher does better with oak trees.)

There we have the dilemma; if we must believe the text, and if we also want to consider Blake's landscape and characters as more than an exposition of faculty-psychology, what do we make of such passages, or the one about the wine-press? To humanize the question further, how are people to regard the experience of having lost someone to death while feeling a strong sense that, somehow, their existence is real and enduring—which, as Bracher points out (p. 5), is how Blake thought about his brother? Bracher's attempt to read *Milton* ontologically is not, for this reviewer, the answer, but there is a need for books that, like his, nag us about the questions.

The writing is serviceable, sometimes quite good, but at times cumbersome in vocabulary ("absolutization," "substitutability," "immediatizing"—pp. 99, 102, 103), and very repetitious; characters seem to be glossed just about every time they appear, a stylistic fault perhaps necessarily entailed by Bracher's method. There is a good deal of wobbling in this book: "although such sacrifice is evil, it also seems to be redemptive at times" (p. 28); "desires can now be seen as inadequate and perverted but nonetheless valid attempts to overthrow and transcend the merely immediate, actual state of identity" (p. 212).

I also make a point in book reviews of evaluating the index: this book has none.

Sven Bruntjen. *John Boydell, A Study of Art Patronage and Printselling in Georgian London*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1985. 302 pp. $50.

Reviewed by Louise Lippincott

The patronage of art in Georgian England has been controversial ever since Hogarth and Jean Rouquet lamented its absence in the middle of the eighteenth century. The role of printselling in the development of taste and the distribution of patronage in the same period is a relatively new topic which has received intense scrutiny only in the last ten years. Both issues are central to the life and career of John Boydell, the printseller who dominated the English and continental markets in the second half of the century.

Boydell was the subject of two doctoral dissertations completed in 1974 and both have now been published by Garland. Winifred Friedman's *Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery* was issued in 1976; Bruntjen's biography, the subject of this review, has just appeared with the promise that it complements the earlier book. Each expands and develops material briefly summarized by the other, and Friedman acknowledges Bruntjen in her introduction. Moreover, both concentrate on the second half of the alderman's career in the print trade, reflecting the biases inherent in the Boydell legend. The legend is well known: Boydell's beginning as an apprentice under W.H. Toms, his early career as a mediocre landscape engraver vending his prints in toyshop windows, his rise to wealth and fame with the publication of Woollett's *Niobe* after Wilson and his *Death of Wolfe* after West, the launch of the Shakespeare Gallery in 1787 and other ambitious publications in the 1790s. His greatest achievement was the reversal of the balance of trade in reproductive prints to favor England over France; it was matched by his political career which culminated in his election as Lord Mayor of London in 1791. By then Boydell was a famous figure in London, visited by foreign tourists, satirized in prints, and eulogized in the press. Hogarth's Industrious Apprentice incarnate, he promoted his own reputation with prints of his portrait, the gift of his *Bridge Book* to the British Musem ("The only book that ever made a Lord Mayor"), the gift of paintings to the Corporation of London, and authorship of an autobiography, never completed. When bad management, war and revolution on the continent

forced the lottery of the Shakespeare Gallery in 1803, Boydell already had made his name as one of the foremost patrons of history painting of his generation. Did he deserve it?

Bruntjen argues that he did. He documents Boydell's thirty year climb up the ladder of the print trade, then focuses on his last twenty years of activity, the era of the Shakespeare Gallery, the *British Rivers*, and the Guildhall paintings. These were years of heavy investment in the output of contemporary artists and engravers and of Boydell's heyday as a patron of the arts. Bruntjen states that Boydell's desire to promote the growth of a national school of history and landscape painting motivated his publication of these elaborate money losers. As a result, British artists freed themselves from the restrictions of aristocratic patronage and reached a sympathetic audience of eager consumers.

That a modern scholar could come to such a conclusion is a tribute to Boydell's salesmanship. As Bruntjen's own documentation shows, Boydell acted primarily in his own interests well into the 1780s and probably throughout his career. The substantial and often fascinating footnotes as well as miscellaneous facts in the text reveal that Boydell specialized in imported prints in the 1750s and 1760s, that he also sold imported French paper to other engravers and publishers, and that his own publications were usually based on drawings (20,000 guineas worth in 1786, presumably many by old masters or Boydell himself) not paintings. In 1787, he invited J.L. David to England. These are not the activities of a devotee of British arts exclusively concerned with reproductive prints, as Boydell and Bruntjen would lead us to believe. Even the later projects put commerce equal to if not above the public interest. Winifred Friedman's article "Some Commercial Aspects of the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery" which appeared in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 36 (1973) possibly too late to be cited by Bruntjen, makes this clear. Boydell's gift of paintings to the Corporation of London also merits skeptical examination; most were old pictures from stock, and one wonders if Boydell reissued the prints after the paintings went up on display. To treat the gift as an enlightened and influential act of patronage seems to be stretching the point.

The more we know about the eighteenth-century business of book and printselling—and much has been learned since 1974—the less credibility Boydell's claims to disinterestedness seem to deserve. Of particular importance in the recent literature are Richard Godfrey's *Printmaking in Britain* (1978) and the exhibition of reproductive prints at the Yale British Art Center in 1980 organized by David Alexander and Richard Godfrey. Godfrey shows that Boydell's landmark decision to publish the print after Wilson's *Niobe* was influenced by the royal ownership of the painting (always a selling point with the general public) and the critical excitement it caused at the time of its exhibition. Rather than dreaming of a native school of landscapists (except perhaps as it might enhance his repertory of artists), Boydell was sharply appraising the commercial potential of the year's most successful picture. Moreover, he did not take the full risk of the project in spite of his £125 investment, for Woollett and Ryland retained two shares between them. Boydell did not gain control of the plate until 1785 when he bought one of the outstanding shares. On the Shakespeare Gallery, Alexander and Godfrey note the mediocrity of many of the commissioned paintings and the low quality of the prints after them. Their failure to satisfy the English public, patriotic but not blindly so, matched the collapse of the continental market as a major cause of the scheme's failure. The depressing response to the prints did nothing to promote Shakespearean history painting in England and may even have discouraged it. Alexander and Godfrey conclude that Benjamin West's collaborations with engravers were ultimately more important in the development of the market for prints after history paintings and the spread of the taste for history painting itself.

Patronage studies also provide a new perspective on the alderman's activities and motives. The role of aristocratic patronage and middle class consumers in the formation of taste has been a central issue in the history of British art, and if little has been resolved, the complexities of the problem are more familiar. Bruntjen addresses only one aspect of a complicated situation when he describes the liberating effects of Boydell's patronage of painters, presumably freed from the vagaries of aristocrats. Alas, he ignores the fact that from most Georgian artists' point of view, this was falling out of the frying pan and landing in the fire. Throughout the century, painters found working for aristocrats infinitely preferable to working for the book- and printsellers, and it is significant that Boydell had difficulty patronizing those artists with secure upper-class clienteles. Most of these painters—Reynolds, Gainsborough, Stubbs, West, and Wright—sold their paintings for more than Boydell was willing to pay. The truly "liberated" artist (forgive the term) exhibited his paintings at the Royal Academy or one of the exhibition societies, sold them to the gentry and wealthy tradesmen, and published the prints after them himself.

As a patron and connoisseur of contemporary British painting, Boydell can usefully be compared to Richard Payne Knight and Samuel Whitbread, both subjects

of recent exhibitions ("The Arrogant Connoisseur: Richard Payne Knight 1751–1824," Manchester, Whitworth Art Gallery, 1982; "Paintings Politics & Porter, Samuel Whitbread II and British Art," Museum of London, 1984). Whitbread's decision to collect contemporary art owed much to his political convictions and his desire to establish a public reputation for morality, patriotism, and social responsibility. Richard Payne Knight sought works which recreated ancient styles and compositions. All three dictated subjects to their painters, demanded high moral content in the treatment of these subjects, and preferred Westall and Smirke as the vehicles for their projects. Not only did all three behave like the paternalistic, dictatorial aristocrats of tradition, but they also sponsored dispiriting numbers of tedious mediocrities. They patronized history painting in its lowest, most trivial form.

One cannot fault Bruntjen for failing to consider literature which had not appeared at the time he was writing, although Garland's decision to publish his biography without additions or revisions might be questioned. It appears to this reviewer that in light of the recent developments in the history of British art a definitive biography of the man is still to be attempted. The Boydell legend constructed around the ambitious Shakespeare Gallery and its failure has received more than enough attention, while important questions remain to be answered.

One would like to know more about Boydell's beginnings in the print trade. The source of his fame and fortune was the *Bridge Book* and like publications. What did they look like, how were they sold, who else was involved in their production? Surely these humble images provide the key to understanding Boydell's role in the art market, as mirror and maker of public taste. The prints themselves, Boydell's catalogues, and his newspaper advertisements, ideal sources for this kind of study, have not yet been systematically tracked down or analyzed. Secondly, Boydell's inventory and methods require close comparison with those of his predecessors and contemporaries, not only printsellers but also painters and especially booksellers. He did not operate in a vacuum; his choice of projects, his rhetoric, and his working methods had numerous parallels and precedents. Yet for some reason or combination of reasons he was astoundingly successful, and these might be divined through comparison with others. If he was a commercial genius with a talent for art, he might also be considered with Josiah Wedgwood and other entrepreneurs who made fortunes in manufactures and commerce for the growing ranks of British domestic consumers.

Boydell the capitalist or Boydell the patron? This is not simply a matter of definition, but of motivation. Judging from the epithet "Commercial Maecenas" so often applied to him, not even his contemporaries knew for sure where Boydell's commercial interests ended and his public benefactions began. Quite possibly the man did not know himself. Early in his career it seems clear that commerce dominated and the benefits obtained by others were incidental. Artists and engravers profited from his example or the "trickle down" of his profits. Later, as Boydell's ambitions broadened to include politics and public life, he withdrew from the daily management of his business and on occasion pursued projects ostensibly inimical to the firm's—the gift of paintings to the Corporation, for example. But, to what extent did this new position evolve in response to that of the Royal Academy, equally ambitious and even more vocal on the subject of British art, patriotism, patronage, and prints? By excluding engravers from its membership, the academy consigned them to subordinate status if it did not exile them to the outer realms of trade and commerce. Boydell used his fortune, his business, and his political position to mobilize the City, creating (or hoping to create) a public forum for presentation of an alternative position, where the relation between artist and market were mediated by the entrepreneur rather than an institution. Unable to marshall London's leading artists, all academicians, into his projects, was he challenging their positions as tastemakers and centers of influence, just as they threatened his control of the trade in reproductive prints? The legend of John Boydell, the heroic, public spirited printseller, grew out of this complicated and murky situation. Created to meet the needs of a specific moment, it no longer does justice to the man's very real and important achievements. What they were remains to be understood and appreciated.