

The Art of Recording

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The art of recording was always poised between two imperatives: it involved not only professional competence (with the accent on *art*) but also the discipline required to delineate antiquities exactly (with the accent on *recording*).

From its inception the Society of Antiquaries of London understood how visual records of relics of the past would benefit scholarship. As early as the 1710s the need to disseminate antiquarian research via high-quality images was acknowledged by John Talman, William Stukeley and others, and, on its reestablishment in 1718, the Society's articles specified the importance of producing engravings of antiquities¹. In much the same way as the Royal Society prioritised the collecting of accurate empirical data from which valid scientific inferences could be drawn, so the

Society of Antiquaries undertook to illustrate scrupulously the objects and monuments within its remit. Stukeley, the Society's first Secretary, wrote that 'without drawing and designing the study of Antiquities ... is lame and imperfect².' Likewise, in 1768, the Director of the Society, Richard Gough, declared, that 'the pencil is as essential as the pen to illustrate antiquities³'.

These opinions were widely shared and the Society accumulated drawings as part of its investigations. From 1721 drawings deposited by members were kept in portfolios, of which about twenty existed by the 1750s. After the move to Chancery Lane in 1753 safe storage in the library on a permanent basis was at last possible for these records⁴. The visual data contained in them allowed scholars to put together what history and geography had scattered across Britain and thus to comprehend the legacy of the past more systematically than before. Moreover, at a time of social and economic change, with many sites vulnerable to 'improvement' or demolition, the visual record of a monument or a building helped to preserve something of its existence for the future.

Most antiquaries possessed some ability as draughtsmen and some, for example William Stukeley, William Borlase and James Douglas, were capable designers, but the proficiency in drawing needed to record antiquities to the most exacting standards could be found only in those who had undertaken some sort of artistic training. From the 1780s, therefore, the Society

¹ Article VI: 'The Director shall Superintend and regulate all the Drawings, Prints, Plates and books of the Society and all their works of Printing, drawings or Engraving.' Evans, 1956, pp. 58–60.

² SAL MS 268, p. 2. This is Stukeley's comment in his copy of the minutes and was inserted some time after 1726.

³ Gough 1768, p. xxix

⁴ Nurse 2007, pp. 199–225

employed its own draughtsmen to record and disseminate its findings. This activity extended from drawing items presented at the Society's meetings to making highly wrought and detailed visual surveys of cathedrals and facsimile copies of wall paintings and tapestries. The policy was instituted in 1784 with the appointment of John Carter (1748–1817; figs 21, 24). He soon developed his own antiquarian reputation (he was elected a Fellow in 1795) and worked only intermittently as a draughtsman for the Society after 1785, so much of this work was undertaken by Jacob Schnebbelie (1760–1792) and then by Thomas Underwood (1772–1835), who was appointed Draughtsman-in-Ordinary in 1792. After Carter, the most significant artist-antiquary associated with the Society was Charles Alfred Stothard (1786–1821), who began publishing his *Monumental Effigies of Great Britain* in 1811. He made facsimile drawings of the Bayeux Tapestry for the Society in 1816 (cats 109, 110) and was elected a Fellow in 1819, when he made a notable series of drawings of the Painted Chamber at Westminster (cat. 107)⁵.

These images, and the engravings derived from some of them, cannot be seen in isolation, however, for the Society had to battle against two aesthetic prejudices: first, that its primary orientation to British antiquity associated it with works of art and architecture that were necessarily inferior to their classical equivalents; second, that its reproductions were inescapably dull and prosaic by virtue of their obligation to visual accuracy. With respect to the first of these difficulties the Society could do little, except to proselytise for a better-informed understanding of British antiquity that would overcome classical bias. Here the production of expertly engraved prints, showing the historic legacy in all its splendour and variety, could demonstrate that Britain's early history and, especially, its medieval culture were not as barbarous or uncultivated as the ignorant suggested.

The second prejudice was more difficult to overcome. The Society viewed the recording of monuments as essentially a research enterprise, where accuracy of depiction was the paramount virtue if scholarship was to be advanced. John Carter talked of good antiquarian drawing as calculated 'to give information and instruction' and singled out for disapproval 'picturesque appearances produced by the skill of the Artist ... tending more to accredit the modern delineator than the ancient Architect'⁶. James Douglas referred to the aquatinted plates in his *Nenia Britannica* (cat. 60) as 'the facts here established'⁷. 'Correct data' was the phrase used by Richard Tongue when presenting a collection of his paintings and models to the British Museum in 1838⁸.

⁵ The Bayeux Tapestry plates, engraved by Basire from 1819 to 1822, were reproduced in *Vetusta Monumenta* (1821–23). For information on, and illustrations of, Stothard's copies of wall paintings in the Painted Chamber at Westminster, see Binski, 1986, pp. 24–30.

⁶ Carter 1803, I, pp. 106–7

⁷ Douglas 1793, p. 25

⁸ Evans 1994, pp. 200–8

From a connoisseur's point of view, however, accurate depiction was essentially hack-work, for the artist had to forswear the creative and individual touches that dignified his calling. William Gilpin, the theorist of the Picturesque, described George Vertue as 'an excellent antiquarian, but no artist. He copied with painful exactness; in a dry, disagreeable manner, without force, or freedom⁹'. Written in the year that the Royal Academy was founded (1768), Gilpin's observation reminds us that the increased prominence of the visual arts in England tended to elevate the imaginative and the ideal over the prosaic and the real. Twenty years later Richard Gough noted ruefully: 'The walk of fame for modern artists is not sufficiently enlarged. Emulous of succeeding in History, Portrait, or Landscape, they overlook the unprofitable, though not the less tasteful, walk of Antiquity, or, in Grecian and Roman forget Gothic and more domestic monuments¹⁰.'

Gough himself was a victim of this situation. Although he employed Jacob Schnebbelie, Samuel Hieronymous Grimm and others to provide the illustrations for his topographical publications – for example *Sepulchral Monuments in Great Britain* (1786) – the drawings from which they worked were inadequate, particularly when judged by the more exacting standards of the next generation of draughtsmen. As Charles Stothard noted of these early and pioneering efforts:

the delineating part is so extremely incorrect and full of errors, that at a future period, when the originals no longer exist, it will be impossible to form any correct idea of what they really were ... Had Mr Gough been draughtsman sufficient to have executed his own drawings, he might have avoided the innumerable mistakes which, from circumstances, and the nature of the subject, must unavoidably have arisen. He could not transfer that enthusiasm which he himself felt to the persons he employed, to enable them to overcome such difficulties¹¹.

By the 1790s, however, it was at last possible to recruit technical proficiency that matched the antiquarian's demands. James Moore, for example, published *Monastic Remains and Ancient Castles in England and Wales* in 1791, including aquatint engravings after his own designs by Schnebbelie. Moore also employed the watercolour artist Edward Dayes to collaborate with him in producing drawings of British antiquities after his original sketches of cathedral and monastic remains. From this contact Moore moved on, from 1792 to 1795, to collaborate with Dayes's apprentice, Thomas Girtin, paying him six shillings a day¹².

Sir Richard Colt Hoare, owner of Stourhead, was one of Turner's most important early patrons, commissioning from him an extensive series of watercolour drawings of Salisbury Cathedral and its environs (cat. 96); Turner worked on them from c. 1795 to 1806. Indeed, by the

⁹ Gilpin 1768, pp. 126–7. See also John Nichols's comment: 'Mr Vertue would have had more admirers as an engraver, if his style had been more spirited. But the Antiquary and the Historian, who prefer truth to elegance of design, and correctness to bold execution, have properly appreciated his works...', *Literary Anecdotes*, vol. 2, p. 254. Both references are cited in Myrone, 2007, pp. 99–121.

¹⁰ Gough 1786, p. 9

¹¹ Stothard 1817–32, p. 5

¹² In 1795 Moore also bought Turner's *Transept of Tintern Abbey, Monmouthshire* (c. 1794) from the Royal Academy exhibition but appears to have had no further contact with him. For Moore's patronage see Bell, 1917, pp. 47–83.

winter of 1798–99 Colt Hoare was alone responsible for nearly half the commissioned watercolours Turner then had in hand¹³. At the turn of the century Turner also worked for the Revd Thomas Dunham Whitaker, providing illustrations for his *History of ... Whalley* (1800–01) and three subsequent topographical publications. Although most of these watercolours were of natural landscapes, religious buildings and country seats, in the *History of ... Whalley* Turner also made detailed drawings of ancient cross shafts, misericords and seals that are unique in his work (cat. 100)¹⁴.

Sir Henry Englefield, a Vice-President of the Society, met the young John Sell Cotman around 1803 and was later described by Cotman as one of his most loyal friends¹⁵. Cotman dedicated his *Miscellaneous Etchings* of 1811 to him, and Englefield, for his part, was clearly interested in supporting Cotman's interest in medieval architecture¹⁶. On his departure for Normandy in 1817, Cotman was presented by Englefield with a drawing instrument that would facilitate the accuracy of his notation. It was a form of camera lucida, the so-called Graphic Telescope, designed by another of Englefield's artist contacts, Cornelius Varley¹⁷.

But the work of Turner, Girtin and Cotman should not be allowed to eclipse the work of less well-known draughtsmen. Looking at these images today, it is clear that the Society's stress on empirical data has allowed much to be preserved that the aesthetic prejudice of the time would have discarded. We are thus able to see details of excavations, as well as the objects found in them, some of which have now disappeared completely. In addition, for all the desire to use images as databanks there is an aesthetic quality to even purely documentary records. The draughtsmen's resoluteness of approach, diligence in research and commitment to accuracy have together produced a distinctive vision of British antiquity.

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¹³ Woodbridge, 1970

¹⁴ See Burnley, 1982

¹⁵ Letter to Dawson Turner, 3 September 1841

¹⁶ Kitson 1937, and Oppé 1942, pp. 163–6 and 169–71

¹⁷ Pidgley 1972, pp. 780–6

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This text is a revised edition taken from 'Making History: Antiquaries in Britain 1707 – 2007' exhibition catalogue published by the Royal Academy of Arts, London – all catalogue numbers referenced can be found in this publication