

# *The Edgar Wind Journal*



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# *The Edgar Wind Journal*

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## *Assistant Editor*

Giulia Maria Paoletti

*Contacts*

[info@edgarwindjournal.eu](mailto:info@edgarwindjournal.eu)  
[submissions@edgarwindjournal.eu](mailto:submissions@edgarwindjournal.eu)

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*Publisher*

**Bernardino Branca**

Contact: Corso Magenta 48, 20123, Milan, Italy

Phone: 0039 3483605940

Email: [bernard.branca@gmail.com](mailto:bernard.branca@gmail.com)

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# Oxford's Art-Historical Circus: Life as a Henry Fellow at Magdalen College 1952–3

Colin Eisler

## Abstract

It has often been stated that art history began in Oxford with the establishment of a chair of art History in 1955. That is far from true as shown in this essay. There were multiple possibilities for the study of art history in Oxford before then, with significant collections and outstanding scholars in subjects that intersected with art history. In one year abroad the author took seminars with Jean Seznec on Diderot, Sir John Beazley on Attic Vase Painting, Alessandro Passerin d'Entrèves on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, had consultations with the then Slade Professor Ernst Gombrich and spent many hours studying drawing in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

## Keywords

Art history; Oxford; Ernst Gombrich; Ashmolean Museum

It took a German Jewish refugee, Sir Nicholas Pevsner, to recognize *The Englishness of English Art*, first broadcast as the Reith lectures in 1955. Similarly, this German-born Jewish refugee (English and American educated), hopes to stress the remarkable qualities of pioneering British art historians. Those often wealthy and or aristocratic initiators of art's study had taken the Grand Tour, belonging to the *Dilettanti* or the Society of Antiquaries. The latter, meeting with far less royal favor, were and are more intrinsically academic in orientation, devoted to systematic investigation, collecting and publications. The Antiquarians were less libidinous and self-indulgent than the equally wealthy and well-born *Dilettanti*, tending toward *Gruendlichkeit*, toward the compulsive, and the quasi Teutonically exhaustive.

Both Oxford and Cambridge had their own museums, the Ashmolean established in 1682 and the Fitzwilliam in 1816, these initially closer to Chambers of Natural and Artistic Wonders than to more conventional institutions. Neither ever played an especially dynamic, didactic role despite rich collections and varied, original exhibitions, nor were they endowed with a staff oriented toward such educational ends.

Two World Wars may have contributed on the one hand to infrequent familiarity with the German language among younger English generations while leading to an exalted

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view of the complex, too often impenetrable literature of *Kunstgeschichte* emanating from Vienna, Munich, Berlin, Prague and Hamburg. I was so fortunate as to be a student of Erwin Panofsky in my Yale Junior Year when he once confessed how grateful he was that exile forced him to write in English, admitting he barely understood his own convoluted theory, clogged and besotted *Jugendwerk*.

Long before the founding of London's Courtauld Institute and Warburg Institute, a very wealthy member of the Society of Antiquaries, the unmarried lawyer, Felix Slade (living with his bachelor brother in their mother's home), left his fortune to sponsor three annual lecture series on the arts, to be given at University College, London, Cambridge and Oxford. The first of the Slade lectures were given in 1870 by none other than John Ruskin, arguably the greatest art historian since Vasari. Combining passion, prolificity and social conscience, he proved a worthy contemporary of Karl Marx, then residing in London. Though such inspired philanthropy as Slade's lectures allowed for exposure to an unusual variety of specialists, their constantly shifting focus entailed losing continuity and concentration.

Due to the development of two new scholarly institutions in London in the 1930's, the Courtauld and the Warburg, art history's study shifted from amateur to professional status, moving away from *dilettante* and commercial-oriented connoisseurship toward analyzing meaning and the revival of antiquity along novel far more challenging, original intellectual concerns. The first institute was entirely English, founded by Samuel Courtauld and Lord Lee of Fareham and Sir Robert Witt. The second institute, an initially Hamburg cultural research library, was funded by my future godfather Max Warburg for his melancholic brother: Aby. Aby's uniquely broad research interests made him unsuited to work in the family bank. This institution would be shipped secretly, by barge, overnight to London keeping it out of Nazi hands and under the aegis of that city's University College.

Though admiring Henri Focillon above any and all twentieth century art historians, for sheer productivity and talent Kenneth Clark's Gothic Revival, Leonardo, Rembrandt, Landscape, and Nude books betray the uniform excellence and virtuosity found among the best of Britain's art historians. Only Clark's truly awful essays in haute vulgarization, his series on *Civilization* (first destined for an American TV audience) and based – possibly unwittingly – on the work of Will Durant, is best forgotten. Clark was, of course, a Slade lecturer in 1961.

I went to Oxford in the autumn of 1952 as a Henry Fellow. In terms of my family history, this was singularly appropriate since the Henry's funding – initiated in 1927 – came from Anglo-Australian Jewish copper philanthropists, Sir Charles (an M.P. in 1927) and Lady Julia Henry. In the 1940's, in New York city, I had gone to a progressive school with a member of the same (Lewisohn) family and later came to admire its great scholar, Elizabeth Eisenstein. My future Anglo-German step-father Ernest Minden also dealt in copper, having successfully smuggled what was left of our Hamburg fortune out of



Germany in the form of copper ingots, these shipped from that port to London in 1933, the same year that the Warburg Institute (and my family) fled to London.

On the usual rainy London Autumn day in the Autumn of 1952 I left my English sister Gerda Chambers' Hampstead mews house to take a train for Oxford, then boarding a bus to drop me at Magdalen's doors. I rang the bell, only to be severely rebuked by a porter who, upon seeing my youth, snapped: "The Fellows ring, you knock." Not yet knowing just where my rooms were, I sat in Magdalen's Library, only to be screamed at by a bullish old C.T. Onions (venerable editor of the O.C.D) – "Get out of the Library, Get out of the Library". As exams were then being prepared there, I was seen, at best, as an unwitting spy.

All too soon I was brought to my very costly four-story walk-up "rooms", lit by two tiny transoms and "warmed" by a perilous six-pence fed gas heater. I could only get to sleep by wearing my duffle coat and all other clothing, probably including shoes. Such squalor prevailed in the attic recently "rebuilt" attic floor of Magdalen's beautiful 18<sup>th</sup> century New Buildings (to differentiate it from those of Gothic date) and surrounded by a park inhabited by beautiful Asiatic deer. Recently I learned that such profitable slum housing had been devised by the Senior Tutor as he luxuriated in New Buildings' most splendid quarters.

Magdalen was my fate because Thomas Sherrer Ross Boase, a sometime art historian, was its president. As fatuous and elegant as he was snobbish, Boase had little to offer me beyond an occasional third degree (I seated against a window so making my inquisitor invisible) as to what my plans might be and just where I could be working on them.

Though Isaiah Berlin and his Oxford set made infantile fun of him (as in "á Boase is a Boase is a Boase) that wily Scot went undeservedly far in Oxford's administrative hierarchy, well above and beyond his already undeserved Magdalen Presidency. Could this have been due to Boase's striking resemblance to the brilliant Lord Clark? Both were tall, slender, presentable Scots, their family fortunes from trade, each elegant and very well-tailored. Surprisingly Boase went to Rugby and a became a decorated World War II veteran. He even finagled TWO Slade lectureships, one while at London's University College, the other when at Oxford.

Harboring unkind thoughts about him, I suspected my generously financed Fellowship went to buy Boase's Ottonian manuscript page or spent upon his orchids. Could my money have gone to frame his many photos of the great actress Peggy Ashcroft (she a fellow survivor of some mutual disaster, whether a plane crash or shipwreck)? Had any or all such possibly illicit expenditures let me freeze and/or starve in such uninhabitable quarters?

Never had I seen quite so beautiful a sitting room as Boase's, embellished by exquisite Regency furniture, lit through neo-Gothic lancet windows, decorated with

stunning medieval antiquities and exotic plants. Such a flawless setting differed from Yale's, whose masters' residential quarters had to be shared with a wife, frequented by students and often accompanied by the pitter patter of little feet. Could so profoundly, exclusively self-regarding an individual as Boase have even contemplated to openly partner his privileged life with anyone else?

How and why did I never "liberate" any of the innumerable vast food parcels then being sent to sustain the smug theological writings of C.S. Lewis by his adoring American readers I shall never understand. England was then still subject to rationing, with the students hiding their hoard of butter and sugar in the Gothic niches of the College's greater courtyard. My rooms were way above his, on the same stairs, whose steps and risers were made invisible by all his packages. Surely none of these could possibly have been missed by that singularly popular author, whose unlikely marriage to an American Jewish fan was to be the subject of a successful Hollywood movie.

If anyone saved me from a slavey's premature death from freezing and starving at Magdalen it was my generous fellow student there, the anorexic Donald Hope, an artist and classicist who shared copious quantities of some costly black currant, vitamin-laden elixir known as Rybeena. Fortunately, Ernst Gombrich was the Slade professor when I was at Oxford. He could not have been kinder or more helpful, lecturing that year on the Medici (oddly enough also Boase's scholarship subject). At Yale my Senior Thesis had been on Alfred Stieglitz so I came to Oxford to study the relationship between photography and the other visual arts, a topic which, also interested Gombrich. In fact, his great mind enveloped almost everything. He even accompanied me to check out a version of Cagnacci's *Death of Cleopatra* (I found this in the back of an Oxford tailor's shop). I am sorry I did not then buy this large, erotic canvas even though Gombrich thought it was only a good copy.

Welcome lectures on anthropology (by one of the Hawkeses I believe) along with others on Indian sculpture (this subject well represented at Oxford), broadened my so called "cultural horizon". Yet self-education was definitely the name of the art historical game when I was at the University. Mercifully, in terms of Do-It-Yourself Tutelage, the University provided the very best imaginable art historical opportunity – permission to leaf through its great collection of Italian Renaissance drawings on my own, in lavish, luxurious peace and quiet, with a patient curator giving me just as much time as I wanted to see the masterpieces in her generous charge.

Deeply impressed by Dennis Mahon's book on Seicento art theory, a subject then of no interest in America, I wrote the author a fan letter. Thereupon that generous man let me accompany him to several of England's greatest Catholic estate sales, these collections recently broken up by death duties. Many magnificent, very large Guercino's and Reni's – along with other splendid Baroque paintings – went under the hammer for giveaway prices at Christie's or Sotheby's, soon to be installed in Mahon's very large, very ugly red brick house on Cadogan Square, London.

Whether it was Magdalen's complex cuisine (jugged, buckshot-filled, fermented hare a *specialité de la maison*). Such nurture along with Oxford's climate or the terrors of my freezing "rooms" meant never feeling quite well. Not even the medical ministrations of Sister Orledge could cure me (she presiding at the College's Saint-Swithin's Gate in real pearls and cashmere twin-set) to help ailing students. Nor would the Magdalen's doctor, his office furnished in ravishing Chinese Chippendale. He kept telling me I did not have Diabetes, seemingly the sole disease in his pharmacopeia. Years later I learned that one of my American predecessors at Magdalen, Walter Clemons, was treated by the same finely furnished physician, later dying of that seemingly unknown and un-diagnosed disease.

Deciding I need a change of scene and/or climate, I went to visit many remarkably hospitable English and Scottish collectors. These included the Wyndhams, the Marquis of Bute, the Earl of Elgin, Lord Crawford's, Count Seilern's, and Stirling-Maxwell's in Glasgow. Confusing the latter with his famous forbear, I assumed he had to be dead. Not so. Still in his very late nineties, he was living in an oxygen tent. So, I waved at his corpse-like being while mouthing a theatrical "Thank-you".

I also came to know curators and their collections in Birmingham, Edinburgh, London and Port Sunlight, they mostly far, far more generous in sharing their learning than their American peers whose primary duty necessitated almost full-time social climbing to facilitate the tax-free fund raising (and giving) essential to the United States' museum miracles. Several students then at Oxford and all informally interested in art history found one another – these including John Mallet, later Curator of Ceramics at the V&A and a lifelong friend. The future classicist Erkinger von Schwarzenberg (he a tall dark Botticelli come to life) also belonged to the group. His unforgettable rooms housed cascades of grey wolfskin throws, the host serving welcome espresso from golden demi-tasse cups. Fortunately, one of this small group belonged to the same regiment as the venerable Captain Spencer-Churchill, so allowing for a memorable visit to his matchlessly eclectic collection of ancient arts, we also meeting its witty, good-humored owner.

Just how and why I happened to enjoy the teas given at Oxford's Jesuit Campion Hall remains a mystery but may have been partially due to the warmth, the cream and the sugar which surrounded such welcome occasions along with Father d'Arcy's art-loving fame. Alex Eaglestone was then attached to Campion Hall, he resembling a self-assured soccer player more than a man of the cloth. Later with a fellow Campion Hall scholar, he prepared many key biographical texts pertaining to Saint Ignatius Loyola. Academically I encountered both the best and worst of what Oxford then had to offer. Predictably the bitter bottom of relentlessly non-thought emanated from the University's then celebrated Philosophy Department. I soon fled after a mercifully brief encounter with its famous (infamous?) lectures on "The Meaning of Meaning", these right out of Gulliver's Travels.

Before going to Oxford, I was interested in several of England's distinguished refugee Marxist scholars' works, especially those by Frederick Antal and Francis

Klingender, yet though living in Britain, were little known there. Blunt, of course one of the “Cambridge Five” had always been very helpful to me and I was glad that Magdalen offered him sanctuary when hounded by righteous patriots. I was also happy to learn that Magdalen’s German Jewish Refugee Senior Tutor Carl Leyser – interned with my father on the Isle of Wight as a Stateless Enemy Alien – saw to it that the College’s lovely Gothic tower was bathed in commemorative purple light on Holocaust Day.

Most unexpected was my welcome friendship with one of Magdalen’s leading scientific fellows, Brian Lloyd, a specialist in diet, who studied the post-war horrors of malnutrition. A delightful, darkly handsome Welshman, Brian nursed a peculiar passion for third or fourth rate English paintings of the 1920’s and 30’s. These dismal daubs hung on the walls of his increasingly splendid homes, presided over by his German wife Reinhold and their seven children. Brian was to leave Magdalen, establishing a vastly profitable science research park nearby where he occupied a huge house next to that of the Czech-Israeli billionaire and possible spy who disappeared from his yacht Robert Maxwell.

Thanks to Brian’s *gout particulier* I discovered the pathetic underbelly of Oxford’s art market – attending that city’s few auction houses which provided him with lots of truly awful, requisitely cheap English pictures. Such sources came in stunning contrast to Oxford’s few antique shops on The High whose windows offered works of genuinely “museum quality”. I never ceased wondering at the brilliance of their costly offerings, to be seen just a few doors down from the College. Though their dazzling contents were of course infinitely beyond my means, I did pick up some Elizabethan lead gutter box reliefs decorated with women’s profiles which I gave to Yale’s club dedicated to that queen.

Oxford’s Oxfam was my Wildenstein. There I found a splendid Chinese deep blue silk imperial kimono encrusted with golden woven dragons, this dressing up a wall of my unspeakable digs. I also bought an extremely rare New Zealand tiki and found a lovely Art Nouveau horn and moonstone comb soon jammed into my transom “window” so “When it rained, it rained moonstones”. My mother – a moonstone lover – later destroyed the comb by cutting its teeth off.

Though disliking most Protestant art for its materialism, the Ashmolean’s splendid Dutch still-lives permitted endlessly appealing visual dialogue, especially Adriaen Coorte’s exquisitely painted *Asparagus*. Warm and clean, that beautiful museum was ever a welcome refuge. I wish I could say the same for the University’s great Bodleian Library. This was so extremely cold that I could only remain conscious by constantly nibbling costly, forbidden chocolate bars. Between fear of freezing or being caught for illicit consumption made concentrated reading exceedingly difficult.

Cambridge also hired two full-time resident art historians in succession, first of these the bombastic, wealthy Rubens specialist Michael Jaffe, who I knew well, along with his delightful English numismatist wife Patricia Milne-Henderson. He was followed by the excellent Strasbourgeois scholar Jean Massing. Demonstrably fine though they were, it

might have been preferable to have signed up minds less linked to the Museum and to Northern art.

Though the cascade of illustrious Slade or other lecturers is inevitably cited as central to Oxford, Cambridge and London's art historical vitality, Otto Pächt's name is not to be found though he was long an honorary lecturer at Oriole College. Surprisingly his presence there was almost totally ignored throughout an extensive English residence. Pächt may never have given as much as a single public lecture at the University throughout his thirty or so Oxford years.

He, like Gombrich, had a very slight speech impediment, yet this was never in the latter's way. Pächt's stunning English obscurity recalls that of another unrivalled refugee scholar, Erich Auerbach, whose presence was almost completely ignored when at Yale following his Turkish exile.

Otto Pächt's splendid works had long impressed me in America before coming to Oxford. Just why he was such a minor figure there remains a mystery. Far from unknown in England, he wrote invaluable articles for the Burlington Magazine and the Warburg Journal. No forbidding Teuton, Paecht was always accessible and happy to share his thoughts. He came from a prosperous Austrian Jewish family and was blessed with an understanding, gracious Greek wife, they living most pleasantly in a small townhouse near the Ashmolean Museum.

Possibly Pächt was not particularly hungry for acceptance, never converting to the Church of England (as had his fellow Austrian Ernst Gombrich). Interestingly both men's sons became well known Sanscrit scholars. Once invited back to Vienna, under deservedly prestigious circumstances, Pächt became among the world's most prolific and honored art historians, suddenly showered with dazzling, richly deserved decorations. Was this due to a triumphant Austrian return? Did this erase the ignominy of Pächt's exile from so determinedly Nazi a nation? Pächt went on to prepare outstanding catalogues of manuscripts in Vienna's National Library, after having done the same so for the Bodleian. Finally, Oxford came across with an Honorary Doctorate in 1971.

Familiar with Jean Seznec's formidable scholarship while still at Yale, I screwed up the requisite courage (my French being abysmal) to take his Diderot Seminar at Oxford. Amazingly the fellow graduate students' French was about as bad as my own. Dr. Seznec was glacial in approach and demeanor, he quite justifiably chastising me for a far too long and insufficiently analytic tack to my sad topic – the Death of Socrates as seen through Enlightenment Eyes. As so deadly a theme got me down, I could only produce quantity instead of quality.

Another of my seminars was given by Sir John Beazley, the world's expert on Attic Vase Painting. Though still ashamed to admit it, I was bored by his subject's intricacies, he devoted to successfully identifying this Greek Master or that as deduced from just a few

shards their author determined thanks to his virtuosic stylistic sensitivities. But I was very taken with the eccentricities of so likeable an old man, he entirely Edwardian in manner. Who could possibly resist the intensity of Beazeley's very being, he right out of *The Importance of Being Ernest*, the *Yellow Book*, or *Pygmalion's Henry Higgins*?

I made it a point to reserve huge books in Oxford's Art Library so that they could be placed near Dietrich von Bothmer's desk. This strategic location let me listen to Beazeley's singing mildly naughty ditties from Victorian pantomimes as he uncovered the traces of yet another freshly baptized Greek vase painter. Sir John's long-term students were all knitted unusual Christmas gifts by Lady B, such offerings known as Beazely Tubes, to be pulled up or down any or all arms and legs. Woe to the recipient who encountered their donor in wintertime when not wearing at least one of her good works. How improved my own Oxford life might very well have been, were I the wearer of four such knittings encasing perpetually shivering limbs.

Though brief (and in my case, essentially frivolous), attending the Great Classicist's seminar put me in good stead with his major disciple, a curator at the Metropolitan Museum, Dietrich von Bothmer, who also happened to have been by far my most difficult colleague at the Institute of Fine Arts. A Prussian aristocrat, he fled Nazi Germany to Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar in the mid-1930's to study under Beazley. Though arrogant, this intolerant and intolerable individual practically genuflected before me as a fellow student of his worshipped Oxford Herr Doktor Professor.

Another Oxford seminar was the very best I have ever been so fortunate as to attend, a small Dante class conducted by the University's Serena Professor of Latin, Alessandro Passerin d'Entrèves. A specialist in Natural Law, this brilliant medievalist was also a splendid Dante scholar, leaving Oxford for Italy during World War II to fight in the Italian Underground. Meeting weekly, each of his classes was built around a single canto of the *Divine Comedy*. This was first read aloud in d'Entrèves' exquisite Northern Italian, and then gone over in English translation, every line provided with his almost invariably profound commentary.

With such a magical cicerone as d'Entrèves, we students were given the keys to a divinely delineated kingdom, whether that of Dante's *Hell* or *Paradise*. One of my classmates confessed that these weekly meetings helped her survive the strains of Post-War English life. Sadly, unlike Michelangelo's lifelong ability to hear Savonarola's voice thundering in his ears, I can no longer recall d'Entrèves' suave sound, yet the very thought that I had once been privy to so revelatory an experience remains a glorious resource, sustaining me over a long life.

Among the "psychological surprises" of Oxford life was how deeply steeped its culture was in what sociologists designate as the "homosocial". Perfect strangers could stop you in the street in 1953 with declarations of love. The Divine Max Beerbohm, who knew



absolutely everything when devising his university's irresistibly magnetic Zuleika (Eureka?) Dobson, doubtless knew when he drafted her that she was in drag.

England, of the 1940's and 50's, was then permeated by a loathing of most things American. One of d'Entrèves' nightmares was the very thought of his daughter's possibly marrying a man from overseas. On one of my singularly few Oxford dates, I sensed an unusually tall couple following us. Commenting upon this to Henrietta, she, unembarrassedly, stated that yes indeed they were there, at her English father's wish. Obviously, all Americans were then seen to be sex maniacs.

On a terminal but possibly relevant note, one might remember that both John Ruskin and Aby Warburg, the world's most innovative art historians, ended irrevocably mad. Does, or can, or may, their common insanity relates to a possibly deleterious concentration upon the exterior, upon the surface, upon the material appearance of life and art's very fabric?

Warburg's cosmic concerns went further than Ruskin's moral ones, teeming with astrology, mysticism, kabbalah, and proto-sociological concerns. Where Ruskin is too often forgotten, Warburg is a subject of almost universal, ever greater, often exaggerated admiration. Should we not need to now explore what these great men's tragic psychology had in common and how their very souls derailed into irrevocable, strikingly similar disaster? Neither man had had any much-needed angel to help him look homeward, each increasingly disoriented by the terrifying breadth of their concerns and by their complex emotional disturbances. Warburg was even incapable of mourning his Orthodox father in literally suitable fashion, refusing to tear his lapel.

With the hopeless madness's of the German and Englishman, modern times lost two essential minds. Where Marx and Freud were Old Testament prophets, dispensing unpalatable if essential truths, we need the revival of Ruskin's compassionate morally inspired esthetic curiosity along with the daring of Warburg's unrestrained cosmic concern.

I am deeply grateful to Oxford for providing so richly varied an academic year and to Sir John and Lady Julia Henry for making it possible.

**Listed below are the many English friends and acquaintances who so generously contributed in myriad ways to my life in art's history**

Anthony Blunt

Michael Jaffe and Patricia Milne-Henderson

Francis Watson

Ernst Gombrich

Ellis Waterhouse

Kenneth Clark

Michael Kauffmann

John Pope-Hennessy

Keith Andrews

Gertrude Bing

Jennifer Montagu

Christopher and Sally Brown

Dennis Sutton

Roland Penrose and Lee Miller

John Russel and Rosamund Bernier

Caroline Elam

### **Collectors visited during 1952–3**

Francis Wyndham

Earl of Elgin

Lord Crawford

Major Spencer Churchill

Denis Mahon

Marquess of Bute

Sir John Stirling Maxwell

Count Seilern

Queen Elizabeth II, Windsor Castle (With National Art Collections Fund)