

Victoria & Albert Art & Love

Introduction

Susanna Avery-Quash

Essays from a study day held at the National Gallery,
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Introduction

Susanna Avery-Quash

The essays presented here originated in two Study Days, jointly organised by the Royal Collection and the National Gallery, which took place on 5 and 6 June 2010 at the National Gallery, Trafalgar Square. Over those two days speakers from England, Scotland, Germany and France gave talks about Queen Victoria and Prince Albert as enthusiastic patrons of the arts, and showed, among other things, how their extensive and diverse collections reflected their love for one another as well as their strong sense of public duty to assist the artistic life of the nation. The Study Days took up some of the themes explored in the concurrent exhibition, *Victoria and Albert: Art and Love*, which took place at The Queen's Gallery between 19 March and 5 December 2010. The exhibition, the first ever to focus on Victoria and Albert's shared enthusiasm for art, brought together over four hundred items from the Royal Collection, and was accompanied by a scholarly catalogue edited by Jonathan Marsden.

Given the enthusiastic response to the Study Days, it was decided to make the talks available permanently, easily and cheaply. That decision led to the current venture, in which the Royal Collection and the National Gallery have once more collaborated to produce the first ever e-publication by either institution, hosted on the Royal Collection website and with a link from the National Gallery's home pages. 2011 was the 150th anniversary of the death of Prince Albert, and we hope that this e-publication is a fitting tribute to a remarkable man who did so much for the arts in his adopted homeland, even in the face of much misunderstanding and opposition during his own lifetime.

In the course of the two Study Days certain threads in the complex and colourful story of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert's involvement in the arts became dominant. Perhaps the most important related to the sheer extent – the depth and breadth – of their commitment. Certainly their enthusiasm ran deep, not least because their love of art was a shared pleasure. Indeed, this is arguably a unique phenomenon in the history of the British monarchy: which other sovereign and his/her consort have been so united in their interest in the arts? Near contemporary equivalents can be found, I would suggest, only in less exalted ranks, including two close associates of Victoria and Albert: one of the Duke of Devonshire's nieces, Harriet, Duchess of Sutherland (1806–68), who was Mistress of the Queen's Robes, was a promoter of taste and a keen collector together with her husband; while Sir Charles Eastlake (1793–1865), the first Director of the National Gallery, shared his interest in art with his wife, Lady Eastlake, who became a notable art critic in her own lifetime, especially during her widowhood – which was almost as extended as Queen Victoria's.

The mutual delight in collecting and displaying works of art became for Victoria and Albert an important part of their everyday life and an expression of their love for one another. From the time of their engagement in 1839 to the Prince's death in December 1861, significant moments in their marriage were marked by the acquisition of works of art. They often gave each other artistic gifts, and their exchange of presents – *Bescherung* in German – occurred regularly at Christmas and on their birthdays (delightful watercolours by James Roberts commemorate the tables spread with gifts on these occasions), as well as to mark their wedding anniversaries and the births of their children. Indeed, about a third of all the objects shown at The Queen's Gallery exhibition entered the Royal Collection in this way. All kinds of art objects of varying value were thus exchanged, including a set of jewellery in the form of orange blossom given by Albert to Victoria on their engagement, as well as important examples of early Italian painting given by Victoria to Albert on his birthday in 1846. Perhaps the most bizarre, if familial, gifts, as Charlotte Gere points out, were the pieces of jewellery incorporating either baby teeth of the royal infants or stag's teeth from animals shot by Albert in Scotland.

It was not least because their collecting of art was such a feature of their joint lives that the Queen felt so debilitated after Albert's death: 'How dreadful', she noted in her Journal for 30 June 1863, 'to be always lacking his advice & working in the dark without his unerring eye & great taste, striving to keep to indications of his wishes'. In fact Victoria did continue to visit exhibitions, country houses and artists' studios until the last decade of her life, yet her collecting tastes became less ambitious and she contented herself largely with commissions to commemorate contemporary family events or to perpetuate Albert's memory. As John Morrison points out, much of the Highland imagery, which perpetuated a fanciful notion of Scotland full of stags, glens and kilts, fulfilled this ambition of Queen Victoria – even before her widowhood.

This mention of Queen Victoria's visits to artists' studios reminds us of another aspect of the royal couple's profound interest in the arts. Many artists revelled in the 'hands-on' approach adopted by the couple, especially Albert, and most found his willingness to critique their work helpful. A few, however, not least the miniaturist Robert Thorburn, found this royal interest more of a stifling interference (see Vanessa Remington's essay). It is often said that William Powell Frith thought his celebrated depiction of *Derby Day* much improved by the suggestions of Prince Albert; equally telling is the less well-known story (also recounted by Vanessa Remington) about the animal painter Thomas Sidney Cooper. While he was painting one of Queen Victoria's prize Guernsey cows at Osborne he was amazed to receive a number of visits from Prince Albert, who came to monitor his progress and to discuss various aspects of art. Cooper's verdict was that he had 'never come across anyone who showed a more comprehensive appreciation of artistic excellence generally'. Remington and others demonstrate the particular closeness of Victoria and Albert's relationship with Landseer, Gibson, Marochetti, Winterhalter, Dyce, Gruner and Triqueti, and describe

the royal couple's fierce loyalty to certain artists and their families, especially when they fell on hard times. Most touching is Philip Ward-Jackson's account of Victoria's decision to give work to the elderly sculptor Richard James Wyatt when she heard that he had suffered minor injuries from an exploding grenade during the French bombardment of Rome. Jonathan Marsden reveals the very important role of certain art agents, notably Ludwig Gruner and Emil Braun, in assisting Victoria and Albert to acquire Old Master paintings for their collection. Behind the scenes, Miss Marianne Skerrett, the Queen's 'dresser', often seems to have acted as a practical go-between – and occasional peacemaker – for the royal couple and various contemporary artists.

The fact that Prince Albert felt sufficiently confident to discuss works of art with their creators was no doubt largely because he was himself a good amateur artist. Both he and Victoria had taken lessons and were proficient in sketching, painting and etching. Albert even studied modelling with John Francis and designed jewellery for his wife. Furthermore, both were accomplished musicians. As the current Prince of Wales has noted of his great-great-great-grandparents, 'the sovereign and her consort habitually relaxed in the evening at Windsor playing Beethoven overtures together at the piano (when the Prince was not himself composing)'. Richard Foulkes's essay reminds us too that the Queen in particular was a most enthusiastic theatregoer and a keen critic, finding the Republican-spirited William Macready's acting, for instance, increasingly melodramatic.

Consistent with Victoria and Albert's 'hands-on' approach to art and their desire to critique what they saw and heard was the conscientious way in which they (especially Albert) went about cataloguing, cleaning and displaying their art collections. A notable instance of Albert's early approach to curatorship is his involvement in finding appropriate frames for his early Italian pictures (see Lucy Whitaker's essay) as well as his initiation of the cataloguing of the pictures under the supervision of his surveyor of pictures, Richard Redgrave. In addition, Albert himself chose places for some of his pictures on the walls at Osborne, a duty usually carried out by the private surveyors of royal houses. Indeed, the novelty of this approach was remembered with evident amusement by members of the royal household. The Queen's lady-in-waiting, Eleanor Stanley, for instance, recorded that she and Lady Canning were disturbed during a visit to Osborne in April 1848 by the Prince looking for spaces in the Drawing Room to hang his pictures and that they were drawn into his frenzied activity, spending several hours with him, 'running up and down stairs, measuring panels, and discussing the respective merits of the different pictures'.

As for the breadth of Victoria and Albert's art collecting, their acquisitions, which spanned their marriage, covered nearly every form of fine and decorative art, from Old Master paintings to sculpture, furniture, jewellery and fine book bindings; it covered all periods (both the antique and contemporary); and it had an international reach. Albert's international upbringing (his birthplace was Germany

and his education had partly taken place in Italy) and Victoria's rule over a far-flung Empire ensured that their collecting and commissioning of works extended beyond British shores. Albert commissioned sculpture from Italian, German and French artists; Victoria's patronage, in contrast to Albert's, extended to include non-European cultures, notably through the collecting of photographs and works of art from India. What makes the royal couple's collecting particularly impressive is the fact that they were both constrained by restricted budgets. They simply could not afford to be big spenders on anything; Victoria, in any case, was more interested in the giver of the gift or the sentiment of the present rather than in any perceived monetary value.

It is evident that while Queen Victoria and Prince Albert shared a love of art, their individual tastes differed considerably. Victoria's purchases tended to be more conventional and often involved an indulgence in personal sentiment. Being strongly family-oriented, and increasingly so after her husband's early death, she spent money on works of art connected in some way or other with her life as a wife and mother. Thus a new image of Victoria emerges in these essays: not the familiar portrayal of the mourning widow clad in black, but a passionate and open-minded young woman. Certainly she was no prude. We discover that it was she who purchased the vast majority of painted and sculpted nudes, while it was Albert who requested the lengthening of the kilt and the sandalling of the feet in the second version of Emil Wolff's portrait statue showing the Prince Consort in classical armour. According to Philip Ward-Jackson, this request may have been in order to avoid disturbing the Queen's calm in the formal surroundings of Buckingham Palace.

By comparison with Victoria's, Albert's tastes were idiosyncratic, notably his interest in and promotion of the early art of Italy and Germany. Susan Foister and Klaus Weschenfelder reveal how Albert's love of early German art evolved from his deep interest in the life of Martin Luther; his family's collection of early German prints, and the enthusiasm of his father, Duke Ernst I of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, for evoking the Middle Ages through architecture, furniture design and portraits of himself. Some of Albert's commissions clearly demonstrate a Northern spirit. As Philip Ward-Jackson notes, the sculpture of Pietro Tenerani, a contemporary Italian artist keenly promoted by Albert, was heavily influenced by the northern Nazarenes and by the so-called 'Deutsch-Römer' artists by whom Tenerani was surrounded in Rome.

Albert's even greater interest in early Italian art was strongly rooted in his passion for Raphael, whose work he saw, in Vasarian terms, as the final brilliant product of the early Italian tradition. His lifelong attachment to Raphael inspired Albert not only to bring together a pioneering photographic archive of the master's painting, but also to attempt to reintroduce into contemporary British painting the art of fresco in which Raphael had excelled. Presumably, too, it was his love of Raphael's art that induced Albert to acquire paintings from contemporary artists, notably William Dobson, William Dyce, Charles Eastlake and Michael Wittmer, whose work, in terms of both its religious subject matter and its evident sensitivity and purist approach to composition, line and colour, reflected Raphaellesque concerns.

While Queen Victoria and Prince Albert were both keen to acquire unique works of art, from past as well as contemporary artists, they were more than happy to allow copies and reproductions into their collection. For instance, the sculpted figure of *Flora* by Tenerani, which entered the Royal Collection in 1859, was produced some eight years after the original version, which had been bought by Nicholas I of Russia. Perhaps knowledge of this approach was widespread: at least Friedrich Wilhelm IV saw nothing wrong with sending them gifts of porcelain vases whose designs dated back to work carried out by the architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel for the previous king. This interest in copies of works of art was also shown in Albert's support for the industrial arts and in the possibilities for mass reproduction afforded by new mechanical techniques. Kathryn Jones's essay focuses on the Prince's keen following of the progress of the Birmingham firm of Elkington's, who specialised in electroplating and in their own patented technique of electroforming, by which an object was 'grown' in a tank using a chemical solution and electric current. What was so appealing about the latter process was that an original piece of art could be reproduced an infinite number of times, in precise detail, and at comparatively low cost. Firms such as Elkington's were given prime spaces to exhibit their wares at international exhibitions, most famously at the Great Exhibition of 1851 in Hyde Park, with which Prince Albert was so heavily involved. But the Queen played her part too – she was an active supporter of the Art Union scheme, a popular form of lottery with an annual ballot of prizes, many of which were reductions of full-sized works of art. She was an early subscriber to the Crystal Palace Art Union, and in 1859 she purchased five examples of their Parian ware.

This promotion of British manufacturing was a sign of Victoria and Albert's public spiritedness, which further manifested itself in their generous loans or gifts from the Royal Collection. They allowed Samuel Carter Hall, editor of the *Art Journal*, to reproduce countless paintings and sculptures from Buckingham Palace, Windsor Castle and Osborne House in the pages of this journal between 1855 and 1861. Kathryn Jones describes how, when Henry Cole was gathering objects for his new museum of applied arts at Marlborough House (the forerunner of the Victoria and Albert Museum at South Kensington), the Royal Family lent freely to it, including furniture, tapestries, medallions, lacquer ware, ancient ironwork, and arms as well as, at Victoria's suggestion, Sèvres porcelain and lace. In 1862, after Albert's death and following his wishes, the Queen offered a collection that he had received from his relative, Prince Ludwig Kraft Ernst von Oettingen-Wallerstein, to Charles Eastlake at the National Gallery (see the essays by Susan Foister and Susanna Avery-Quash). This comprised a remarkable group of 77 early Netherlandish, German and Italian paintings, as well as some Byzantine and Russian works, from which the Trustees made a selection of 25 pictures for the nation. Such patronage of the arts, as Emanuel Starcky explains, was reflected more widely in Europe, particularly in France of the Second Empire.

The place where Victoria and Albert's artistic aspirations, ideas and loves came together most clearly was at Osborne House on the Isle of Wight. This was the royal home that housed the early Italian, German and Netherlandish pictures as well as the royal couple's contemporary sculpture commissions. Meanwhile, the gardens were adorned with other commissioned sculpture and mass-produced urns and the terraces were planted with trees and flowers of personal significance to the Queen, such as orange blossom, which had inspired items of jewellery. As for the house itself, Geoffrey Tyack explains how Albert deliberately avoided employing a professional architect in order that he might himself dictate the plan and construction of the building. This included the novel use of a fire-resistant internal iron structure more often associated with industrial rather than domestic architecture. Superficially Osborne was reminiscent of an Italian country villa, a suitable backdrop for Prince Albert's favourite part of his collection: the early Italian pictures. Not surprisingly, it was for the picture collection at Osborne that Victoria had the first new-style comprehensive scholarly catalogue published in 1876, the year which also saw the publication of Albert's *The Raphael Collection*. Although Buckingham Palace was known throughout Victoria and Albert's marriage as 'the headquarters of taste', it was at their home on the Isle of Wight that their joint tastes reveal themselves to best effect: Osborne House was their *Gesamtkunstwerk*, where they synthesised their ideas about art – what to collect and how to look after and display it.

Although Victoria and Albert's shared interest in and patronage of the fine and decorative arts has been emphasised, it is clear that Albert played the leading role. During his own lifetime his ambition for the arts, and even his participation in them, was often criticised. In 1906 Frith's daughter, Jane Ellen Panton, recalled that the Prince Consort had seen 'ridicule poured on his artistic attempts; sneers at his meanness; indignation at his impertinent interference in home and foreign affairs; and every abuse showered on him that one can imagine'. Ironically, it seems that his contribution was only fully appreciated after his death, when such negative evaluations were turned on their head. As these essays demonstrate, Queen Victoria and especially Prince Albert had a genuine love for, knowledge of and commitment to the arts. Albert's record speaks for itself. Jane Panton, along with her contemporaries, lived 'to hear his praise in every mouth, and to know that he honestly loved art for art's sake, and that in his short time, he did more for artists than any king or prince ever did before or since'.

Susanna Avery-Quash

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