

Victoria & Albert Art & Love

Queen Victoria, Prince Albert and their relations with artists

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Victoria and Albert: Art and Love, a recent exhibition at The Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace, was the first to concentrate on the nature and range of the artistic patronage of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. This paper is intended to extend this focus to an area which has not been explored in depth, namely the personal relations of Queen Victoria, Prince Albert and the artists who served them at court. Drawing on the wide range of primary material on the subject in the Royal Archive, this paper will explore the nature of that relationship. It will attempt to show how Queen Victoria and Prince Albert operated as patrons, how much discretion they gave to the artists who worked for them, and the extent to which they intervened in the creative process. It will describe the unprecedented level of informality which distinguished the artist–monarch relationship at this period, and explain the reasons for this rapport, as well as highlighting the causes of difficulties where they arose. It will attempt to illuminate, often in the words of the artists themselves, how easy or difficult artists found it to fulfil commissions at court.

Queen Victoria's opinions on art and artists survive in her voluminous correspondence and in her Journal, preserved in the Royal Archives at Windsor Castle. Queen Victoria's Journal, which she began as a princess in 1832 and continued until 13 January 1901, within a week of her death, runs to over 120 volumes. Her correspondence, which is even more extensive, was conducted throughout her lifetime with numerous close relations such as her uncle Leopold I, King of the Belgians, and his wife, Queen Louise, and later with her adult daughters. Queen Victoria was always informative, decisive and emphatic, not only in the views she expressed in her writing, but also in her way of expressing them, often using hyperbole or multiple underlining to emphasise a strongly held opinion. So the unfortunate David Wilkie, asked to paint *Queen Victoria's Accession Council* in 1837, produced 'one of the worst pictures I have ever seen both as to painting and likenesses'.¹ Sir Martin Archer Shee, President of the Royal Academy, was condemned as 'that tiresome Mr Shee',² whose portrait of her for the Academy she considered 'monstrous'.³ However, responding to an enquiry from the Duchess of Sutherland in 1857, Queen Victoria was pleased to recommend the Sicilian miniature painter Guglielmo Fajja as an artist who 'makes beautiful miniatures from large pictures. I think he paints particularly well'.⁴



Lively and entertaining commentary on one level, Queen Victoria's correspondence also provides a valuable factual record of the working practice and methods of the artists she knew. The primary source of information, for example, on the working methods and character of Sir William Ross (1794–1860; [fig. 1](#)), who produced over 140 miniatures and watercolours for the Queen between 1837 and 1857, is the detailed discussions of his work found in the correspondence of Queen Victoria and her aunt, Queen Louise of the Belgians ([fig. 2](#)). We learn in the course of this correspondence, that Ross required six sittings to finish a likeness,⁵ that he was painstaking in his work but tiresomely slow ('what we call in French musard, I think you call it dawdling',⁶ as Queen Louise wrote) and that he was hopelessly forgetful: 'Poor Ross who is as excellent, and as confused as ever and who has more than usually forgotten and left everything behind ... began this morning the picture of Charlotte.'⁷

Queen Victoria's Journal is the only source of the information that Robert Thorburn (1818–85), whose miniature of Queen Victoria with Prince Alfred and Princess Helena ([fig. 3](#)) clearly shows the influence of Raphael, had travelled for two years in Italy. Queen Victoria wrote in her Journal: 'He is a young Scotchman, of great talent, who studied 2 winters in Italy, & has painted some splendid miniatures, with such depth of colouring & such power, as I have never before seen in a miniature.'⁸ The contemporary biographical information on Thorburn is otherwise confined to a single slender memoir in the British Library.⁹ The range and extent of these written sources are such as to give us a comprehensive and accurate view of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert's opinions of the artists who worked for them at court.

Queen Victoria and Prince Albert differed from any previous monarchs and their consorts who have earned a reputation as patrons of the arts in that each was a proficient and studious amateur artist. Even a monarch such as Charles I, described

Fig. 1

Magdalena Dalton (1801–74),
Sir William Ross (1794–1860), c.1843
Watercolour on ivory laid on the original
backing card, 2.8 x 2.3cm (excl. frame)
Royal Collection, RCIN 420826

Fig. 2

Sir William Ross (1794–1860),
Louise, Queen of the Belgians (1812–50), 1846
Watercolour on ivory laid on card,
15.3 x 10.6cm
Royal Collection, RCIN 420418

Fig. 3

Robert Thorburn (1818–85),
Queen Victoria with Prince Alfred
and Princess Helena, 1847
Watercolour on ivory laid on
parchment affixed to board, 45.2 x 33.7cm
Royal Collection, RCIN 406891

by the papal agent¹⁰ in 1638 as having 'a good nose for paintings' and unquestionably the greatest connoisseur of paintings to occupy the English throne, is not known ever to have taken up the pen or the brush himself. Queen Victoria, in contrast, received weekly drawing lessons from the age of eight from the artist Richard Westall (1765–1836) until his death. Her lessons consisted mainly of copying drawings by her drawing-master, but she soon started to sketch not only the various members of the Household at Kensington Palace and visiting relations, but the scenery and locations that she observed on annual holidays away from London. What had begun as a childhood amusement became a source of lifelong pleasure which she was later able to share with Prince Albert, who also took pleasure in drawing. In an effort to improve her landscape painting she took a series of 12 lessons from the artist Edward Lear (1812–88) in 1846 and then employed as her tutor the artist William Leighton Leitch (1803–83), who assisted her primarily with her colouring. Sketching became a favourite occupation, particularly on the royal couple's summer visits to the Highlands of Scotland.

In addition to their drawing skills, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert developed in the early years of their marriage an interest in the practice of etching. They were taught the technique by George Hayter (1792–1871) and by Edwin Landseer (1803–73), whose elder brother Thomas was a prolific printmaker. Queen Victoria produced some 62 plates over a four-year period and Prince Albert 25, although some of these were a collaborative effort. Their role was to inscribe the designs on the coated metal plates which were then 'bitten' in acid either by Marianne Skerrett, the Queen's dresser, or by Colnaghi & Co. They often chose to depict their young and growing family, and the results were genuinely accomplished. Both the Queen and Prince Albert also made occasional attempts at painting in oils, and furthermore Prince Albert is known to have made designs for jewellery, such as a brooch containing an enamel miniature of the Princess Royal which he presented to Queen Victoria for Christmas in 1841.¹¹ She wrote delightedly in her Journal: 'The workmanship & design are quite exquisite, & dear Albert was so pleased at my delight over it, its having been entirely his own idea and taste.'¹²

Without doubt, the time that the Queen and Prince Albert spent with the brush, pen and etching needle honed their powers of observation and gave them a sense of empathy with the challenges faced by artists. Prince Albert put it well himself in discussion over dinner with Lady Bloomfield when he said:

*[H]is great object through life had been to learn as much as possible, not with a view of doing much himself – as, he observed, any branch of study or art required a lifetime – but simply for the sake of appreciating the works of others; for he added quite simply and without any self-consciousness or vanity, 'No one know the difficulties of a thing till they have tried to do it themselves; and it was with this idea that I learnt oil painting, water-colour, etching, fresco paintings, chalks and lithography, and in music I studied the organ, pianoforte and violin, thorough bass, and singing.'*¹³



Fig. 4
John Martin (1789–1854),
The Eve of the Deluge, 1840
Oil on canvas, 144 x 218.4cm
Royal Collection, RCIN 407176

The validity of this approach was confirmed by artists who met Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. John Martin (1789–1854) was one of the earliest artists with whom Prince Albert made contact on his arrival in England, and the Prince took a sustained interest in the painting of *The Eve of the Deluge* by Martin, which he eventually acquired for £350 in 1841 ([fig. 4](#)). According to Martin's son Leopold, it was the Prince who suggested prefacing his painting of *The Deluge* (New Haven, Yale Center for British Art) with *The Eve of the Deluge*, and creating *The Assuagement of the Waters* (San Francisco, Museum of Fine Arts) to make up a trilogy. The artist not only adopted these suggestions but also acknowledged: 'what pleasure he received and what great benefit he reaped from the enlightened criticisms of the Prince. They deeply impressed him as being judicious, thoughtful and kind, indicating a truly refined and extensive knowledge of art.'¹⁴

William Powell Frith (1819–1909), after encountering the royal family at the Royal Academy in 1854, was able to confirm what he had often heard: 'namely, that the Prince Consort and the Queen knew quite as much about art as most painters; and that their treatment of artists displayed a gracious kindness delightful to experience'.¹⁵ This view was supported by his experience in 1858 when they met again at the Royal Academy exhibition where his painting *Derby Day* (Tate) was on display. Frith recorded:

*It was on this occasion that the Prince Consort surprised me exceedingly by his intimate knowledge of what I may call the conduct of a picture. He told me why I had done certain things, and how, if a certain change had been made, my object would have been assisted. How the masses of light and shade might still be more evenly balanced, and how some parts of the picture might receive still more completion. I put many of the Prince's suggestions to the proof after the close of the Exhibition, and I improved my picture in every instance.*¹⁶



Fig. 5
Thomas Sidney Cooper (1803–1902),
The Victoria Cow, 1848
Oil on panel, 45.1 x 61 cm
Royal Collection, RCIN 405575

That the Queen and Prince Albert were often as interested in the process as much as the product of art evidently proved surprising to some. The animal painter Thomas Sidney Cooper (1803–1902) had been commissioned by Queen Victoria in 1848 to paint one of her prize Guernsey cows at Osborne ([fig. 5](#)). Whilst working in somewhat trying, hot and dusty conditions at the farm at Osborne, Cooper was amazed to receive a number of visits from Prince Albert, who came to monitor his progress and to discuss various aspects of art. He was even more surprised when, during a heavy downpour, the Prince sought him out to ask him ‘a favour which is not usually accorded by artists while their pictures are in an unfinished state. That is, if you will allow the Queen to see its progress.... Do not be alarmed, Mr. Cooper; her Majesty can appreciate a picture at any stage that it may be in, and she is very desirous of seeing it.’¹⁷ At half past two, Cooper presented himself with the painting at Osborne House:

*So much interest did her Majesty manifest in the picture, that I held it for fully a quarter of an hour while she was examining all the different points, and making most intelligent and pertinent remarks as to the execution of the work. I have painted for many persons of distinction, but I never came across anyone who showed a more comprehensive appreciation of artistic excellence generally, or a more perfect and simple reliance upon my powers, than in this particular instance, as to the execution of the work.*¹⁸

But what some artists found helpful or attentive, others found infuriating. The Queen’s Private Secretary, Major General Henry Ponsonby, wrote to his wife in 1874 about the portrait painter Henry Graves (1818–82): ‘He says it don’t pay painting the Queen & he would rather not – the honor [*sic*] is great but the payment

ordinary and the expense of living down here considerable. Besides which he is driven wild with Royal suggestions.'¹⁹ Clearly, it was only by possessing or adopting a personality of some compliance that an artist could sustain a working relationship under such close and continuous scrutiny from his patrons.

The sculptor William Theed (1804–91) proved adept at this approach. Cast with the responsibility for making life-size plaster groups for the over-doors in the new areas of Buckingham Palace in the mid-1850s (**fig. 6**), Theed seems genuinely to have appreciated Prince Albert's contributions. But he was successful at anticipating the Prince's interventions, liaising with the Palace to ensure that the Prince was given the opportunity to make his suggestions at a timely rather than an inconvenient stage. He wrote to Colonel Biddulph in March 1855: 'I was about to call on you to say that if it should be the pleasure of His Royal Highness to see the other Group for the Approach Gallery, it wants but a few days of completion in the clay; and it is always of great advantage to be honoured by His Royal Highness's really useful suggestions.'²⁰ Tact and a willingness to defer to royal opinion on matters as varied and detailed as the colour which the sculptured groups in the Ball Room and Ball Supper rooms should be tinted, or even whether a particular statue should be clothed with stockings or with Roman sandals, characterise Theed's phlegmatic approach to working for Victoria and Albert and explain in part the success of this long-standing working relationship.

Ironically, Sir Edwin Landseer (1803–73; **fig. 7**), the artist whose work for Queen Victoria over two decades epitomises more than any other her taste in painting, was very far from the model of compliance displayed by Theed. Although Queen Victoria found Landseer 'very agreeable and particularly gentleman like',²¹ Landseer found it difficult, particularly in the early days, to put up with the peremptory royal demands. 'I am still occupied at the Palace,' he wrote to Lady Abercorn in 1842, 'Her Majesty is all whim and fancy.'²² Landseer was by all accounts extremely personable; he was popular with the ladies, and Frith tells us that he was a delightful storyteller and good at singing: 'the most charming companion in the world'.²³ The Queen, however, found him unreliable: he was late in submitting his bills and she had trouble persuading him to finish half-completed works. Indeed, some key works never were finished to her satisfaction. One of Landseer's most ambitious uncompleted works was a large-scale equestrian portrait of the Queen on which he worked on intermittently throughout his career; a sketch alone survives in the Royal Collection (**fig. 8**). With this commission Landseer seems to have been over-anxious to produce a masterpiece in the manner of Van Dyck's equestrian portrait of Charles I and the painting languished in his studio, weighing on his conscience, until his death.

Another painting which proved problematic for Landseer was known as the 'Boat Picture' (**fig. 9**). As a surviving sketch shows, the composition was intended to depict Queen Victoria disembarking from a boat at Loch Muick to inspect a dead stag in the



Fig. 6
William Theed the Younger (1804–1891),
Thetis bearing the Armour of Achilles, 1852
Plaster
Buckingham Palace



Fig. 7
Sir Edwin Landseer (1803–73),
The Connoisseurs: Portrait of the Artist with Two Dogs, 1865
Oil on canvas, 92.4 x 72.1 cm
Royal Collection, RCIN 403220



foreground. Landseer experienced difficulties in realising the likenesses in the painting from the very beginning and even when Franz Xaver Winterhalter (1805–73) was brought in to advise him on correcting the Queen's features, he seemed unable to achieve a likeness that would satisfy the Queen. She wrote in her Journal on 5 April 1854 that she had sat once more for the picture 'which is very good, fine and all finished, but our likenesses are not good'.²⁴ The Queen's last sitting took place on 10 April, and the painting was shown, unfinished, at the Royal Academy, where it met with critical reviews. In a letter written in 1870 Landseer referred to the painting as his 'Balmoral misfortune' and said that when he had been to Windsor in an attempt to finish it he had been nagged over 'the most trifling points of accuracy such as McDonald always wore a white shirt and grey stockings. I have made up my mind never to accept another commission and *not* to go to Osborne'.²⁵ Landseer's mental health deteriorated soon after this and he never worked for the Queen again, but given the insecurities of the artist and the inconsistency of his efforts, it is surprising that the relationship between monarch and artist survived at all to produce a body of almost forty oil paintings over a period of more than thirty years.

One explanation that has been advanced for the survival of the relationship between Landseer and the Queen was the soothing intervention of Marianne Skerrett (fig. 10), whose official position was that of the Queen's Dresser, but who also acted as clerk to the Queen and whom Landseer called 'the dearest and most wonderful little woman I ever knew'.²⁶ Miss Skerrett managed the practical details of sittings, and seems to have been adept at reconciling the demands of her royal mistress and the needs of the artist himself. Yet her existence serves only to emphasise another significant distinction between Queen Victoria and Prince Albert and all the other royal patrons who had preceded them. Marianne Skerrett's role involved arranging the necessary practical details of royal commissions. Neither she nor Ludwig Gruner (1801–82), who acted as an art adviser and agent to the royal couple, diminished the

Fig. 8

Sir Edwin Landseer (1803–73),
Queen Victoria on Horseback, 1838
Oil sketch on millboard, 52.1 x 43.2cm
Royal Collection, RCIN 400200

Fig. 9

Sir Edwin Landseer (1803–73),
Queen Victoria Landing at Lock Muick, 1850
Oil on canvas, 42.9 x 76.5cm
Royal Collection, RCIN 403221



Fig. 10
Rosa Koberwein (1876–1903),
Marianne Skerrett, 1880
Coloured chalks, 67.2 x 52.3cm
Royal Collection, RCIN 917950

Fig. 11
Jean-Joseph Benjamin Constant (1845–1902),
Queen Victoria, 1899
Oil on canvas, 327.7 x 202.0cm
Royal Collection, RCIN 403425

constant and strikingly direct contact which the royal couple maintained with the artists who served them. Indeed, their relations with artists at court were notable for their unprecedented directness and informality of tone. Landseer dined with the Queen on a number of occasions in 1850, a privilege which Benjamin Haydon explained in his autobiography was far from being the conventional treatment accorded to artists. He numbered Lord Egremont and Sir Robert Peel amongst the very few other patrons to consider a great artist fit society at their table.²⁷ And when Landseer died, it was the loss not only of a 'great artist' but a 'kind old friend' that Queen Victoria mourned.²⁸ Indeed, she considered Winterhalter and Landseer 'our personal, attached friends of more than 30 years standing'.²⁹

Frith enjoyed a little of the ease that could develop in the artist–monarch relationship. His daughter, Jane Ellen, observed:

[A]fter the first sitting we never heard anything but praise of the Queen. The first idiotic stiffness over, when she gave over speaking to him through a third person ... and rational converse was possible between the Queen and Papa, they got on famously. She laughed at his stories, took an interest in all he told her, and whenever the good and charming Lady Augusta Bruce had not sufficient authority to obtain what he required, a word to the Queen was enough, and the article, whatever it was, at once appeared.³⁰

Not every sitting, however, was given in a spirit of such *bonhomie*. Sir Frederick Ponsonby recorded in his *Memoirs* that he saw Queen Victoria after her sitting for a portrait by Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant in 1899 (**fig. 11**). The Queen, who had imposed a 20-minute limit on the length of the sitting, told him that Constant

was a most extraordinary artist as he never painted at all, but sat with his face between his hands gazing at her during the whole sitting in a most embarrassing way. Of course Benjamin-Constant realized that twenty minutes was ridiculously inadequate for the purpose: he had therefore tried to stamp an impression of her on his brain. The result was a magnificent picture.³¹

Although most sittings for portraits took place at court, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert are the first members of the British royal family who made frequent visits to artists' studios. Prince Albert first acquired the habit during the three months he spent in Florence and the three weeks in Rome during 1838–9. According to his companion Sir Francis Seymour, later Lord Hertford, the Prince rose early and spent all day visiting galleries and artists' studios. When Prince Albert visited England in the autumn, at the time when he became betrothed to Queen Victoria, he visited John Martin's studio and he followed this with several further visits after he had come to live in England. It was therefore probably Prince Albert who initiated this more informal form of contact with artists, but it was a practice that they continued together. Twice they visited Landseer at his home and studio in St John's Wood: on the first occasion, 3 April 1849, the Queen found it 'full of charming sketches & pictures of every kind, but chiefly studies & sketches';³² two years later, she returned to find 'some beautiful things ... some beautiful unfinished sketches'.³³ Even after Prince Albert's death, Queen Victoria continued to make private visits to artists' studios. She visited the studio of Sir Francis Grant (1803–78) in 1868 to see a portrait of her cousin the Duke of Cambridge before it was sent to the Royal Academy, and she visited Frederic Leighton (1830–96) in his studio on 12 March 1869, finding him 'most agreeable & gentlemanlike, & his house & studio charmingly arranged'.³⁴

Queen Victoria and Prince Albert's relations with artists were unquestionably more informal and direct than those of any previous monarch. But with Ludwig Gruner as their only salaried artistic adviser, how did the royal couple establish their range of artistic contacts? How did they initially become acquainted with artists? Only a year after his marriage in 1840, Prince Albert was given the opportunity to meet and engage with the leading artists in the country through his appointment as President of the first Fine Arts Commission. His appointment had been made partly at the suggestion of Sir Robert Peel, in acknowledgement of his interest in the arts. The commission was charged with organising the painting of a large series of works in fresco for the new Palace of Westminster being designed by Sir Charles Barry. A competition was organised to select the artists who should participate in the creation of the new decorative schemes and Prince Albert, as President, came into contact with all those artists who submitted proposals for historical and literary subjects for the project. They included Edward Matthew Ward (1816–79), John Calcott Horsley (1817–1903), John Rogers Herbert (1810–90), Charles West Cope (1811–90), William Dyce (1806–64), Daniel Maclise (1806–70) and Charles Eastlake (1793–1865). He and the Queen decided to encourage the



Fig. 12

Ludwig Gruner (1801–82) and Anna Brownwell Jameson (1794–1860), *The Decorations of the Garden Pavilion in the Grounds of Buckingham Palace*, 1845

Coloured engravings on paper; presentation binding red silk velvet decorated with silk-satin and metal-wrapped thread, 44.5 x 35.4cm
Royal Collection, RCIN 708005

participants by making available the newly built Garden Pavilion at Buckingham Palace as a site on which the artists could experiment with the technique of fresco painting which was little known in England at the time. In the central octagon, eight lunette-shaped compartments were dedicated for selected artists to paint in fresco ([fig. 12](#)). Time after time the Queen and the Prince visited the artists at work: 'unannounced & without attendants', as one of the artists, Thomas Uwins, recorded, 'courting conversation, & desiring rather reason than obedience, they have gained our admiration and love'.³⁵ Eastlake, who first came into direct contact with Prince Albert through his dealings with this first royal commission (he was Secretary of the Fine Arts Commission), quickly gained the Queen and Prince Albert's confidence. As President of the Royal Academy between 1850 and 1865, and Keeper, a Trustee and later first Director of the National Gallery, he became a key figure of authority in the art establishment and remained a trusted adviser to the royal couple throughout his lifetime.

Most artists, however, became known to Queen Victoria through the personal recommendation of close friends or relatives. Winterhalter, who worked extensively for Louis-Philippe, King of the French, and the Orléans family, was introduced to Queen Victoria by Queen Louise of the Belgians, daughter of King Louis-Philippe. Heinrich Von Angeli (1840–1925), who first painted Queen Victoria in 1875, was recommended to the Queen by her daughter, Crown Princess Frederick William of



Fig. 13
Frederic, Lord Leighton (1830–96),
Cimabue's Madonna Carried in Procession, 1853–5
Oil on canvas, 231.8 × 520.7cm
Royal Collection, RCIN 401478

Prussia. John Phillip (1817–67), who painted a number of Scottish and Spanish genre scenes for Queen Victoria, as well as the official record of the *Marriage of the Princess Royal*, was recommended to the Queen by Landseer. Personal recommendations also accounted for the employment of a number of miniature painters in royal service. The elderly Jean-Baptiste Duchesne de Gisors (1770–1856) was first commended to Queen Victoria by Queen Louise of the Belgians in 1841. Reginald Easton (1807–92) started to paint miniatures for Queen Victoria on the recommendation of her daughter Princess Helena, and Crown Prince Frederick William of Prussia was able to endorse the work of Edward Taylor (1828–1906) and Johannes Zehngraf (1857–1908) later during the Queen's reign.

Queen Victoria and Prince Albert also became acquainted with many artists' work through exhibitions. They took every possible opportunity to visit exhibitions both at home and on state visits abroad. On a state visit to Belgium in 1852, for example, they visited the Antwerp exhibition of Fine Arts, where they admired history paintings by several Belgian artists as well as Landseer's *Foresters' Family*. They were punctilious in their attendance at the annual exhibitions of the Royal Academy. It was there that they saw, for example, Frederick Leighton's first exhibit, *Cimabue's Madonna Carried in Procession* (**fig. 13**) when they visited privately the day before the opening in May 1855. Queen Victoria commented that: 'There was a very big picture, by a young man called Leighton, his 1st attempt, at the age of 20 ... It is a beautiful painting, quite reminding one of a Paul Veronese, so bright, & full of light. Albert was enchanted with it – so much so that he made me buy it.'³⁶

This particular painting provides a rare synthesis of Victoria and Albert's tastes, which in many respects were very different. The quality which Queen Victoria most admired in painting was intense colouring, and this was not the only occasion when



Fig. 14
William Powell Frith (1819–1909),
Ramsgate Sands: 'Life at the Seaside', 1851–4
Oil on canvas, 77.0 x 155.1 cm
Royal Collection, RCIN 405068

she used a comparison with Veronese's rich Venetian tones as a mark of praise. Prince Albert responded primarily to purity of line, and would have therefore have found much to admire in the relief-like composition of Leighton's early masterpiece. In this, Prince Albert was driven above all by a love of Raphael and he particularly admired contemporary artists such as William Dyce who displayed Raphael's influence. Albert admired art that was didactic, instructive, cerebral; for Victoria, successful art demanded an emotional response, and paintings that she admired were more often than not those with a sentimental association. Her strong sense of family led her to favour portraits and records of events, such as marriages and christenings, and she was often charmed by landscape or genre scenes which were familiar to her in some way. Queen Victoria, for example, asked to purchase Frith's *Ramsgate Sands: 'Life at the Seaside'* ([fig. 14](#)), which she saw at the Royal Academy in 1854, even though a buyer had already been found for it. The appeal of the painting was universal and so great was the crush of the enthusiastic crowds surrounding it at the Royal Academy that it had to be protected by a guard-rail. Queen Victoria's interest, however, stemmed from the fact that Ramsgate was a resort that she remembered with great affection, having spent childhood holidays there for many years.

The royal couple were not restricted in their tastes by the boundaries of contemporary fashion and Prince Albert's admiration for early Italian paintings was particularly unusual in the context of the time. A more important constraint on their collecting appears to have been the financial restrictions within which they felt

obliged to operate as patrons. When Queen Victoria came to the throne in 1837, the shadow of George IV's profligate overspending still hung heavily over the monarchy. In acting as patrons, the Queen and Prince Albert adhered to a strict budget. Queen Victoria set her annual expenditure in 1841 at £2,000, 'For myself, for Pictures Statues &c. / not including engravings & lithographs & c. &c.', an amount which rose to £3,300 in 1855 and from which she never deviated.³⁷ Many pictures were simply put beyond her means by this comparatively modest spending power. The Queen complained, for example, in 1847, that she was not rich enough to buy the English historical paintings that she liked, and she often resented the prices she was charged for commissions. Her lady-in-waiting, the Hon. Eleanor Stanley, remembered her delivering

*a terrible broadside at English artists, both as regards their works and (though I agreed with her in much that she said) as regards their prices, and their charging her in particular outrageously high; in this I do not think she was quite borne out, for she quite forgets the additional time and trouble they bestow on things for her, coming down here, thereby being obliged to give up all their engagements for the day, waiting perhaps here for a considerable time, and at last hearing the Queen could not sit to them that day, or only half an hour, and many other similar disappointments, such as their not being always allowed to exhibit the pictures.*³⁸

Financial disagreements lay at the heart of the total breakdown of the relationship between the monarch and the miniaturist Robert Thorburn, who had painted a number of important miniatures for Queen Victoria between 1844 and 1853. Such was the bad feeling between the two parties that Thorburn declined any further royal commissions in 1853. The heated correspondence that led up to this declaration was fuelled by Thorburn's perception that his prices (£100 for a three-quarter-length miniature and £200 for a full-length) were being questioned by the court. He listed his grievances in full in a letter to the Keeper of the Privy Purse, Sir Charles Phipps, dated 27 January:

*You desire me to specify some of the annoyances I have been subjected to at the Palace, it is perhaps better to do so, and you must then acknowledge that I am not over sensitive. Firstly – I have been kept in daily expectation during eight or nine months for an acknowledgement of a picture upon which I had bestowed great pains, and to the completion of which in a given time I had sacrificed all my private engagements. Secondly – I have had the price which the public pay me for my portraits anticipated by the proposition of the most paltry sum. Thirdly – I have been commanded to go to Windsor and Osborne in the depth of winter, without the least provision for my comfort being made on my arrival and actually on one occasion was turned out of the Billiard Room into which I had been introduced, to allow two private gentlemen to have a game at Billiards; I was in fact turned out of the house to wait in the grounds. It would be impossible to enumerate all the slights and annoyances to which I have been subjected, painful to the feelings of any gentleman ... In conclusion, I have only to say that I cannot again submit to these indignities.*³⁹

Responding to an earlier complaint from Thorburn, Phipps was reluctant to 'be the medium of laying before Her Majesty a communication such as I am sure has never before been handed to Her',⁴⁰ but in the event the Queen decided not to pursue the intended commissions and Thorburn was never employed again.

Thorburn may have been over-sensitive, but it is clear from her correspondence that Queen Victoria was always very cautious about the payment of artists. When Winterhalter proved too busy in 1860 to paint the children of the Princess Royal, Queen Victoria recommended instead the miniaturist Annie Dixon, firstly on the grounds that she painted 'Heads and Groups of Children beautifully' but also that 'she is very moderate in her prices'.⁴¹ The Princess Royal clearly found the Queen's arguments compelling and Annie Dixon was summoned to Osborne House on the Isle of Wight to paint the children while they were staying there during the summer of 1861. Miss Dixon's attractive prices are itemised in a surviving memorandum addressed to Sir Henry Ponsonby headed: 'Miss A. Dixon's Charges for Portraits in Miniature' and containing a sliding scale of templates for different sizes of miniature with the price attached to each, ranging from 15 guineas for 85 x 67mm to 40 guineas for 210 x 140mm.⁴² She also made it clear in another memorandum that where she painted a double portrait she generally charged double her price for a single miniature, but would allow a 10 guinea discount on account of the sitters sharing the same background.⁴³ This was exactly the sort of consideration that would have appealed to Queen Victoria's powerful sense of value for money.

Evidence has shown Queen Victoria and Prince Albert to be well-informed and sympathetic patrons, who, as practitioners of various forms of art themselves, were often as interested in the creative processes of art as in the final product. They took a direct and lively interest in the artists who worked for them, visiting their studios, meeting and talking with them, and exchanging ideas, in a way that was unprecedented among former British monarchs. The impetus for this approach came largely from Prince Albert and it was therefore inevitable that after his death, on 14 December 1861, the great sense of the enjoyment of and enthusiasm for art, which Queen Victoria and Prince Albert had shared, disappeared. Queen Victoria quite openly expressed her lack of confidence in her own artistic judgement, saying: 'how dreadful to be always lacking his advice & working in the dark without his unerring eye & great taste, striving to keep to indications of his wishes. For me, who am so ignorant about art, & constantly need to be satisfied, with what I ought not to have been, it is most difficult to decide things.'⁴⁴

The Queen did continue to visit exhibitions, country houses and studios in a more limited way, and made the occasional significant purchase in the later part of her reign. But to a very large degree Queen Victoria and Prince Albert's engagement with art and artists had been a shared pleasure, and inevitably the Queen's artistic endeavours and collecting activity withered after his death in 1861.

The Prince Consort's strengths as an artistic patron, whilst evident to the Queen, were largely unappreciated at the time. The credit that he has quite rightly recently been given for his approach perhaps makes it easy to forget that, outside a narrow circle of artists and courtiers, his efforts went unappreciated by the majority of his contemporaries. William Powell Frith's daughter, Jane Ellen Panton, wrote in 1908:

*It is extraordinary to remember how Prince Albert was disliked and suspected all his lifetime in England by everyone, from the highest to the lowest; and the more than well-deserved reaction from this unjust judgement only began two or three years after his death. I have heard in my childhood 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: I have 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 ...*⁴⁵

Notes

1. Royal Archive, Journal, 12 November 1847.
2. Royal Archive, Journal, 22 October 1842.
3. Royal Archive, Journal, 31 October 1842.
4. Queen Victoria to Harriet, Duchess of Sutherland, 26 February 1857: Royal Archive, VIC/ADDA/24/337.
5. Queen Louise of the Belgians to Queen Victoria, 14 October 1839: Royal Archive, VIC/Y7/7.
6. Queen Louise of the Belgians to Queen Victoria, 21 October 1839: Royal Archive, VIC/Y7/8.
7. Queen Louise of the Belgians to Queen Victoria, 27 December 1841: Royal Archive, VIC/Y9/51.
8. Royal Archive, Journal, 23 February 1844.
9. British Library, Add. MS 28512, fol. 188.
10. Cited in Levey 1991, p. xvi.
11. William Essex (1784–1869), after William Ross (1794–1860), *Victoria, Princess Royal (1840–1901)*. Enamel set in a gold brooch with sapphires, rubies, emeralds, diamonds and topazes, 3.5 x 6.8cm (RCIN 4834).
12. Royal Archive, Journal, 24 December 1841.
13. Bloomfield 1883, vol. 2, p. 110.
14. Balston 1947, pp. 202–3.
15. Frith 1887, vol. 1, p. 257.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 286.
17. Cooper 1890, vol. 2, p. 62.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
19. Maj. Gen Henry Ponsonby to Mrs Mary Ponsonby, 22 April 1874: Royal Archive, VIC/ADDA/36/740.
20. William Theed to Colonel Biddulph, March 1855: Royal Archive, PPTO/PP/QV/Add/62/64; information kindly supplied by Jonathan Marsden.
21. Royal Archive, Journal, 22 September 1850.
22. Landseer to Lady Abercorn, Victoria and Albert Museum, V&A, Eng MS, 86 RR, vol. 3, no. 192, cited in Ormond 1981, p. 14.
23. Frith 1887, vol. 1, p. 318.
24. Royal Archive, Journal, 5 April 1854.

25. Landseer to ?William Russell, 13 April 1870, Houghton Library, Harvard, MS. Eng. 146, no. 46 cited in O. Millar 1992, p. 146.
26. Horsley 1903, p. 128.
27. Elwin 1950, pp. 552–3.
28. Royal Archive, Journal, 1 October 1873.
29. Royal Archive, Journal, 1 October 1873.
30. Panton 1908, p. 33.
31. Ponsonby 1951, p. 138.
32. Royal Archive, Journal, 3 April 1849.
33. Royal Archive, Journal, 8 April 1851.
34. Royal Archive, Journal, 12 March 1869.
35. Uwins 1858, vol. 1, pp. 204–5, 283–5, cited in O. Millar 1992, p. xxxviii.
36. Royal Archive, Journal, 3 May 1855.
37. Royal Archive, VIC/ADDT/231/1.
38. Erskine 1916, p. 98.
39. Robert Thorburn to the Hon. Sir Charles Phipps, 27 January 1853, Royal Archive, PP/VIC/1/54/5.
40. The Hon. Sir Charles Phipps to Robert Thorburn, 18 January 1853, Royal Archive, PP/VIC/1/54/5.
41. Queen Victoria to Crown Princess Frederick William of Prussia, 15 October 1860, Royal Archive, VIC/ADDU/32.
42. Royal Archive, VIC/ADDT/123.
43. Royal Archive, VIC/ADDT/124.
44. Royal Archive, Journal, 30 June 1863.
45. Panton 1908, pp. 39–40.

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