

Collecting for the Colonies

ANNA TIETZE

Department of Historical Studies, University of Cape Town

Amassing Treasures for all Times: Sir George Grey, Colonial Bookman and Collector by DONALD JACKSON KERR. (Otago: Oak Knoll Press and Otago University Press, 2006). 352 pp. ISBN10: 1-5845-6196-3

Uplifting the Colonial Philistine: Florence Phillips and the Making of the Johannesburg Art Gallery by JILLIAN CARMAN. (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2006). 452 pp. ISBN10: 1-8681-4436-4

In the past twenty-five years, as historians and art historians have questioned and challenged the bases on which their subjects are built, one of the major publication growth areas has been in studies of museums, their histories and their collections. These studies have offered meta-level analyses that are now very familiar but that just a few decades ago would have been regarded as extremely unusual. As the writings on this area have proliferated, a very broad differential in their approach has become evident: that between accounts that seem to celebrate the collecting urge and the growth of public museums on the one hand, and accounts that are somewhat critical of the motives of their collector-subjects and museum institutions on the other. These two books represent these two poles of museum studies very graphically and tacitly reach different conclusions on their subject of study while being driven ultimately by a similar curiosity. Underlying both is the same interest in the collecting urge, and in the extraordinary relationship between some private collectors and the large public institutions which they help to establish. Both find fruitful material for study in the late nineteenth century/early twentieth century period when, with public collections scarce and under-resourced, the private collector-benefactor could play a powerfully important role as public educator.

Kerr's study of Sir George Grey, sometime Governor of Australia, New Zealand and the Cape, is a minutely-researched account of a lifetime of book-collecting, carried out mostly at a great distance from suppliers, and pursued with great vigour while the collector was simultaneously rather busy with his public duties as governor. Opening chapters deal with early biographical material and close with Grey's graduation from Sandhurst and departure, in 1837, on an exploratory tour of Australia. This tour, brainchild of Grey himself and a Sandhurst colleague, was sponsored by the National Geographic Society, and included the request that the travellers 'collect specimens of objects of Natural History'(p.48) wherever they went. Grey's collecting work had begun, though not with books. On travels marked by great dangers (which are mentioned only in passing by Kerr), Grey built up impressive collections of scientific specimens, and established his lifelong

tendency of sharing his discoveries by quickly donating many of his specimens, on his return, to London institutions such as the British Museum and Kew.

Largely as a result of the expedition, it seems, Grey was offered the position of Governor of South Australia. Still only in his twenties, he took up the post in 1841. He continued to collect, now in his spare time, but increasingly began to focus on the book collecting which was to become his passion. Kerr establishes that there was a basic distinction within Grey's libraries, between philological publications documenting the languages of the regions he visited or governed, and the more conventional bibliophile's material: incunabulae, valuable classical literature, first editions and the like. This bipartite interest marked Grey's collecting whether he was in Australia (1841-5), New Zealand (1845-53 and 1861-8) or the Cape (1854-61). In all three places, he engaged with local language speakers, made concerted efforts to learn their languages, and assiduously collected publications in or about them. In addition, he was collecting mediaeval manuscripts, many on vellum, and priceless early books from all the main European areas. It must have been odd for the governor's visitors to see, in Cape Town or in Auckland, libraries containing such items as a fourteenth-century copy of the *Roman de la Rose*, a fourteenth-century vellum copy of Dante's *Divina Commedia*, or a fifteenth-century volume of Italian polyphonic hymn music 'of very great rarity' (p.164), plus a great deal else. What is even more remarkable is that most of these libraries remained in the colonial centres Grey governed. At significant times in the course of his career, Grey did a kind of astonishing purge of his collections, giving away the bulk of them to public institutions in the Cape and Auckland. In 1861, Cape Town received over 3500 manuscripts and books from Grey's private collection;¹ in 1887, the Auckland Free Public Library was opened with a gift of 8000 works from Grey's private collection, including fifty-three tenth-century manuscripts, over eighty publications from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and many thousands of rare autograph letters (p.214). Another substantial collection had simply been lost in the early years, when fire destroyed Government House, Auckland, in 1848. This, then, was a lifetime of energetic collecting, especially remarkable given the fact that Grey was entirely reliant on booksellers' catalogues and a very slow postal service from London for most of his purchases.

Kerr's response to his subject - to Grey specifically and to the colonial collector-benefactor more generally - is entirely positive. The fact that many of the indigenous-language publications collected by Grey were biblical texts used by missionaries to convert 'heathens' to Christianity is a point noted but not made more of, and neither is Grey's pride in Anglo-Saxon culture and sense of its power and mission to bring 'Civilization' to far-flung places. As a keen bookman and special-collections librarian himself, Kerr brings to his study of Grey an empathetic acknowledgement of the consolations of books - and an awareness of how complicated can be the collector's relationship with them. Grey is heard, via his letters, speaking poignantly of the urge to find a tranquility in books that is missing from

1 In addition, he donated 44 paintings, prints and photographs. Kerr mentions these in passing but does not elaborate.

his active and demanding career life (p.164). Regarding his decision to give away his library *en bloc* to Cape Town in 1860, Kerr notes the rather desolate personal circumstances of Grey's life at this time: illness, recent separation from his wife, a general sense that he was 'going down the hill of life'. Against this background, as Kerr points out, the renunciation of the private library seems like a highly significant transitional moment, a kind of death and hoped-for new beginning. Or again, from Cape Town on Christmas morning, c.1860, we hear Grey attempting to bridge time and space by poring over a fifteenth-century volume of prayers, hymns and psalms while the African sun blazes outside. In this testimonial (p.257-58), his professions of love (the word is used more than once) for this and other ancient books reveal that, for Grey as for so many collectors, collecting was very much *more* than simply an intellectual activity pursued from a desire for knowledge. It joined him to people and to the past; it was a comfort.

Jillian Carman's study of the founding of the Johannesburg Art Gallery is very much more sceptical of the motives of its leading characters. The account that results offers a sustained critique of colonial collectors and museums, and their relationship to their public. Using a theoretical scaffolding familiar to many museological studies, a hybrid of Marxist and Foucauldian critique, Carman questions the ultimate purposes of the main players, the wisdom of their choices, and the appropriateness or otherwise of their understanding of the Johannesburg public.

The stage is set by an account of this public, and its nascent town, at the turn of the century. Johannesburg is presented to us as a chaotic mix of buildings - the fruit of little or no town planning - which house or service a largely male, single, mining population. This was a town with more drinking places than shops, with no state-funded education in the 1890s - and as a result little education at all - and no state-funded libraries, museums or theatres. It was a place of rough-and-ready pleasures, and hard work. Itinerant entertainers, privately sponsored, offered circus and music-hall style entertainment, but there was little other than this on offer. Carman notes some early initiatives towards temporary local art exhibitions in Johannesburg in the 1890s, supported by the Transvaal government, but concludes that on the whole this town was perceived and accepted by most to be a sort of cultural desert and one in which one worked briefly before moving on.

The change began, she notes, post-South African War under British rule, with the establishment of a Johannesburg town council under Milner in the first years of the new century. Milner aimed to improve Johannesburg, both for those who currently lived there and as an inducement to British families to immigrate. He was supported in this drive by the Randlords, among them Lionel Phillips and his wife who returned to Johannesburg in 1905 after a nine-year stay in London. Lionel Phillips was British, but had been active in the Johannesburg mining world in the 1880s and 90s. His return in 1905 was possibly only anticipated to be temporary; Carman notes that he was contesting a Conservative seat in London in the same year (p.54). But, pressured by Randlord colleagues to resume his former directorship of H. Eckstein and Co., and anyway desperately needing the money, Lionel felt it wisest to stay. By 1908, he was planning a more comfortable and permanent home in Johannesburg, writing to senior partner Julius Wernher 'I cannot ask my wife to go on living in the *chalet*. It is very small and has lots of rats and mice'

(p.54). With some extra financial help from Wernher, Villa Arcadia was built for the Phillipses. It nicely symbolizes the transformations now occurring in this once-rudimentary town.

Carman sees the renewed British involvement in Johannesburg in the early years of the century as a crucial seedbed for the art gallery idea and similar initiatives. As Johannesburg sought for a new permanence and respectability, it made sense to invest in public places of education and leisure for its growing stable population. But if such public institutions were to be established, it was vital that there be an energetic, determined facilitator ready and able to convince people of their importance, solicit funds and sort out the thousand and more administrative issues that surround such projects. The person who fulfilled this role for the Johannesburg Art Gallery was Florence Phillips. Carman provides a biographical sketch of Phillips: South African-born, of a father who worked as a land surveyor, she met and married Lionel Phillips in Kimberley, and, through his sisters in London, discovered a wider and more cosmopolitan world that she eagerly embraced. A busy cultural and social life ensued, despite Phillips's frequent problems with illness. In these first years of the century, she consolidated her interest in the exhibition world and particularly in the visual arts and must have begun to conceive of the idea of bringing a permanent exhibition space to Johannesburg. One friendship made at this time - that with Caroline Grosvenor - was particularly auspicious, given Phillips's interests. Grosvenor, who had known many of the leading late-century English artists, introduced her in 1909 to a major figure of the Edwardian art world, Hugh Lane. It was a crucial meeting. Within a very short time from their introduction, Phillips had secured Lane's services as art-collector for a new gallery in Johannesburg, and the Johannesburg Art Gallery project was under way.

Carman halts the narrative at this point, in order to devote some time to establishing Phillips's personal collecting interests prior to meeting Lane and to show that Lane's notion of art collecting and taste in galleries were rather different from hers. This is something she wants to insist on because it is part of a larger claim that the gallery's opening collection was somewhat foreign to the Johannesburg viewing public too, and that this public might have been better served had Phillips not succumbed so completely to Lane's ideas. On the evidence of Phillips's own personal tastes and collecting interests, and her involvement in local temporary South African exhibitions, Carman argues that she was primarily interested, not in the *art* gallery, pure and simple, but in the notion of *design* museums that had gained ground in the course of the late nineteenth century, primarily in England but also elsewhere.

In England, the design museum idea had grown out of the 1851 Great Exhibition and the vision of its chief organizer, Henry Cole. Some of the manufactured goods from the Great Exhibition had been bought by Cole when it closed, and had been used to form the basis of a collection for a new permanent museum of design, originally the South Kensington Museum and later renamed the Victoria and Albert. The idea of this museum was that it would help educate the general public, but also crucially offer an education in taste for students of the schools of design that Cole was masterminding in London and the provinces. Both museum and schools would offer an alternative to the education in the Fine Arts (painting and sculp-

ture) that was offered by conventional art schools and galleries. And both their aims and their public would be somewhat different. The design schools would be chiefly recruiting artisans from the manufacturing industries and, through teaching them principles of good design, would in turn be enriching these industries with informed designers who could improve their manufactured goods and thus make them more desirable and competitive in a national and international market.

Within the world of the visual arts, the connotations of the two kinds of training schools (and related exhibition places) were very different. A school of fine art traditionally saw itself as training students in mastery of the human figure, and as a place in which one learnt the grand narratives of the Bible and the Classics which were regarded as the staple of a serious artist's career. This kind of art training and its associated ideas were coming under attack by the second half of the nineteenth century, leading to a new experimentalism and openness to genres of painting such as landscape. However the core assumption persisted that the business of 'fine art' was something very different from 'design'. The innovation of the design schools was to shift the balance of attention towards visual artefacts other than the traditional fine arts, and to weight the curriculum towards training in shape and pattern, and the pleasing design of functional objects.

Various factors contributed to the popularity of this new training focus, some mercenary, others ethical and aesthetic. There was the desire of the major industrialized nations to capture the bulk of the world market for their manufactured goods, in an age of increasing choice for consumers. And related to this was the realization that in an age of mass production, it mattered far more that the initial design for an object was as successful as one could make it. Where the new machinery was producing hundreds or thousands of items from one template, much money stood to be gained, or lost, from the quality of its original design. And then there was the quite different concern for the lives of factory workers and the kind of relationship they had to the goods they produced. In the writings and lectures of William Morris and John Ruskin, these moral questions were raised. How could human beings retain their sanity when tied to a particular spot in a conveyor belt of mass production? And couldn't the discerning consumer *see* the difference between the manufactured object made slowly and carefully by the craftsman, and the object produced by a machine? Lying behind the design schools and museums, these two different impulses uneasily jostled for supremacy: should a training in good design be aimed at maximizing profits for factory owners and boosting the nation's economy or should it aim to restore to workers their pleasure in manual labour, in craftsmanship - and improve the lives of all by surrounding them with beautiful objects, lovingly made?

The various motives for taking an interest in the design of manufactured goods joined together to make this a fashionable concern at the turn of the century, and Carman is able to show that Florence Phillips was very much caught up in the trend. Through her friendship with Caroline Grosvenor, she became well acquainted with the ideals of William Morris and his circle, and became a keen collector of lace and textiles. She and her husband commissioned work on their British homes from the Decorative Arts Guild, a Morris-inspired organization (p.68), at a time (in the 1890s) when this was rather daring, and by 1909 she was approaching the

Victoria and Albert Museum with requests for loans for a temporary arts and crafts exhibition in Johannesburg the following year (p.72). The requests were turned down, but once the permanent art gallery was established she tried again, writing to Lord Curzon from Johannesburg: 'In addition to the Art gallery, we are anxious to establish a Museum of Industrial Art, which is much needed here. This will in time become a great industrial Centre, but workers have nothing to refer to and what we need is a museum on the lines of South Kensington, so that workers have a standard to aim at' (p.74).

The London museum consistently refused her requests, but Florence Phillips had meanwhile offered her own collection of lace and textiles to the new Johannesburg Art Gallery. Its 1910 catalogue, written by Hugh Lane, noted that apart from the works of fine art its collection included some 'specimens of applied Arts and Crafts', to be housed in the main gallery until a 'School of Design' was established. He noted that 'in furtherance of this project, Mrs Lionel Phillips has given the valuable collection of antique lace and embroideries which is exhibited, and is anxious to obtain examples of old Dutch furniture, iron, brasswork, pottery and china, for this portion of the museum' (p.79). Despite Florence Phillips's obvious interest in this field of training and exhibition practice, however, no design school or design museum ever materialized in Johannesburg. Carman concludes that the rival notion of a conventional fine art gallery, stemming from Hugh Lane, was simply too powerful: 'Lane's intervention significantly altered the course of [Florence Phillips's] Johannesburg enterprise' (p.79) and 'Florence's original plans were scuppered' (p.108), although this does not seem to be implied by Phillips's pleas to Lord Curzon as late as 1913, three years after the gallery had opened, or by Lane's seemingly open-minded comment on the plans in the 1910 catalogue above.

Hugh Lane was an Irish-born private collector and professional art dealer who, while still very young, had established himself as a major player in the Irish and English art world. A dealer in old master works, he made his reputation as a collector and benefactor of *contemporary* art for galleries in Dublin, London and Johannesburg. The Dublin project was the first. In 1900, Lane met William Yeats and others involved in promoting Irish nationalism in poetry and theatre. Seeing the possibilities for a similar movement in the visual arts, Lane began to press for a gallery of Irish and contemporary British art, one that would foster new artistic ideas and a sense of Irish identity. By 1904, however, a meeting with art critic D.S. McColl had aroused Lane's interest in progressive late nineteenth-century French art and he began to collect this school also. His efforts to found a public collection resulted in the establishment in 1908 of the Municipal Gallery of Modern Art in Dublin; its opening collection contained much that was either lent or given by Lane himself and represented both his initial interest in Irish art and his newer interest in French developments. In the following year, 1909, Lane met Florence Phillips and very swiftly they seem to have consolidated a plan for a permanent Johannesburg art gallery, with a collection of contemporary art gathered together by Lane. In 1912, Lane was working again on behalf of South Africa, this time gathering together the seventeenth-century Dutch works that would form Cape Town's Michaelis collection. In the same year, he promised his remarkable collec-

tion of thirty-nine nineteenth- and twentieth-century, largely French artworks to Dublin, on the condition that they build a new gallery in which to house them. In the face of prevarications from Dublin, he re-routed his offer to London in 1913, bequeathing the works to the National Gallery on the condition that they form the basis of a 'Collection of Modern Continental Art'.² In a codicil of early 1915, Lane changed his mind again in favour of Dublin, but, though signed, the codicil was unwitnessed. A few months later he was dead, drowned on the *Lusitania* in May 1915. The terms of his bequest were disputed for many years by London and Dublin and the pictures are now shared between the two, with London holding eight key works of major importance.

Lane's involvement in the Johannesburg art gallery project was lucky for South Africa because he brought to the job an awareness of innovative art, an awareness that was relatively rare for South African or British collectors of the time. It was vital for a collector of contemporary art to have an awareness and understanding of the *French* art world because this was the indisputable centre of avant-garde developments in the field. And yet all too few British collectors and curators appreciated its importance. Long after the Impressionists' dealer, Paul Durand-Ruel, had broken into the American market and aroused a taste for this art among collectors there, British institutions were still clinging on to conventional forms of recent art that suited popular taste and that were produced in abundance locally. A major London exhibition of Impressionist art staged by Durand-Ruel in 1905 aroused little positive interest and few sales,³ and the contemporary art wing of the National Gallery, the Tate, continued to buy largely from London's staid Royal Academy shows. So a collector, like Lane, who appreciated *Continental* art, as French art was generally called, was something of a rarity and a daredevil. French art was the home of the 'modern', a term having much more to do with stylistic innovativeness than with chronology.

Lane spoke in the preface of the 1910 Johannesburg catalogue of his desire to 'form a representative collection of Modern Art for South Africa' (p.xvi), and on the basis of this claim Carman offers an extended discussion of the artistic modernity of the Johannesburg collection. The catalogue list reveals, however, that this collection was a mixed bag. It contained some fine works by leading modern artists, and was indebted to Lane's advanced taste in this. But it also contained much that was distinctly non-modern. Three factors were probably at play: Lane's sense of the tastes of the Johannesburg public, the limitations of the funds at his disposal and then quite simply the fact that he was distracted at the time by the parallel, and to him more important, project of buying for Dublin. To a friend he noted: 'I find that one cannot buy for two galleries (not the same sort of thing) as I want all the *bargains* for Dublin!' (p.179), and Dublin opened with not only a stronger representation of modern art but also with twice as many works as Johannesburg. Lane secured for Johannesburg some works by late nineteenth-century Impressionists Monet, Sisley and Pissarro, as well as works by the slightly earlier Boudin

2 B. Taylor, *Art for the Nation: Exhibitions and the London Public 1747-2001* (New Jersey: Rutgers University, 1999), 141

3 Although Lane, significantly, was a buyer at this magnificent exhibition

and Jongkind. Progressive twentieth-century British artists Wilson Steer, Augustus John, Rothenstein and Sickert were represented also. These were all artists who would uncontroversially have been thought suitable for a collection of modern art. But the collection also included a fair number of non-modern works by British artists of major or minor repute: Moore, Millais, Orchardson, Watts, Wilkie, Maclise, Frith and James Charles, Mrs Swynnerton, Oliver Hall, and Boyd Houghton. Some were gifts by others, and simply had to be accommodated by Lane; others were his own choices. Either way, the resulting collection was a mix of modern art and much that was far more traditional.⁴

Carman is critical of the collection, but, as noted, not on the grounds of whether it successfully represented a collection of 'modern art'. Her objections to it gather around two other main points: its failure to adopt the hybrid art gallery/design museum model possibly favoured by Florence Phillips, and its failure to exhibit recent South African art and thereby be representative of the home nation. The first charge is an interesting one. Quite apart from the facts in the Johannesburg case and whether or not, as discussed earlier, Phillips's plans were 'scuppered' by larger forces on this issue, there is the general charge which might be made against virtually any of the leading art galleries of the past hundred years: why is it that we operate with such a narrow conception of what is aesthetically interesting, such that our public exhibition spaces for the visual typically include only paintings, drawings, sculpture and, nowadays, photographs? Why no exhibitions of functional objects in our art galleries? Carman may well be right in saying that Florence Phillips would have favoured a broader, more experimental Arts and Crafts-style exhibition space. If so, she would not have been alone at the time, but her view was certainly a minority one, and regrettably remains so today.

The second objection to the collection, that it massively underrepresented South African art, is a more contentious one. It is undoubtedly true that it did so, and Carman devotes some time to making this point. She only reveals fairly late in her narrative, however, that this did not upset the broad Johannesburg gallery audience of the time. Her misgivings about the early collection's bias towards the European turn out to be largely personal ones, though ones shared by many in our own time. The argument that the early collectors should have embraced far more fully their own local art is always a tricky one, however, and seems to hinge on one of two tacit assumptions: that an art gallery's function is to be representative of its local peoples and place, or that its function is to be selective on grounds of quality, but that there was far more of quality locally available in South Africa than an early collection like Johannesburg's would suggest. I am not sure which of these Carman tends towards, but both are problematic and in the case of the latter, surely untrue. It is a fact that South Africa did not have as dynamic, large and interesting a fine art tradition as European countries at this time. There are obvious, simple reasons for this. It is also the case that within Europe, as earlier mentioned, some countries had art traditions far more vigorous and influential than others. That of

4 And in fairness to Lane, he admits this later in the 1910 Catalogue preface: 'It will be admitted that an extreme catholicity of taste has been displayed in the choice of pictures in this collection.' Carman, 2006, xvii

France dwarfed Britain's, and it was for this reason that serious British art critics of the early century were appalled by a National Gallery collecting policy which seemed to favour local over Continental art. Lane collected for Johannesburg some French art by important modern artists of the nineteenth century and added to it some of the 'big' names from, largely, nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain. Some of these were moderns, some traditionalists. This allowed the collection to represent some relatively recent developments in areas of European art history, and offer some appeal to both conservatives and progressives. Some more South African works might have been added, but they could not have formed a large part of the collection; this was the beginning of the twentieth century and not the end of it.

Carman's critical response to the collection amassed by Lane is part and parcel of a generally rather negative view of the benefactors she surveys in her study. The Randlords who provided funds for this collection, Florence Phillips who bought some important paintings for the gallery and worked energetically to bring it into existence, and Hugh Lane who, unsalaried, sourced and purchased most of the collection are all intermittently subjected to some fairly serious criticism, with their motives for involvement in the project being questioned (the book's title is here significant) or their levels of commitment being doubted. It is true that some of the Randlords were slow to commit funds to the scheme, that they gave sums that were not astronomical in relation to their private wealth and that they did not consider giving works from their own valuable private collections (of old master art). It is no doubt true that Florence Phillips seemed to many domineering and exhausting, and that Hugh Lane seemed, at least to artist Augustus John, a 'silly creature and...unmitigated snob' (p.151). It is also quite possible that the Randlords, and in particular the Phillipases, saw the sense in which their benefactions could assuage popular criticism of their massive wealth and privilege, and that Lane might have found his involvement with South Africa useful for his curriculum vitae. But most of the Randlords supported the scheme and gave funds in the end – there seems to have been approximately £25000 for Lane to work with (p.143) – and, for their part, both Lane and Florence Phillips had plenty of honourable reasons, as well as selfish ones, for establishing the gallery.⁵

The honourable reasons for establishing early public museums, galleries and libraries sometimes risk being sidelined by the more 'radical' of the museological literature. This literature typically finds motives of self-aggrandisement in the private collector turned benefactor, and a desire to 'tame' and control the poor in the wealthy minority that drove the establishment of the early galleries or public libraries. It is arguably a curious response to a public project that generally, if not always, resulted in an improvement in public life – the creation of institutions whose interesting collections one could visit voluntarily and free of charge. The early museum and public library age – roughly 1860 to 1930 – witnessed some extraordinary acts of public-spiritedness on the part of collectors and philanthropists.

5 This sum is equivalent to approximately £1,800,000 today

These two books, in their different ways, tell the story of some of these figures. They alert us, too, to the quirks and passions of the collecting urge. It is fashionable to be cautious in one's praise of this activity too, but in reading of Lane's pursuit of Irish, and then Continental, art, or Grey's dogged pursuit of incunabulae, ancient classics and published records of indigenous languages one is surely reminded of just how important were these private collectors. Driven by a focused interest, a desire to make a full record of it, and then a willingness or even desire to make it public property, these collectors were invaluable for the establishment of some of our best modern public institutions. They were also part of the process of linking present to past. In his paean of praise to old books, written on a Cape Town Christmas morning, Sir George Grey strikes a modern note with his opening remark: 'I wonder that so few people love old books, that so many ridicule me for loving them' (p.257). His answer, that the valuable old book 'is like a fair and costly monument erected on some much traversed highway' (p.258) is one that serves for artworks too. It is a fortunate thing that in the days before state initiatives were well under way, occasional private figures directed time, money and effort to building up private and public collections of 'monuments' that created a highway, and that made it seem solidly, *interestingly* traversed.