

THE VALUE OF OUR INHERITANCE

Some Reflections by David Cooper



Cover illustration taken from 18th Century French School

THE VALUE OF OUR INHERITANCE

Creativity infuses every aspect of society and is key to how we function as human-beings”.

“The Arts are a key learning tool through which we can all grow and develop self-expression and creativity - the very creativity that might lead one day to a career in science or engineering”.

Bernardine Evaristo June 2021.

It is often said that Farnham is one of the most desirable towns in which to live. We need to consider how this might change with new developments, more people and more traffic, but we must first ask why Farnham has this special distinction. Our new status as a ‘World Craft Town’ may lead to a way forward, but Farnham is more than that. We have inherited an historic English market town which once prompted the architectural historian, Alec Clifton-Taylor, to say of Castle Street that, *“for sheer visual delight, this street has few equals in all England.”*



19th Century Castle Street



20th Century Castle Street

Our Inheritance

Farnham's medieval and Georgian architecture has been carefully conserved. This is a remarkable achievement when elsewhere similar towns have been ruined by modern developments. In 1911 enlightened residents formed The Farnham Society and in 1968 the Farnham Buildings Preservation Trust was established. Significantly, it was during this period that the Farnham School of Art was so influential in the town.

In celebrating 'Craft' today, we must now ask what has happened to the position once held by 'Art'. Readers may not be aware of the cataclysmic removal of centuries of traditional Fine Art practice that has taken place today, here in Farnham - and in Colleges of Art all over the country - together with the elimination of all historical references to the origins of Fine Art in the Renaissance.

Farnham School of Art, founded in 1871, is central to the story of the traditional values in Fine Art, which had been established by the Art School and which had enabled the contemporary craft scene to evolve. For almost a century, the School was led by some outstanding local figures: artists W. H. Allen 1911-27, Otway McCannell 1928-1945 and James Hockey 1945-1971.

In the early days, there had been a cross-fertilisation of ideas and skills between the Absalom Harris Pottery at Wrecchlesham and the Art School. George Sturt, the writer of rural crafts and affairs, had once studied art at the School and in the first half of the 20th. century, local architect Harold Falkner, a former student of W. H. Allen, brought a flavour of the Art and Crafts Movement to our buildings. He was also a keen supporter of Farnham's Castle Theatre. Later, Sir John Verney, author, artist and conservationist, became friends with a coterie of artists who taught at the School, was on its board of governors and was also a local Farnham Councillor.

For almost a century, artists and craftsmen who taught full-time at the School of Art came to live and work in Farnham and added their expertise to the cultural life of the Town. James Hockey, while Principal of the Art School, became Chairman of The Farnham Society from 1948 until 1953 and from that date, its Vice-President until his death in 1990. In the late 1950s, one of his proteges was Victor Ambrus, a Hungarian refugee, who became a well-known illustrator and artist on British national TV. Recognising his talent, Hockey had given permission to the unqualified Victor to teach Life-Drawing part-time at the School, joining Arthur and Mary Hackney in the department of Adult Education.

Among the teaching staff who had been employed by James Hockey, many others gained national recognition, for example, Henry Hammond and Paul Baron in Ceramics, Ella MacLeod in Textiles, Harold Cheeseman, Leszek Muszynski and Robin Ball in Fine Art. Other significant figures were academics Dr. Tony Crowe and Alan Windsor who, in 1975, with his wife Elfriede, helped secure the future of the Ashgate Gallery renaming it the *New Ashgate Gallery*. Ben Franklin, Head of Sculpture, created an impressive new work in the Borelli Yard and artist Michael Fairclough was commissioned by Royal Mail to design a season of postage stamps and to create a fifteen-foot mural on the external face of the former West Street Post Office.

Central to all the cultural activity in Farnham was the example set by the School of Art. It was this institution that eventually grew under government policy to become a college and in 2008 was given full University status. It has been regrettable but only too noticeable, that today full time university staff no longer live in the town or contribute personally to its artistic life. Nevertheless it remains true that the standards set by the Art School in the early days provided a firm basis for the Arts and Crafts in Farnham, in the 21st. century.

The ethos of the School was based on the teaching methods of the Renaissance, particularly on the figurative traditions of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture. It is significant that these subjects were taught in groups, or 'schools', where teaching was actively demonstrated by a Master to his group of students. Here, in Farnham, drawing from the human figure was taught across all disciplines until the 1970s. My personal experience of teaching at this time confirmed the importance of this tradition.

I had graduated at Brighton College of Art in the 1950s and later at the Painting School of the Royal College of Art in London. In 1965, I was appointed a full-time Lecturer in Fine Art at Farnham School of Art (note the word 'school' rather than 'college'). I began teaching Life-Drawing to Foundation students. Having completed thirty years of such teaching, I took early retirement in the 1990s.



Life class in progress

For centuries observational drawing had been considered essential training for Fine Art students. Controversially, this has now been replaced by 'conceptual art'. The Tate Gallery defines this as, '*Art for which the idea (or concept) behind the work is more important than the finished art object*'. This places a higher value on the artist's ideas than on the final work. The definition of 'Fine Art' is a 'work of art that is finished or completed to a very high standard', for example, a work by Titian or Rembrandt.

Today the traditional values of Fine Art, together with its four centuries of art history, have now been deliberately banished because the entire subject is thought to be irrelevant. 'Creative' ideas that appeal to any of the senses are promoted above visual acuity and technical expertise. In any other field this would be an outrageous way of proceeding. Would we accept buildings which were poorly constructed because the architect's initial idea or concept - or 'rough' - is the sole object of our admiration, rather than the finished object?

Breaking the Mould

Revolutionary ideas had begun to permeate Further and Higher Education in the 1960s. The belief was held, particularly among students, that individual personal creativity was being constrained by too much formal teaching. In general society this was combined with a lack of respect for authority and traditional values. Ironically, it was a central figure in the 'Alternative Comedy' scene of the 1980s, speaking recently on BBC Radio 4's *'Desert Island Discs'* programme, who describes how the lack of Fine Art teaching had affected him as an art student.

Alexei Sayle had been a student at Chelsea College of Art and at a teacher-training college in Roehampton. He found these experiences demotivating and cruel. He explained that teaching had become pointless. According to Sayle, while at Chelsea, a tutor would turn up in black leathers to review Sayle's work, dismiss it, and say, "*See you again in two months time*". He graduated feeling confused and depressed.

In the 1980s, out went the teaching of drawing in the majority of Art schools and colleges, including here in Farnham. In the mood of a Maoist diktat, out went all Art History before Picasso. In Primary and Secondary education and in sympathy with the new trends, out went the teaching of English grammar and in came 'child centered learning'. Self-expression was the order of the day and 'conceptualism' dominated the art scene. However, it is significant that the crafts retained their traditional disciplines, for what use is a pot without a skilled potter or a piece of cloth without an expert weaver? (No use here for just an idea or a concept!) It has been Fine Art with its high standards that has been abandoned. The result is that it has been craft which has gained the accreditation here in Farnham, not art.

Does all this matter?

In giving up the figurative traditions in Fine Art, there has been a deliberate rejection of a basic visual 'grammar'. To express oneself in words, there is a need to be clear in order to be understood. In all the arts, whatever concept is communicated, for it to be conveyed successfully, mastery of the disciplines of whatever medium is used is required - be it music, poetry or drama. Visually, in the preliminary process of working-up ideas, pencilled notes or drawings are still the simplest methods.



Studies of horses Leonardo da Vinci



A horseman Leonardo da Vinci

Little attention has been given to the fact that Picasso had been trained in the figurative manner. He was a practiced representational artist before he evolved Analytical Cubism. Closer to home, Antony Gormley, the sculptor, uses drawing as a means of placing two-dimensional ideas into three-dimensions. Tracy Emin is enthusiastic about drawing and was at one time Professor of Drawing at the Royal Academy. David Hockney's exhibition, *The Arrival of Spring*, may have been formed on his iPad, but his final results are firmly based on traditional disciplines. He insists that looking intensely at an object is the way fully to appreciate the natural world. Drawing in art has certainly not gone away, but it is often ignored, placed out of sight and buried untaught in what were once traditional Fine Art Colleges throughout the country.

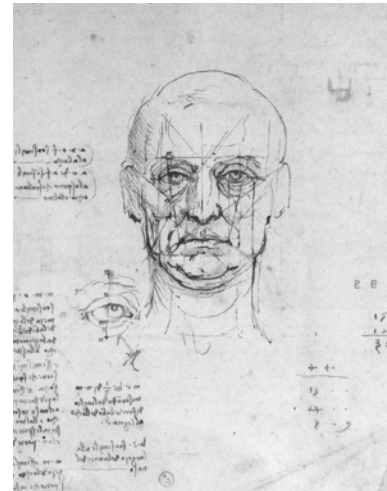
What is this discipline and why has it been rejected?

Observational drawing included the study of perspective. This was a partnership which gave a wide and deep understanding of the natural world, but only a limited number of students could attend. Hockney has said, "*Drawing makes you see things clearer and clearer and clearer until your eyes ache,*" and, "*What an artist is trying to do is bring people closer and closer to something.*"

In understanding the context in which the form and structure of an object is shaped and how it relates to its environment, the artist must use analytical methods of visual orientation. Drawing has its own objective methodology. This means navigating positions by using horizontals and verticals and holding them in mind. Similarly, a walker plots his geographical position on a map, or an archaeologist, searching for buried objects, lays out a grid of squares on the surface of his dig. In drawing the life figure, this required much concentration and time from the student and the tutor.



Surface of archaeological dig showing grid set-up



Preliminary drawing by Leonardo da Vinci

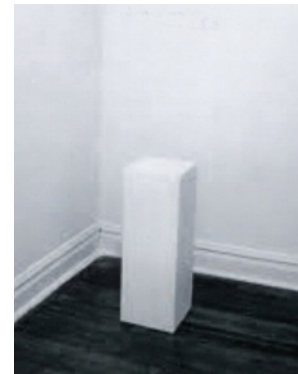
In the BBC series, *Leonardo: Drawing the Body*, Dr. Alice Roberts says, "*I know how much the process of drawing helped me with the sciences. Drawing became my primary tool for learning my subject which was anatomy.*" When sharing drawings with her students later on, she claims that they were not drawing to learn, but to understand - and that this approach may be seen, here, in Leonardo's drawing (above). It is in this first act of drawing that self-confidence is created in a student, who will be able later to work more freely with a more advanced idea of what might lie beneath the surface of a structural organic form.

These approaches lie at the heart of the figurative tradition which bases its strengths on representational, not conceptual, skills in order to analyse and depict the visual world. They are disciplines which benefit all artists who wish to explore ideas. There is an obvious connection with the written word, but whatever language is used mastery of its grammar gives an author command over the way ideas are expressed.

Commercial Imperatives

In Art Colleges, small groups of students with an artist/tutor and a life model booked for three-hourly sessions, proved expensive to maintain. The radical ideas which had brought about the student disturbances of the 1960s, overturned former traditions - and self-expression ruled. Meanwhile, Government cuts meant that Departments of Fine Art had to find their own money to maintain regular levels of funding. This led to the commercialisation of their activities in order to survive. In Fine Art, it was more economic to allow students the freedom merely to express ideas, rather than actually having to teach them.

This provided the State with a simple financial decision to make. 'Bums on seats' became the mantra of all administrators. There was no need to teach this demanding subject at all! Dismiss all history of art before Picasso! Let 'conceptual art' reign! Since then the art market has dumbfounded the world. The work of the Old Masters still fetches eye-watering sums at auction, but so does novelty and nonsense. 'Disappearing pictures' by Banksy and 'invisible art' such as Andy Warhol's 'empty plinth', raised far more than eyebrows. If the poorly tutored work of students can find galleries to sell work that is outrageous and shocking, simply because it is 'innovative', then why should the State fund a quality education?



*Spectacles mistaken for a genuine installation by
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2016*

*Friedman's 'Empty Space'
Hayward Gallery 2021*

Financial considerations have also impacted on the architectural design of major building developments. Today Farnham is undergoing changes on a huge scale. Massive buildings are being erected on the site of the historic community gardens at Brightwells. These new buildings dominate the skyline and there will be more to come in The Woolmead. New housing developments surround the town on every corner. Most of this new work has been promoted by developers and owes little to Farnham's architectural heritage. Is this perhaps because too much reliance is placed on computer-aided design and the demands of the financial markets? Many of these designs feel impersonal and, indeed, are often taken 'off the shelf' from a corporate design brochure.

Return to our Roots

I believe it is time to take stock of the increasing trend of abandoning too easily the knowledge gained through personal experience. What are we losing by handing it all over to the machine? People tend not to use the skills of map-reading and are unable to navigate their environment without relying on technology. Living in this virtual world are we losing touch with reality? Can we judge the true value of what has been designed, whether in architecture or art? What part do aesthetics play in our education? It is clear that any vacuum in our experience and understanding renders us more vulnerable to the persuasions of the market place.

In general education, the State has reluctantly acknowledged that there is a need to return to parts of the traditional base. English Grammar is back in the classroom. For example, foreign students have experienced host families who were unable to help them with their English homework and who were unaware of the works of Shakespeare. In British construction industries, skilled workers in the building trades from Eastern Europe have been similarly disappointed by the poor standards of their English counterparts. There has been a dawning recognition that we need the return of Technical Colleges and apprenticeships. Some measures are being promised, but the traditions and disciplines of Fine Art in Colleges of Further and Higher Education - throughout the UK including Farnham - have been ruthlessly and comprehensively dismissed.

Now, surely, is the right time for a better understanding of the quality of what we can see and to increase our appreciation of the visual world. The discipline of looking through drawing should now be a fundamental part of all Art Education

“If only one could draw! I can’t. That’s why I keep on drawing.” Alberot Giacometti.

David Cooper ARCA (Painting)

July 2021

LIST OF IMAGES FOR 'OUR INHERITANCE'

Cover - Hands - French School print (Old Master Dialogues - Day+ Gluckman)

P. 1 - Castle Street, Farnham 1887

- online print (Mary Evans Picture Library £9.49)

P.1 - Castle Street, Farnham 20th century

- postcard (akpool.co.uk) German address

P.3 - Life Class

- 'The best life classes in London' (timeout.com)

P.3 - Life drawing, arm, hand, pencil, paper, easel (?)

P.4 - Study of horses by Leonardo de Vinci

- Royal Collection (commons.wikimedia.org)

P.4 - Horseman by Leonardo de Vinci

- Royal Collection

<https://www.rct.uk/collection/912343/a-study-for-an-equestrian-monument>

P.5 - Archaeological grid

- 'Archaeological mapping'- Canadian address (coastalarchaeology.wordpress.com)

P.5 - Study on proportions of head by Leonardo de Vinci -

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Leonardo_da_vinci,_Study_on_the_proportions_of_head_and_eyes.jpg

P.6 - Glasses left on floor mistaken for exhibit

- photos by Tj Khayatan and K Nguyen bbc.co.uk

P.6 - Tom Friedman's 'A Curse of an empty space'? (Christie's)

These images have been used in the interests of academic research.