Exhibitions and the Market for Modern British Art:

Independent Art of Today at Agnew’s Gallery, 1906

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The established narrative of modern art in Britain at the beginning of the twentieth century speaks of an absence of spaces for the modernist ‘avant-garde’, of the decline (if not the total obsolescence) of the Royal Academy, and of the failure of museums to collect innovative art at the time it was produced.¹ This is a narrative that still regularly equates modern art to modernism, the latter seen as a current of deep formal innovation that emerged in the years directly before the First World War and strove to succeed in an art world dominated by conservative forces.² The broad story, or stories, of modern art have been overtaken, more often than not, by the narrow narrative of modernist art, with its almost single-minded focus on the formal attributes of a work of art. Whether of the Academy, or operating outside of it, many artists of this period are defined not by their rich and varied reactions to the conditions of modernity – which ought to be the criteria for ‘modern’ art – but by their failure to adopt a formally progressive style, depict primarily urban subject matter, and/or employ modernist manoeuvres, such as the creation of manifestos. One result of this outlook is that almost an entire
generation of artists, despite being routinely described by critics of the time as ‘modern’ – in terms of subject matter, approach to narrative, and technique – have largely been left out of the history of twentieth-century art in Britain, caught in the hazy middle ground between Academic-style ‘conservatism’ and a pre-war modernist ‘avant-garde’. The modernity of the art market and of exhibition culture has, until recently, been overlooked for similar reasons, with many accounts of modern art in Britain assuming a starting point of December 1910, when Roger Fry’s *Manet and the Post-Impressionists* opened at the Grafton Galleries.

This essay seeks to expand this narrative by focussing on a high-profile commercial exhibition – *Some Examples of Independent Art of To-day, English, Scottish, Irish* (hereafter referred to as *Independent Art*) – that opened at Agnew’s, a prestigious Bond Street gallery with an illustrious past in trading academic art, in February 1906, travelling to Manchester later that year. Featuring work by forty living artists, united by their resistance to the Royal Academy and by their adoption of what was then perceived as a modern aesthetic, the exhibition was seen by several critics to present a pivotal moment in the history of British art. The presence of non-Academy artists in a venue associated strongly with the Academy was rightly perceived as a powerful statement. However, the exhibition is rarely commented on today, despite its undoubted usefulness in
shedding light on ongoing debates surrounding the market for modern art and the development of British modernism/s. To describe these artists, or this exhibition, as ‘avant-garde’ would be wholly misleading: the aim of our research is not to enter into conversations as to whether such a thing existed in pre-war Britain, or even to claim that these artists were as modern as others working in the same period (as if such a thing could be marked on a chart). The usefulness of the exhibition, indeed, is that it doesn’t slot neatly into a history of modern art, nor into its apparent antithesis, but helps us draw the two sides closer together, and draw wider conclusions regarding the relationship between artists, critics and the art market during the Edwardian period.

Here we approach the exhibition both as a cultural episode and as a commercial event: an art business venture organised with the aim of gaining a net profit by selling art. We are able to examine the exhibition’s finances attentively thanks to the Agnew’s stock books (the business records that trace the firm’s sales and purchases) preserved at the National Gallery archive. The stock book entries have been transcribed in appendix 1, and the data has been enhanced by our tracing of the current location of the artworks (when possible). By offering an in-depth study of the exhibition itself, as well as by establishing links with the many networks operating in the art market and art practice at the time, we problematise the narrative of dealer/critic relations, a
narrative first articulated by sociologists Cynthia White and Harrison White in their 1965 monograph *Canvases and Careers*. We also challenge one of the main tenets of modernist scholarship – namely, that modernist artists alone struggled against an unresponsive market. With the evidence of a principal London dealer’s financial records and other sources such as specialist publications reports, we demonstrate that at the turn of the twentieth century in Britain the market for modern art was contracting for all living artists. Instead of supporting the binary division between ‘modernist’ and ‘non-modernist’ artists, we illuminate a rapidly changing art world struck by a lack of demand, a world in which living artists of different persuasions, even when supported by art dealers and art critics, were struggling to gain wide support by the public and collectors. We accept, nonetheless, that determining the ‘failure’ or ‘success’ of an exhibition remains a fraught endeavour, and that our analysis relies on extant records that will never provide the full story: for instance, we have no record of visitor numbers, little information about the reception of the exhibition beyond a small circle of high-profile critics, and no visual records of the exhibition itself.

In its close attention to financial records and cultural economics, this paper contributes to a rich literature in art market studies, a discipline which considers the art trade as a medium for cultural as well as commercial exchange, often
utilising quantitative and statistical analysis to uncover hidden patterns and unknown correlations. Such methods were first applied to the early modern art market: in 1982 John Michael Montias explored statistical analysis in his seminal study, *Artists and Artisans in Delft*; he was later followed by scholars such as Neil De Marchi, Hans van Miegroet and Filip Vermeylen. British art of the late nineteenth century has also been the subject of market investigation: Grischka Petri has examined the business data and prices of works by James Whistler, whereas Thomas Bayer and John Page have produced a broad-scope analysis of the British Victorian art market gleaned from Christie’s sales and the art dealers’ Tooth records. New research that follows these methods continues to be published, and our work is particularly indebted to the recent studies on commercial exhibitions by Anna Gruetzner Robins, Pamela Fletcher and Anne Helmreich. Among other things, this research has drawn fresh attention to important critics and dealers operating in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century London, including several figures of particular relevance to this essay, most notably David Croal Thomson, D. S. MacColl, Roger Fry, and Robert Ross.

By re-examining the critical reception of *Independent Art*, this paper also continues the ongoing reassessment of Edwardian art and artists that can be traced back to influential exhibitions such as *The Edwardian Era* (Barbican Art Gallery,
1987), and which has continued in the scholarship of writers such as Kenneth McConkey, Lisa Tickner, Ysanne Holt, Andrew Stephenson and David Peters Corbett, as well as various online projects, special journals and, in 2013, the exhibition Edwardian Opulence (Yale Center for British Art).\textsuperscript{12}

Crucial to all of these studies – and to other recent projects, such as the outcomes of the Edwardian Culture Network – is the desire to underline connections between the supposedly monolithic cultures of ‘Victorianism’ and ‘Modernism’ (and the related pseudo-polarities of ‘narrative’ and ‘form’) while exploring the possibility of a distinctive ‘Edwardian’ culture.\textsuperscript{13}

This attempt to rescue the early 1900s from its role as either nineteenth-century adjunct, or dress-rehearsal for the pre-war emergence of a distinct modernist movement in Britain, has enriched our understanding of a range of previously neglected artists, such as William Orpen, George Clausen, and William Rothenstein, all of whom formed part of the Independent Art exhibition.\textsuperscript{14} It has also shed further light on aspects of modern art that have often been buried due to the obsession with subject matter and style, most obviously the question of narrative: an issue that, as we will see, has particular relevance to the Independent Art exhibition.\textsuperscript{15}

‘The Greeks have entered Troy’: The Exhibition
In its London iteration, *Independent Art* showed fifty-two paintings and watercolours by forty living artists. The majority of artists were English-born, with sixteen Scottish artists represented and just three Irish artists. Welsh artists were not represented at all, despite the high profile of Augustus John, whose absence was noted by many critics. As an ensemble of works indebted to developments in French art around the mid-to late nineteenth century – especially the Barbizon School and Impressionism – the exhibition was an unusual choice for Agnew’s. It was in a sense a statement in favour of more recent trends in European painting. However, that statement lacked clarity. Following the predispositions of the New English Art Club and the International Society – whose stylistic variety regularly stumped critics – *Independent Art* was a markedly diverse exhibition where, if the order of the catalogue reflected the actual arrangement of the works on the walls, different genres were displayed closely together, and were probably matched by size, colour and compositional affinities rather than by subject or artist classification. Although most works were contemporary – painted within the last few years – a handful were not, most notably William McTaggart’s *Emigrants leaving the Hebrides* (c.1883-9) In this sense, it was not unlike the famously heterogeneous summer exhibitions of the Royal Academy, or the hangs Agnew’s traditionally used in their old
masters exhibitions (*plate 1*), though the roster of artists involved still marked it out as a radical departure for the firm.

This lack of clarity extended into the exhibition’s organisation and promotion. The small catalogue gave no indication of who was behind the exhibition – aside from Agnew’s – or of how its contents might be read. If the exhibition was to be interpreted as a statement of intent, or intellectual statement, from a particular group of artists (as some critics would suggest it was), such a statement was to be gleaned from the work itself, and not from any accompanying text. This is not surprising, perhaps, when we bear in mind the overall awkwardness of presenting a survey of essentially non-academic art in a commercial gallery principally associated with the Academy. Such a prestigious venue, and its potentially well-heeled audience, did not lend itself to attention-grabbing marketing tactics. Simply being there was a statement in itself. Moreover, as further discussed later, a disinclination to clarify the key aims of their art was typical of these artists, who tended to resist attempts to be seen as a group, or to self-identify as ‘modern’ artists.\(^{18}\) This was not a group – if group we can call them – given to manifestos, let alone conspicuous cohesion. Even the rare group portrait, such as Rothenstein’s early *Group Portrait* (1894, private collection), which features portraits of three *Independent Art* exhibitors, D.S. MacColl, Philip Wilson Steer and Walter Sickert, alongside sympathetic figures Charles
Furse (who died in 1904) and Max Beerbohm, shows the artists all looking in different directions: a reluctant group if there ever was one.¹⁹

As to the content of the exhibition (listed in full in appendix 1), landscapes of Britain, represented as semi-idealised countryside scenes, were the highest represented category. They comprised scenic corners from Scotland, such as William York MacGregor’s *Stirling Bridge* and James Paterson’s *An East Lothian Village* (cat. 19 and 32); views of Ireland – Nathaniel Hone’s *Coast of County Clare* and Thomas Hunt’s *A Galloway Pastoral* (cat. 13 and 22) – and, of course, many picturesque vistas from England. These included Arthur Douglas Peppercorn’s *Hampshire Coast*; a view of the Wye by Frederick Brown; two scenes of Sussex by Alfred William Rich; and Berwick-on-Tweed by David Young Cameron (cat. 16, 5, 49, 51, 8). A few works represented places outside Britain: Charles Holmes painted the Swiss hills near Dornach (cat. 4); Roger Fry, D.S. McColl and Alexander Jamieson illustrated French corners of Gabriel-de-Brecy, Honfleur and Abbeville respectively (cat. 21, 45, 2).²⁰ Hercules Brabazon sketched an Egyptian market and a view of Catania in watercolour (cat. 46, 49); whereas Walter Sickert (whose watercolour was exhibited on the stairway) depicted Saint Mark’s Square in Venice (cat. 52).

The landscapes were paired with a handful of society portraits in which the elaborate outfits worn by the sitters were
as important as, or perhaps representative of, their psychology –

John Lavery’s *Violet and Gold*, Philip Wilson Steer’s *Summer*
and William Nicholson’s *George Carpenter* (cat. 3, 18, 39).

Scenes of middle-class life, such as strolls in the countryside,
days at the seaside, moments of idle melancholic contemplation
and music lessons – as shown by Charles Sims’ *On the Arran
Sea*, George Henry’s *The Locket*, Robert Burns’ *The Window
(plate 2)*, Henry Tonks’ *The Lost Path (plate 3)* and Charles
Hodge Mackie’s *Musical Moments* (cat. 28, 40, 25, 1, 24) –
rubbed shoulders with representations of working-class
activities. Selling at the market, washing laundry and sharing a
modest meal were represented with a simultaneous realism and
idealised monumentality in, respectively, Alexander Roche’s *A
Scottish Fishwife (Callow Herrin’)*, Orpen’s *The Wash House
and William Strang’s *Suppertime (plate 4, plate 5 and plate 6)*
(cat. 41, 35, 36). There was only one openly Christian subject,
Charles Ricketts’ *Betrayal (plate 7)*, an experimental rendering
of Judas kissing Christ in the garden of Gethsemane (cat. 33).

The one work inspired in its subject by classical literature,
*Tibullus in the House of Delia*, by Charles Shannon, was also a
triple portrait of Ricketts, Shannon and Shannon’s lover Esther
Deacon (cat. 10). Two works, Rothenstein’s *Aliens at Prayer
(plate 8)* and William McTaggart’s *Emigrants leaving the
Hebrides*, carried some political as well as social connotation
(cat. 14, 17), with the former clearly referring to the 1905 Aliens
Act – the first anti-immigration legislation to go through British parliament and the subject of great political debate at this moment – and the latter looking back to an earlier instance of emigration, albeit one with personal relevance to the artist. Two flower pieces by Gerard Chowne, Stocks and Zinnias, softened the message of the more socially-loaded subjects (cat. 34, 37). Although different in style, Independent Art mirrored the historical composition of Agnew’s stock: a great number of landscapes, some portraits and scenes of modern life, and a very light sprinkling of religious and classical pictures.

As an exhibition at Agnew’s, Independent Art attracted the attention of newspapers, periodicals and art journals – and Agnew’s also paid for listings in The Times. The show was reviewed by national broadsheets such as The Times, Morning Post, Standard and Pall Mall Gazette; by local papers in London (London Daily News and Daily Telegraph) and outside London (Manchester Courier, Western Daily Press, Clifton Society, Nottingham Journal and Dundee Courier); and by weekly periodicals such as The Illustrated London News, The Graphic, Saturday Review and Black & White Magazine (plate 9). Notable literary and art publications such as The Academy, Athenaeum, and The Art Journal also commented on the show. Because of its modern character, Independent Art also appeared in journals such as The Studio and The Burlington Magazine, which did not usually review Agnew’s exhibitions. The
particular nature of this show, and the significance of Agnew’s
devour in general, was much commented on, not without
some hyperbole. 24 Unsurprisingly, the most excitable comments
came from critics working for those periodicals most likely to
favour an exhibition of non-Academic art. For instance, Ernest
Halton, writing in *The Studio*, went so far as to argue that ‘the
exhibition [...] forms an epoch in the annals of British art of to-
day’. 25 Meanwhile, former Carfax Gallery director Robert Ross
(a close friend, and former dealer, of many of the artists
involved) strained to describe its impact, claiming at first that
‘my pangs were akin to those of a small country circus on
learning that his troupe of performing dogs has been engaged by
Mr. Imre Karalfy or the Hippodrome’, before settling on a more
dramatic, if tongue-in-cheek, metaphor: ‘the Greeks have
entered Troy or the barbarians the senate house’. 26 These
comments, though laced with comedy in the case of Ross,
evertheless present the exhibition as something of a symbolic
breakthrough: a potential moment of triumph for ‘independent’
art in Britain. Looking back from the 1930s, the equally
sympathetic critic Frank Rutter would be even more effusive,
describing the exhibition as a ‘glorious moment [...] a great
victory for the New English. Steer, Tonks, Sickert, Rothenstein,
Orpen and the rest had “arrived”’. 27

Although most subsequent histories of British art would
dampen Rutter’s glory by failing to mention the exhibition at all,
those that have done tend to take seriously Rutter’s idea of a
generation that had finally gained recognition.28 In her recent
study of Edwardian painters in Dorset, for instance, Gwen
Yarker quotes positive responses by Rutter and by The Studio
critic Ernest G. Halton before concluding that the show’s
importance lay in the fact that it ‘generated a wider market for
the artists’.29 While it is true that Independent Art generated
some sales, and that its very existence was testament to the
increasing authority of non-Academy artists, one of the central
contentions of this paper is that, unique episode though it was, it
cannot be categorised as unconditionally successful, either
critically or commercially. Despite the sometimes effusive
reviews, the exhibition was not as widely reported as the
organisers may have hoped for it to be – compared to the Royal
Academy summer exhibition, for instance, it received relatively
low coverage in the national press – and there is no evidence
that it reached an especially large audience.30 When we compare
press coverage of Independent Art, for instance, to that of Fry’s
1910 exhibition of Manet and the Post-Impressionists at the
Grafton galleries, it is clear that the former was neither a subject
of wide public debate, nor a society event.31 Even if the
commercial outcome was positive for some artists, records show
clearly that Agnew’s made significant losses on their
investment, more than enough to ensure that the experiment was
not repeated. No sooner had the Greeks entered, or ‘arrived’, in
Troy than they were asked to leave again. It was not so much a
great victory as a hollow one.

Like many shows of this era, *Independent Art* has been
overshadowed by scholarly interest in the raft of self-
consciously modern exhibitions that followed soon after,
especially in the period 1910-1914. This is partly the result of
a historical bias towards ‘modernist’ art and exhibitions, but it is
also a reflection of their wider press coverage and cultural
impact in the contemporary moment: something *Independent
Art* clearly did not achieve. However, the exhibition’s failure to
generate this level of publicity should not preclude further
discussion of its rich dynamics and wider implications. Recent
criticism has sought to balance our vision of the Edwardian art
world by drawing attention to the operations of leading galleries,
societies, collectors and artistic networks at the turn of the
century. Though *Independent Art* reminds us that artists of this
era eschewed the self-promotional tactics required to
successfully navigate the contemporary market and media, it
should not follow that their work, and the structures built around
it, are unworthy of sustained critical attention. That which
Ernest Halton described in his review of *Independent Art* as a
‘vigorous phase of modern art’ is still in need of vigorous
historical analysis.

*Independent Art* within Circles of Commerce and Criticism
In 1906 the picture trade in London was mainly located along the two perpendicular axes of Pall Mall and Bond Street. This commercial cluster expanded from the vicinity of the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square, moving west towards the Athenaeum Club and Marlborough House in Pall Mall, extending from there north up Bond Street and its smaller side roads, towards the Royal Academy (from 1867 situated in Burlington House, just off Bond Street) and, further north, towards the recently opened Wallace Collection in Manchester Square. Although not as affluent as today, these were central areas of luxury shops, department stores, hotels and gentlemen’s clubs. Many private galleries grouped around these national institutions and trade centres. Modern art continued to be shown at the Royal Academy which, even if not a commercial enterprise per se, supplied many dealers with new art. Bond Street was the site of long-established, international, high-capital and high-profile businesses such as Agnew’s, Colnaghi, Goupil and Graves.

A fertile alternative exhibition scene had nonetheless developed in London since the late 1880s, platforms which aimed to show artists’ work independently from the Royal Academy and associated dealerships. Newly founded artists’ societies were an example of this new commercial model: most importantly, the New English Art Club was founded in 1886 and the International Society in 1897. The New Gallery had also
been showing the work of ‘independent’ artists since 1888, followed by a raft of small commercial galleries, which were changing the shape of the London art world. Of these, particularly worthy of note is Carfax & Co., a smaller-scale enterprise, based around intellectual networks and not averse to taking risks, which presented modern art and old masters alike.\(^\text{37}\)

The rights of the Academy and traditional Bond Street dealers to consider themselves as representing the leading group of contemporary artists had therefore been under serious debate for many years, both inside and outside the capital. Recent surveys of English art held at Wolverhampton and Bradford in 1902 and 1904, for instance, had directly challenged the hierarchy of contemporary art by suggesting that the true heirs of Hogarth, Gainsborough and Turner could be found outside the Academy, among the very artists featured in *Independent Art*.\(^\text{38}\)

Agnew’s were among the oldest businesses among the Bond Street dealers, one of the most established traditional galleries and, until the advent of Duveen Brothers, perhaps the most successful financially.\(^\text{39}\) Agnew’s had operated as an independent firm in Manchester since 1817, opening a second store in Liverpool in 1859 and a third in London in 1860.\(^\text{40}\) In 1876 Agnew’s had moved to a new gallery at 39b (later 43) Old Bond Street, in a two-storey building, specifically designed as a gallery by the Anglo-Jewish architect Edward Salomons. Agnew’s functioned as a partnership and by the time of
Independent Art the firm was led by a triumvirate established in 1903, Lockett Agnew, Morland Agnew and David Croal Thomson. Lockett Agnew had been the head of the firm since his uncle William Agnew retired in December 1895. His partners were then William’s two older sons, Morland and George Agnew. When George retired in December 1902, Lockett and Morland were joined, as junior partner, by art writer-cum-art-dealer Croal Thomson (1855–1930) (plate 10), who had been an Agnew’s employee since at least 1898 and was to remain with the firm until the end of 1908.41

Agnew’s business model was principally one of retail, which sold art to private buyers rather than to other dealers for resale. They purchased art ‘wholesale’ from the art business, either from artists, auctions or dealers, and sold it to individual collectors. For contemporary art, buying directly from artists was Agnew’s preferred acquisition method, and one that would be followed for Independent Art. In the 1850s Agnew’s had built their success on modern British academic painting, at a time when this market was booming, fuelled by the new money of the industrial revolution. However, the pattern of art sales began to change in the late nineteenth century as high-end collectors shifted their interests towards the art of the past. British portraiture of the eighteenth century, then dubbed ‘Early English’, was especially successful – and since William Agnew’s retirement the family firm had developed its expertise,
and trade, in that direction.\textsuperscript{42} Both Lockett and Morland Agnew were collectors, as well as sellers, of Early English, and it was on these, as well as European Old Masters, that their efforts were now focused. A steady supply of such works met the collectors’ demand: following the 1870s agricultural depression that caused aristocratic landowners to sell assets to release capital, and new legislation that facilitated these sales (such as the Settled Land Acts of 1882–1890), there was a reliable stream of suitable older works on the market. In this felicitous encounter of supply and demand, many collections in England and the United States were formed through the mediation of Agnew’s.\textsuperscript{43}

As sales of Old Masters were booming, the market for modern British art was contracting. Although it still occasionally sold for large amounts, modern British art, especially that produced by the generation of artists born around the 1830s–1850s, was increasingly becoming a risky investment for the firm. Works took longer to sell or did not sell at all. Just to single out a distinctive example, in 1903 \textit{The Bathing Place: a White Naiad in a Rippling Stream} by Royal Academy President (and National Gallery Director) Edward Poynter (plate \textit{11}) was bought from the artist for £700, a considerable sum that matched the high prices paid for modern art the previous decades.\textsuperscript{44} Yet the work failed to find a buyer, and was finally sold after thirteen years, at significant loss, for £400.\textsuperscript{45} This
contraction was a broader market trend not only restricted to Agnew’s and the works in which the firm traded. The Year’s Art, the detailed listing of art sales in London, recorded increasing losses for the generation of Victorian British artists, such as William Powell Frith, that had dominated the market until then. Following these sale trends, Bond Street, which in the 1880s had been the centre of the modern art trade, was increasingly selling the art of the past by the early 1900s.

However, Agnew’s were reluctant to abandon modern British art completely: artists such as Briton Rivière, Edward Burne-Jones and Wilfrid Ball still had single exhibitions in this gallery up until the 1890s. This is partly because, even if the trend for modern art was downwards, some artists were still doing very well. For instance, Burne-Jones’s Briar Rose cycle (now at Buscot Park) showed at Agnew’s in 1890 with an extraordinary public, commercial and critical success. Thus, Agnew’s continued to support modern artists associated with the Royal Academy even into the new century. Their English Art 1900 was a show of modern ‘cabinet pictures’, smaller sized (and therefore lower priced) works by Royal Academicians, which probably had the purpose of enticing new buyers with limited economic means towards academic works. However, had been only moderately successful commercially and it received a lukewarm critical response, providing the firm with yet another strong hint that there was
change in the air. The older generation of artists was losing commercial ground and new artists were needed to replace the old guard, but the Royal Academy was not fulfilling this role.

From 1900 Agnew’s had also started, very tentatively, to move into the market for art independent from Academy circles, perhaps spurred on by some of its buyers – we can trace this move closely by observing sales noted in the firm’s stock books. In 1901 the Scottish mine owner (and patron of John Singer Sargent) George McCulloch commissioned Agnew’s to buy Orpen’s *The Mirror* for £35, a price twenty times lower than Poynter’s *Bathing Place.* Orpen was only twenty-three at the time, and barely established, despite his early promise. The buyer McCulloch, one of those rare figures of new moneyed collectors whose acquisitions spanned through the older and newer generations of modern British art, also purchased from Agnew’s John Lavery’s *Gilda* in 1904. Even in the case of such an established artist as Lavery, prices were much lower for ‘independent’ art than its academic counterpart: *Gilda* was bought from the artist for £100, exactly one seventh of the cost of Poynter’s painting. Lavery’s work, however, was successful commercially where Poynter’s picture was not, and *Gilda* sold at a profit, for £125. A scattering of other independent paintings followed. A few months after, *A Scottish Fishwife* by Roche (see plate 4), which was later exhibited in *Independent Art*, was bought by Agnew’s from the artist and resold with a 10%
commission to the Edinburgh dealers Doig, Wilson & Wheatley. Wilson Steer’s Summer, another Independent Art exhibit, was acquired from the artist in June 1905 for £250 and sold six months later to Irish collector and museum trustee William Hutcheson Poe for £315. This flurry of buyers’ interest probably contributed to the idea of exhibiting such artists in a major group show.

In this context, the decision in 1903 to appoint Croal Thomson as partner – former editor of the Art Journal, the periodical that had been at the centre of the British art establishment – might be seen as a way to expand the trade of the firm, including towards works by the then commercially successful Barbizon School, on which Croal Thomson was an expert – hence the opening of a Paris branch of Agnew’s in 1907 to focus on this sector. Although the catalogue and reviews give no real indication as to how Independent Art was put together, contemporary testimonies suggest that Croal Thomson was the main force behind it: if not the instigator, then almost certainly the organiser, a role for which he was moderately well qualified. As director of the Goupil Gallery in London from 1885–1897, he had gained some experience working with contemporary artists outside the Academy. During his directorship Goupil gave one-man shows to several of the artists featured in Independent Art. Most notably, in 1889 Goupil had hosted ‘a collection of paintings by London
Impressionists’, which featured an influential catalogue introduction by Walter Sickert.\(^5^7\) Croal Thomson’s connections with independent contemporary artists continued into the 1900s. Shortly before the exhibition at Agnew’s, he had sat on the executive committee for the 1905 Whistler Memorial Exhibition, organised by the International Society of Sculptors, Painters and Gravers (of which Priestman, Lavery and Shannon were on the council), where he would have certainly come into close contact with the newer generation of artists.\(^5^8\) As a Scotsman, it is also likely that he had good connections north of the border, which may explain the relatively high proportion of Scottish artists at the *Independent Art* exhibition.

Of all the artists exhibited at *Independent Art*, Croal Thomson had a particularly strong relationship with Philip Wilson Steer. In December 1901, at a dinner held in Steer’s honour at the Café Royal (attended by at least nine of the ‘independents’), Steer was reported to have spoken ‘gratefully’ of Croal Thomson, ‘saying he was most kind and encouraging in his early days’ – feelings that were reiterated in later letters between the two.\(^5^9\) Steer, indeed, had painted Croal Thomson in 1895, shortly after his one-man show at Goupil – a portrait Croal Thomson bequeathed to the Tate Gallery in 1930.\(^6^0\) Although Steer seems an unlikely candidate to be the leading organisational force among a group of artists at this time – his biography suggests more of a backseat player – his friendship
with Croal Thomson hints that he may well have been part of the intellectual genesis of *Independent Art*. As a teacher at the Slade School of Art, Steer was in close contact with a new generation of painters working independently of the Academy, as well as being a close friend of many of the older artists, including MacColl, Tonks and Rothenstein. The fact that Steer’s work appeared before the show as one of the few examples of independent art for sale at Agnew’s also indicates that a commercial relationship between the artist and the dealers had already begun.

Despite his connections with Steer and others, however, Croal Thomson’s suitability for this new role at Agnew’s should be questioned. It is evident, for instance, that his relationship with the majority of the ‘independents’ was very different to that of younger, contemporary critics such as D. S. MacColl, Charles Holmes and Robert Ross, who not only had close personal ties with the associated artists but, in the case of MacColl and Holmes, produced art in a similar style. Croal Thomson’s preferences, on the other hand, never strayed too far from the Barbizon School, seen most clearly in his support of Arthur Douglas Peppercorn, often described as the English Corot. In fact, Croal Thomson had been one of the staunchest supporters of narrative academic art in previous decades, and could hardly be described in 1906 as *au fait* with recent artistic developments in Britain. During his editorship the *Art Journal* was a
publication in crisis that had increasingly lost touch with contemporary developments in British art. It would eventually cease trading in 1912, and there is no special evidence of the magazine encouraging artists outside of the Academy when Croal Thomson was the editor: although New English Art Club exhibitions received reviews, they were noticeably shorter than those dedicated to the Academy, and often cautious in their praise.⁶¹ Although Croal Thomson had the experience to bridge different groups, he was at best a tepid advocate of the ‘modern’ movement.

On account of this, perhaps, at least one critic preferred to associate the exhibition with critic-artist D.S. MacColl, a staunch defender of non-academic art practices.⁶² Though he had no formal connections with Agnew’s and showed only two watercolours at Independent Art, he was a lifelong friend of Steer and certainly knew Croal Thomson, having recently corresponded with him regarding the possible bequest of Rodin’s sculptures.⁶³ The suggestion of MacColl’s involvement in Independent Art makes most sense when seen in the context of his criticism of the Chantrey Bequest, a large fund held by the recently founded National Gallery of British Art at Millbank (already informally known as the Tate Gallery) for the purchase of modern British art.⁶⁴ Royal Academicians administered the bequest, but their choices of invariably academic art were often controversial. Writing as art critic of The Saturday Review,
MacColl had repeatedly accused the Chantrey administrators of being driven by personal preferences and Royal Academy-based favouritism. A founding member of the National Arts-Collection Fund, MacColl had long been in the running for a major museum position, and his campaigning to change public perception as to what represented the ‘best’ of contemporary British art was soon to pay off: in June 1906, only a few weeks after Independent Art, he would be nominated as the first Keeper of the Tate Gallery.

Robert Ross suggested, albeit obliquely, that the whole operation of Independent Art owed its existence to MacColl’s continued efforts. ‘Let me congratulate the Chrystostum of critics,’ wrote Ross in his best purple prose, ‘the Origen who has scoured our heresies, Mr. D. S. MacColl [...] What has been Mr. MacColl’s Waterloo is a Canossa for Messrs Agnew’. The reasoning behind MacColl’s elevation no doubt lay in the exhibition’s arguably judicious timing, coming as it did towards the end of several months’ excited discussion over the future of the Royal Academy and the state of contemporary British art. MacColl’s involvement as an exhibitor, however, ensured that he was unable to react critically to it in the pages of The Saturday Review, although he could have chosen to write a short catalogue introduction (as he had done in the case of the 1904 Bradford exhibition), the absence of which clearly left viewers and critics somewhat in the dark as to the exhibition’s leading
motives. In light of this, we might well ask whether MacColl himself saw the show as his Waterloo, or whether he saw himself as a bit-part player in Croal Thomson’s scheme. The reality, one suspects, is that the exhibition, despite its potential symbolic power, was not so much designed as thrown together at short notice, perhaps to take advantage of seemingly fortuitous circumstances.

Not the Royal Academy: The Disjoined Identity of Independent Art

This idea of a last-minute enterprise is borne out by the exhibition’s catalogue and reception. It is certainly easy to detect an element of caution and/or uncertainty in Croal Thomson’s choice of objects, exemplified both by the absence of Augustus John and, most obviously, by the exhibition’s long and somewhat vague title. The loosely-defined boundaries of the exhibition did not escape the attention of critics. Bernhard Sickert, the artist, critic, and brother of Walter Sickert, was the most forthright in response. ‘I do not follow in what sense the term “independent” is to be understood’, he argued in the Burlington Magazine: ‘Fifteen members of the New English Art Club and thirteen of the International Society have pictures here, and it can hardly be said that these artists are independent of the two societies named’. Robert Ross made the same point in The Academy, finding ‘the epithet “independent” […] misleading’.
The artists selected were united not by what they shared, necessarily, but by what they opposed. The title was to be read, essentially, as ‘Not the Royal Academy’. In so doing, Sickert claimed mischievously, the exhibition gave to the Academy ‘an importance to which artistically it has no claim’ and to the ‘independents’ a sense of unity that their actual work did not necessarily support.

Sickert affirmed that fifteen of the artists were New English Art Club members, although plenty more had exhibited with the club at some point, making it by far the leading shared feature of the group. The International Society – which contained a much larger contingent of Scottish artists – was also a prominent unifying factor, including council members Lavery, Shannon and Priestman alongside many frequent exhibitors. The ‘independent’ artists also shared exhibiting spaces, most notably small commercial galleries such as E.J. van Wisselingh’s Dutch Gallery, Carfax & Co., and the Leicester Galleries, as well as exhibitions such as those held at Wolverhampton and Bradford. As this all suggests, the artists shown at Agnew’s were already part of a complex network, supported by a small band of collectors (including C.K. Butler, A.M. Daniel, Edmund Davis, Charles Rutherston, Michael Sadler, Laurence Hodson and Herbert Trench), critics (such as MacColl, Fry, Laurence Housman, Charles Holmes, Walter Bayes and Walter Sickert) and dealers (Robert Ross, Ejlbert van Wisselingh, William
Marchant and Ernest Brown). As noted elsewhere, this was a tight self-supporting network, featuring many figures who adopted multiple roles: Holmes, Fry and MacColl were critics, artists and administrators, while Rothenstein operated as artist, critic and (briefly) artistic director of Carfax & Co. It was, in many ways, a neat system, though rarely conducive to large sales or widespread critical exposure. Few of Carfax & Co.’s exhibitions of contemporary art were commercially successful, with the notable exception of Charles Conder’s early shows, and the gallery balanced the books with regular exhibitions of ‘deceased masters’. With this in mind, the attention of a firm such as Agnew’s was probably welcomed by the majority of the artists, if not for public exposure, then for the access to wealthy private buyers: it was perfectly possible to have a successful career working independently of the Academy, but difficult without steady buyers. Rothenstein, for instance, was still struggling to make money more than ten years into his career. In 1898 he wrote to his father (on whose financial support he relied heavily): ‘I fancy money does come in later, for all my friends just over thirty seem to begin to sell their work – before then seldom’. By 1906, when Rothenstein turned thirty-four, the outlook was hardly any rosier.

Although there were a couple of artists under thirty, and recently graduated from art school, namely Orpen and Ambrose McEvoy, the ‘independents’ were by no means a bunch of fresh-
faced upstarts. Many of them were already in positions of responsibility: Tonks, Steer and Brown, for example, were teaching at the Slade School of Art, long-established as one of the leading art schools in London. Lavery was vice-president of the International Society, and a society painter of some reputation. The average age of the 1906 exhibitors – 45.8 – was actually quite high: this was not so much the coming generation, but one who had been around for a while and never quite broken through into the higher echelons of the art market. They were neither independent of major exhibiting societies nor, in a few cases, the Academy itself. Strang was elected an Associate engraver of the Academy only days before the Agnew’s exhibition opened, while Charles Sims exhibited both at Independent Art and the Royal Academy summer exhibition in 1906. One of the ironies of Agnew’s calling this an exhibition of ‘independent’ art, indeed, was that the firm’s embrace of these artists itself indicated that their independence (from the Academy at least) might be ebbing away, begging the question as to whether this exhibition might merely be a stepping stone to the RA. The difficult situation at the New English Art Club (NEAC), plagued by infighting and the lack of a suitable permanent exhibition space (their usual venue, the Egyptian hall in Piccadilly, was demolished in 1905), may well have encouraged members to start looking elsewhere – and thus to relinquish their independence.\footnote{74}
In fact, some of the ‘independent’ artists – Rothenstein for instance – would be actively courted by the RA in the years following the show, with particular support from the Royal Academician Clausen, who had been a force behind the New NEAC artists in his earlier years but had since changed ranks and accepted ‘officialdom’. Rothenstein declined, however, and seems in 1906 to have been critical of Strang’s move in that direction. In January of that year, shortly before the opening of the *Independent Art* exhibition, Strang wrote the following letter to Rothenstein, laying down his reasons for giving up his independence:

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Thanks very much for your kind & sympathetic letter and I quite see your point, and see the cause for regret. One reason people go into the Academy is, not that they agree wholly with it, but that they are not satisfied with the conditions outside. If we were agreed & harmonious, there would be fewer desertions, for the number of Societies who won’t speak to one another constitutes the strength of the Academy.75
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Strang appears to be seeking some kind of stability, albeit within an institution whose exhibitions he admits to having little or no interest in. He goes on to express concern whether his work will still gain approval from outside the Academy, hinting as he does
of the sense of ‘betrayal’ that clearly followed his defection, and which was picked up on more generally by Robert Ross in his review of *Independent Art*. By referring to the ‘curious symbolism’ contained in the title to Charles Rickett’s exhibition entry (*The Betrayal*), Ross appears to suggest that the exhibition as a whole, providing as it did passage ‘onwards to the Midlands and the middle classes’, could, and perhaps should, be read as the beginning of the end, rather than an exciting breakthrough. 76

Strang’s letter clearly hints at a turning of the tide, most especially the NEAC’s inability to offer a credible alternative to artists who had could have once been counted among its leading members. New artists were emerging, and the old NEAC guard faced tough decisions. Though not members of the Academy, could they count as ‘establishment’ figures in other ways? Ross certainly believed so, noting that ‘Mr. Tonks and Professor Brown are official instructors at the Slade School in London; Mr. C. J. Holmes is Slade professor at Oxford; Mr. Gerald Choune is or was a professor at Liverpool [and] Mr. Fry is now an official at New York’. 77 Despite a history of dividing critics, recent work by artists such as Steer had been remarkably well-received by critics and public alike. It was some time since Steer’s landscapes had been branded ‘simply and crudely horrid’ by the critic of *The Saturday Review*, or ‘distinctly peculiar’ and ‘daringly bold’ by *The Musical World*, as they were back in 1889. 78 He was by now much more likely to be likened to John
Constable, or described as ‘the greatest painter now living and working in England’. Indeed, critics of Independent Art sought to assure potential anxious readers (and buyers) that there was nothing ‘revolutionary’ about the show; it was instead, as Halton put it, ‘the natural outcome of a vigorous phase of modern art which has been steadily developing during the last twenty years’ – a comment which underlines the fact that the show was merely the latest, albeit high-profile, development in a long and complicated narrative. The question remains as to whether it was simply inevitable that Steer and co. should now be exhibiting in a space normally reserved for Academicians, or whether there were (and are) still important distinctions to be made between the ‘independents’ and the Academy.

A ‘not very interesting domesticity’: The Style of Independent Art

Before examining in further detail the outcomes of the 1906 exhibition, it is important to consider the ways in which independence from the Academy played out visually. Although the anti-Academy rhetoric often adopted by MacColl and others (albeit not within the exhibition itself) encourages us to view the art of the independents as a radical departure, parallels can be drawn between the two camps. If we were to take the word of many turn-of-the-century critics, the Academy’s summer exhibitions were bereft of all artistic talent and interest,
consisting merely of sentimental paintings of nymphs and nuns (such as George Wylie’s *The Nymph’s Pool*, Blair Leighton’s *Vows* or, indeed, Poynter’s *Bathing Stream*), overblown historical epics (Fred Roe’s *Martyrdom (Joan of Arc)* and R.B. Wollen’s *The Sun of Austerlitz*), and interminable portraits of field-marshal, bishops and dogs. All of these were certainly in evidence at the 1906 Royal Academy exhibition, alongside the customary imaginatively-titled problem pictures (John Collier’s *Indeed, Indeed, Repentance Oft I Swore*), bucolic landscapes, and flamboyant classical fantasies (Herbert Draper’s *Day and the Dawn Star*). *Independent Art*, conversely, could not boast a single nun, rampaging fireman, exotic animal, or large-scale historical re-enactment. Nymphs and nudity were represented by one work only: Charles Conder’s heavily stylised *River Nymph*, whereas the Royal Academy could boast several works of this kind.

In landscape painting, on the other hand, there are notable synergies between the two shows. Several artists – Clausen in particular – exhibited landscapes at the Academy that would not have looked out of place at Agnew’s. Clausen’s *The Green Fields* and *A Winter Morning*, along with landscapes by Edward Stott, Henri La Thangue and Alfred East, is at first sight as impressionistic, and formally bold, as any painting by the ‘independents’. The work of Frank Branwgy, elected a Royal Academy associate in 1904, could also have sat happily at
Agnew’s. Conversely, paintings from *Independent Art* such as James Lawton Wingate’s *Sheep Washing*, E.A. Walton’s *Sunshine and Sycamores* and James Paterson’s *East Lothian Village* could have been shown at the Academy without attracting comment. As noted, Charles Sims rather contradicted his status as an independent by showing work at both Agnew’s and the Academy in 1906.82

Taken as a whole, however – and bearing in mind that one cannot fully appreciate the exhibition in retrospect, with many paintings still untraced – there are crucial distinctions to be made. These not only help us understand important differences between the International Society, the NEAC and the RA (not to mention other groups and galleries) but also the specificities of this particular selection. The title of Henry Tonks’s *The Lost Path* (see plate 3), like many of his other works from this period, immediately conjures up paintings associated with the Victorian Academy, such as Frederick Walker’s painting of the same name, exhibited at the summer exhibition in 1863.83 Despite its earlier date, Walker’s painting can be read as typical of the particular type of Academy picture that Tonks and the core of the ‘independents’ were especially resistant to (and to which, I would suggest, Tonks is explicitly referring in his choice of title). Walker’s canvas, which depicts a woman in ragged clothing carrying a baby through a heavy snowstorm, could not be much further away in subject from Tonks’s effort,
which depicts two smartly-dressed women who have got lost on a country stroll near Poole harbour. Tonks’s painting can be read, therefore, almost as a parody of an RA work, where the lost path would almost certainly indicate a wider allegorical meaning. Walker’s mother is lost in more ways than one, whereas Tonks’s women have, literally, just lost their way home. In fact, the title of Tonks’s painting seems, in the end, little more than an afterthought, a droll gesture towards narrative in which the featureless protagonists are simply props for an interesting composition. This is certainly how Halton received the painting in *The Studio*, noting how ‘the figures in the foreground are not only well drawn, but they are also placed in the picture with due consideration for the balance of the composition’. He goes on to argue that ‘the chief beauty of the work lies in the landscape’, refusing to be taken by the title into anything so vulgar as a literary reading of the painting.\(^8\)

The relationship between paintings and narrative is clearly key to understanding both the differences between artists associated with the Academy and those who preferred to exhibit outside of it, and the allegiance of critics friendly to the latter (who, in line with the New Art Criticism of D. S. MacColl and George Moore, were generally predisposed to considering form above narrative). This is especially evident in another, more contemporary, set of comparisons between paintings shown at Agnew’s and Burlington House. Roche’s *Scottish Fishwife*
(Callow Herring) (see plate 4), exhibited at Independent Art, shares a subject with Walter Langley’s The Fisherman’s Widow (see plate 12), exhibited at the RA summer show. Both represent lower-class women, accompanied by at least one child, in such a way as to elicit a sympathetic response from a viewer. In the case of Langley’s work, the ‘story’ behind the woman in question is relatively obvious: she has lost her husband at sea and is struggling to deal with her own grief and that of her three children, pictorially divided from their mother by a bumpy stone path leading toward a dark, damp tunnel – at the end of which a chink of light can be found. A group of crab pots flung about the rocks suggests that the figures feel trapped, though the brave pose of the daughter hints at a brighter future. Roche’s painting is much less easy to read. His woman is a seller of fish (herring, as suggested by alternative titles), whose brave gaze meets ours, although folded arms ensure that the meeting remains an uncertain one. The figure behind her, facing away from us and standing in front of a roughly-painted, partially open door, may be her daughter. The cat on the left, meanwhile, appears to have jumped out of Edouard Manet’s Olympia, suggesting perhaps that the woman may be more than a fishwife, linking the painting to works such as William Rothenstein’s 1894 painting, Coster Girls. Criticised for being ‘immensely too large, for its subject’, with ‘no real pictorial motive’, Roche’s painting is deliberately enigmatic; like Tonks, he seems to be flirting with
narrative meaning.\textsuperscript{85} This tactic, which Pamela Fletcher has described as ‘anti-narrative’, was typical of many of the artists featured in \textit{Independent Art}, and had been associated with them since at least the turn of the century.\textsuperscript{86} The emphasis on form above narrative in many accounts of early twentieth-century art has set up a false dialectic which doesn’t take into account the variety of ways in which artists associated with the modern movement continued to engage with narrative at this moment.\textsuperscript{87}

Subject matter was seen by the majority of the \textit{Independent Art} critics as a subsidiary consideration: the real picture lay not in the content, but in the form it took. This approach can undoubtedly skew our perspective of \textit{Independent Art}: just because critics focussed on form doesn’t mean there wasn’t a narrative trend in evidence; likewise, the insistence on storytelling shown by many followers of the Royal Academy doesn’t mean that pictures shown there were formally uninteresting. However, the pictorial evidence – based on a direct comparison of paintings that appeared in both exhibitions – does suggest that, within the heterogeneity of each exhibition (and bearing in mind that the Academy one was much bigger, and therefore more wide-ranging), there seems to have been more scope for focussing on formal matters in \textit{Independent Art}. Strang’s \textit{Supper-Time} (see plate 6), for instance, was both admired and criticised on the basis of its design. Although mention is made of the ‘humble life’ represented – in which
Croal Thomson may have noted allusions to Jean-François Millet and the Barbizon School – the painting is seen in a typical review as ‘distinctly decorative in motif […] a new art in England, where so long the subject noble held undisputed sway’. Orpen’s *The Wash-House* (see plate 5), similarly, for all its pretensions to social realism, was received as an homage to Velázquez, whose *Rokeby Venus* had recently been exhibited on the small wall at Agnew’s before the firm sold it to the National Arts-Collection Fund for a record price, £45,000. This relationship was hinted at by Robert Ross – who wished that the Venus had remained longer in Bond Street, to offer, not so much a contrast but a complement to the exhibition – and, especially, by the critic of *The Observer*, whose review was titled ‘Young School Echoes of Old Masters’. This title may have pleased Agnew’s: after all, wasn’t the market for Old Masters booming? For a fraction of the price, collectors of Velázquez and Rembrandt could own contemporary art capable of hanging alongside them.

Yet reference to the Old Masters was not unproblematic. In fact, Ross suggests an exhibition spoiled in part by a surfeit of old masterish sincerity. In retrospect, the tendency of this generation to temper their modernity with constant winks to tradition has attracted comment. As Ysanne Holt has noted of Orpen’s painting: ‘there is no sense in which this laundress could provoke the moral discomfort aroused by Degas’ versions
of the same subject in the 1870s and 1880s [...]. By insisting, aesthetically and metaphorically, on past conventions it was possible for artists and spectators to overlook actual diversity, insistent and unpleasant real poverty, the new geographies and the developing suburbanisation of the 1890s.\textsuperscript{91} The realism of Strang and Orpen – even the politically pertinent intervention of Rothenstein’s \textit{Aliens at Prayer} (see plate 8) – is alleviated by its rhythmical design, impressionistic brushwork, and winks to Old Masters. As Orpen’s painting is linked to Velázquez, so Rothenstein’s ‘sincere and serious’ study of Jewish worship is linked to Rembrandt.\textsuperscript{92} Potentially dangerous subject-matter is legitimised, partly by the artists themselves and partly in the process of critical reception, becoming as it does far more palatable to Agnew’s clientele.\textsuperscript{93}

Rothenstein may be invoking the Aliens Act and the spectre of immigration, but his sitters are notably non-threatening. So too are Orpen’s washerwomen, who operate in the half-light of their basement room, avoiding the viewer’s gaze. A viewer might be excused, meanwhile, for entirely overlooking the emigrants in the foreground of McTaggart’s large-scale \textit{Emigrants leaving the Hebrides} (c.1883–9), variously described as ‘a fine study of sea and sky’ and a ‘beautiful study of a smooth sea dark under lifting mist’, and never as a reaction to the Highland clearances.\textsuperscript{94}
Despite this division in which the ‘independents’ were discussed largely in relation to form, with implicit recognition that this differentiated them from the storytelling tendencies of the Academicians, the painting that gained the most attention in reviews was nonetheless that with the most clearly defined subject: Charles Ricketts’s stark portrayal of Judas’s betrayal of Jesus (see plate 7), held by some critics to be ‘the finest imaginative work in an exhibition where imagination plays but a small part’, ‘the most remarkable and certainly the most serious picture in the exhibition’ and ‘one of the most powerful things here’.95 Ricketts’s painting was one of the few, if not the only, exhibit that seemed to genuinely surprise and divide viewers. It was ‘new and original’, ‘wonderfully desolate and terrifying’, the work of an artist ‘simply chock-full of ideas’. As The Observer noted, ‘for dramatic intensity nothing in this room can equal Ricketts’s The Betrayal’.96 It was so dramatic, indeed, that Walter Bayes was compelled to read its ‘stringy unarticulated wooden dolls’ as a ‘solemn jest’ in a review that, intriguingly, anticipates criticism received by artists at the Post-Impressionist exhibition of 1910 (an exhibition of which Ricketts was himself a stern critic).97 Laurence Housman, meanwhile, considered the staging to be somewhat ‘artificial’, while Bernhard Sickert asked: ‘Would the majesty of Christ be offended if His right arm were in proper proportion to His body, or if there were any indication of a trunk beneath the grand sweep from the left
shoulder?" Though read by most in relation to its dramatic design, *The Betrayal* clearly gained further interest on account of its subject matter, even from critics who seemed otherwise uninterested in a picture’s narrative. Halton, for instance, couldn’t help but wonder whether the artist had intended the likeness between Jesus and Judas, while Housman mused over whether the young man in the background was fleeing towards a ‘chalk cliff’ or ‘the sheet mentioned in scripture’. It was left to *The Times* to provide the by now statutory Old Master reference: ‘Mr Ricketts’s “The Betrayal” – a Rembrandt with a dash of Daumier’.

There is a sense of relief with which critics dealt with Ricketts, almost as if they were chiding the ‘independents’ for doing precisely what you would expect: avoiding the sensationalism and drama of the typical Royal Academy canvas. As Robert Ross would later claim, the desire to avoid the ‘sweetly pretty Christmas supplement kind of work’ led the majority of the ‘independents’ into an austere cul-de-sac, dwelling ‘too long on the trivial and the ignoble’. Narrative (at least in its obvious forms) was out, frivolity was out, drama was out, history painting was out and so too, Ross argued, was ‘physical beauty’. What was left was a ‘not very interesting domesticity’. Only Steer, whose *Summer* was not only well-received critically, but also one of the few major commercial
successes, seemed comfortable painting ‘beautiful things and beautiful people’.

**Canvases without Careers? The Commercial Value of Independent Art**

Despite the occasionally positive critical reception, *Independent Art* resulted in a distinctly unsuccessful commercial outcome in terms of sales (for full details see appendix 1 and chart of return on investment (ROI) in *plate 13*). The findings noted in the latter may reflect the lower starting prices of the exhibited works; however, the general pattern of sales was disappointing. The investigation of how the exhibition operated as a commercial enterprise is crucial to reflect on the relationship between the workings of criticism and the art market. The extent of such a relationship is a long-standing question in art history. It was principally articulated by Harrison and Cynthia White, who attributed the success of the commercial gallery in nineteenth-century France to the positive connections of the art dealers with the periodical press, interpreting the role of both critics and dealers as publicists: critics produce ‘symbolic value’ or ‘meaning’ for the work, whereas dealers convert this symbolic value into financial worth. White and White named this interdependence between the art market and criticism the ‘dealer-critic system’. 102
Even if recent art-historical enquiry has found much empirical evidence of the dense networks of connections, intersections, and even connivance between periodicals and the art market, scholars have since questioned the all-encompassing dynamics and the mechanical workings of White and White’s model. Robert Jensen, in particular, has argued that the critic-dealer system for French modernism failed: in spite of press attention and plenty of symbolic value given by critics, modernist artists did not sell, and the dealers who supported them struggled to translate the symbolic value into financial value. *Independent Art* carries further proof that in early twentieth-century London, and also outside the most extreme formal avant-garde, the combined efforts of dealers and critics were not always sufficient to guarantee commercial success. Agnew’s stock books demonstrate clearly the extent of *Independent Art*’s limitations: only a few pictures were sold at the exhibition, the show created a significant financial loss for the firm and no stellar careers were launched because of it. This suggests they either failed to take full account of the critical reputations of the artists involved before the exhibition, or that any critical value they identified did not successfully translate into financial value.

Agnew’s made a significant commitment to *Independent Art*: their stock books confirm that thirty-eight paintings out of fifty-two exhibited – approximately three quarters of the total –
were bought in advance directly from the artists at a total expense of £4,642. This was a considerable amount of money at the time, comparable to the price of a twelve-bedroom mansion in central London. Such expenses, however, were customary for Agnew’s, and Independent Art’s mean cost of £122 per painting was relatively modest for the firm, which held high capital and handled much higher figures on a regular basis.

Agnew’s low purchase prices resulted in low prices at the exhibition, a low-cost-low-revenue pricing strategy more fitting to emerging artists who wished to entice new buyers, rather than established and successful professionals. Although comparatively higher prices were paid by Agnew’s to the artists who had gained more critical exposure, such as Ricketts, Steer and McTaggart, the low-pricing strategy problematizes the dealer-critic system’s symbolic interpretation of art prices, while its lack of sales challenges its effectiveness.

A fully effective critic-dealer system would mean that the most critically acclaimed pictures would be the most loaded with symbolic value, which could then translate in commercial value by achieving the highest prices. The case of Independent Art, however, shows that, even if a few of the critically-hyped artists were successful commercially (in this case, Orpen and Steer), the majority were not. In point of fact, in spite of the symbolic value attributed to the works of Independent Art by the critics, before and during the exhibition, there was low demand
for the art on show: the exhibition’s sales records show that purchases were few, and limited to a small – and cautious – group of buyers.

The financial data listed in appendix 1 and elaborated in the chart of return on investment (see plate 13) shows that only nine people bought works directly from the show in February 1906. These first works sold at a great variety of prices, ranging from £21 to £300, and the return on investment (ROI, the ratio between the net profit and the sum invested in purchasing the pictures) was relatively high during the exhibition, when works obtained a profit between 28% and 44%, the exception being William Orpen’s The Wash House (the peak in the graph), which sold for a 78% profit. At this stage the show attracted principally private buyers, as expected by Agnew’s ‘retail’ model described earlier. Edmund Davis, who with his artist wife Mary Davis was a known patron of modern independent artists such as Conder, made the first purchase.106 Davis bought a relatively high-priced landscape, Berwick on Tweed by Cameron, on the day of the opening, 9 February, for £180 (44% ROI for Agnew’s). The next day the most expensive work to be purchased at the exhibition, Sunset by Steer (now catalogued as The Wye at Chepstow) was sold to High Court Judge and amateur painter Sir Charles John Darling for £300 (a relatively low ROI, 26%, as this picture had been purchased for £225, though a high net profit).107 On 12 February K. MacAndrew
acquired *The Locket* by Henry for £136 (36% ROI) and F.W. Bacon bought *Curfew* (*The Columns*) by Pryde for £73.10 (40% ROI). On 13, 14 and 16 February, three more works were sold at lower prices: the watercolour *St. Catharine’s Quay Honfleur* by MacColl was bought by Charles Godfrey for £35 (40% ROI), and the two flower pieces by Chowne, *Zinnias* and *Stocks* were acquired by F.A. White and G.W. Stevens for £21 each (both 40% ROI).108 One of the most significant sales happened on 19 February: the Irish collector William Hutcheson Poe, who had also just recently purchased *Summer* by Steer, bought *The Wash House* by Orpen for £125 (as mentioned, the highest ROI at 78%).109 Finally, on 21 February, the Yorkshire ship builder Charles Hellyer acquired *By the Arran Sea* by Sims for £45 (28% ROI).110 However, the most expensive picture in which Agnew’s had invested, McTaggart’s *Emigrants Leaving the Hebrides*, remained unsold, and so did the most critically acclaimed painting, Rickett’s *Betrayal* which only sold after five years, in 1911, at a loss of £60 (-34% ROI). Equally Tonks’ *The Lost Path*, a work that had been illustrated in *The Studio* and *Black & White Magazine*, and praised there and elsewhere, sold after four years at a loss of £35 (-29% ROI). Similarly, Shannon’s *Tibullus in the House of Delia*, for which Agnew’s paid £400, took eight years to sell, and sold for £180, a loss of £220 and a negative ROI of -55%. These examples clearly show that while critical exposure may have led to some significant
profits during the exhibition’s London run, there is no clear correlation between those works that received the most attention and those that sold for the highest prices. In other words, there is no indication that critical value led to long-term financial value.

After the show, during the summer of 1906, three works left Agnew’s for public collections: sales that, while not financially significant, were undoubtedly useful in terms of securing the long-term reputation of the artists. In June *Musical Moments* by Mackie and *Aliens at Prayer* by William Rothenstein (see plate 8) were sold to the Australian National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, and the Manchester Art Gallery purchased *Violet and Gold* by Lavery in August. Works kept selling slowly, but after 1908, when Croal Thomson left Agnew’s, pictures were liquidated in groups, and at a loss, to other dealers: Wallis & Co., Cape, Dunn & Pilcher and Brown & Rose. *Brecy* by Fry (bought for £50) and *Hampshire* by Peppercorn (bought for £75), both sold in December 1910 for £4.17 each, achieving the worst ROI: -92% and -94% respectively.

However, notwithstanding some absent data, the chart in plate 13 demonstrates how little commercial success came from picture sales at *Independent Art*. In a final reckoning of the exhibition, *Independent Art* had brought a net deficit of £1,477 to Agnew’s, a potential loss of 31.8% of the sum initially invested, allowing for the fact that some works remained
unsold. To this total, other costs must have been added, such as the printing of the catalogue, staff time for installing and dismounting the exhibition, and for framing and transport of works of art.

The income gained from entrance tickets at one shilling each, however, must be added to mitigate these negative figures. These profits could have been Agnew’s secret winning card and the true value added by the symbolic work produced by the critics, although this income directly benefitted the dealers’ finances more than the artists’ careers. We know from other early twentieth-century exhibitions in London that ticket sales often constituted the biggest revenue for art dealers, independently from the sales of the works exhibited.

*Independent Art* seems to have been a popular show and ticket sales may have been considerable, although visitor numbers (and ticket sales) are not known. Regardless of the commercial outcome, the exhibition also added some value to the exhibitors’ careers: it gave the artists exposure and created a new, if limited, circulation of their work amongst private buyers and public collections.

Perhaps *Independent Art* is best interpreted as an experiment, a show put together by Agnew’s with limited financial investment and in a relatively quick time – records show the works were all purchased by the firm in the span of nine months, from June 1905 until February 1906. It
represented, perhaps, a testing of the market to gauge the saleability of a promising group of artists rather than the ‘great victory’ that Frank Rutter recalled. The exhibition might be more fittingly summed up by another, slightly more cautious, critic: ‘It is a sign of the beginning of the victory when a firm like the Agnew’s comes forward and buys fifty pictures from the members of such societies and their friends, and makes a special exhibition of them’. Was the ‘great victory’ really only the ‘beginning of a victory’, or even a noble defeat? Undoubtedly the most powerful indicator of the lack of commercial success of this exhibition is the fact that after Independent Art, Agnew’s ceased almost completely to exhibit and sell works by contemporary British painters until the mid-1930s.

Conclusions

Using the case study of Independent Art, a commercial exhibition of modern paintings and watercolours, this paper has demonstrated the complexities present in the production, reception and market for modern art in Britain at the beginning of the twentieth century. The commerce on works of art was a profitable business at the time in Bond Street, but the booming trade was reserved to the sale of ‘deceased masters’, whereas living artists struggled to find their own place in the market. The financial data provided here has confirmed the depth of such crisis: even at fractional prices compared to works by Royal
Academicians, modern paintings and watercolours struggled to find buyers. Within an undeniable crisis, this paper has also illustrated the workings of an alternative commercial network, independent from the Royal Academy, in a loosely constructed artist-critic-dealer model, illustrated in this case by Steer / Croal Thomson / MacColl, who attempted to bring a different method of collaboration to the functioning of an established art dealership. In some senses, the exhibition built on already existing networks evident in and around galleries such as Goupil and Carfax & Co, with the support of publications such as the *Burlington Magazine, Studio* and *Saturday Review*. It did so, however, in a rather haphazard way, and while some critics (including Carfax director Robert Ross) seized upon the symbolic potential of the Agnew’s exhibition, the reality is that it lacked the careful planning, clear rationale and widespread critical support required to reach a large audience. It also lacked a substantial core of established buyers. As such, it is perhaps emblematic of the way in which this particular generation of British artists, while adopting some facets of what would later be termed ‘modernism’, plainly eschewed avant-garde tactics in promoting their work. Their failure to produce a manifesto certainly undermined their project, at least when it came to establishing their place in the history of modern art in Britain.

The crisis of modern British painting, as is well established in the literature, was stylistic as well as commercial
and coincided with the crisis of the Royal Academy. This paper has complicated this narrative by showing that, even if a gap existed between ‘independent’ and ‘academic’ art, there were still many connections, social (professional and personal) and stylistic (in composition, themes and subjects), between academic and independent artists. Despite forging their identity outside of the Academy and Agnew’s, the lure of both (especially Agnew’s policy of buying work outright rather than having them in consignment) was clearly enough to persuade so-called ‘independent’ artists to shed their supposed independence; likewise the contracting market for older English art persuaded traditional dealers to dip their toes into non-Academic contemporary art.

*Independent Art* itself was an intriguing combination of older-style and new commercial practices. The purchasing policy of Agnew’s, for instance, was characteristic of a bullish market that was disappearing swiftly, and soon London galleries would only sell works on behalf of artists, working as their ‘agents’ or consignment stores, and levying a percentage of 33% on sold works. But there were also new characteristics. The arrangement of the exhibition itself, though typical of non-Academic venues, was still perceived as a novelty and, still in 1904, much praised as ‘the picture exhibition of the future’ to a discerning public.
If *Independent Art* was not a commercial success, it was not without some impact on artists’ careers. Some of the exhibitors, such as Orpen, McEvoy and Strang, went on to gain recognition and, in the case of Orpen, very large sales as well. At the same time, however, the reputations and careers of others – such as Rothenstein, Steer and Tonks – were not appreciably affected by the exhibition. Ultimately the combination of elements present in *Independent Art* – top-end dealers, ‘independent’ artists, press attention and critical and commercial failure – make it a fitting example of the intricacy and contradictions present in the Edwardian art world.

Notes


3 See for example Frederick Wedmore’s Some of the Moderns, London, 1909, which contains chapters on many of the artists discussed in our essay, including William Nicholson, Philip Wilson Steer, Muirhead Bone, Walter Sickert and William Orpen.

4 See for instance Robins, Modern Art in Britain. This account of modern exhibition culture in Britain has been regularly challenged by scholars, but remains engrained in popular accounts of the period. On the growth of artists’ societies in general see Julie Codell, ‘Artists’ Professional Societies: Production, Consumption and Aesthetics’, in B. Allen, ed. Towards a Modern Art World, London, 1995.

5 Some Examples of Independent Art of To-Day, English, Scottish, Irish, Agnew’s Gallery, 9 February to 6 April 1906; for its move to Manchester, see ‘Independent Painters at Messrs. Agnew’s’, The Manchester Guardian, 2 May 1906. The catalogue was printed by Agnew’s, a copy held at the National Art Library, London.

6 The Agnew’s stock books are also available online, for 1906, see https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/research/research-centre/agnews-stock-books/reference-nga271110-1904-33 (accessed August 2019).


13 Naomi Carle, Samuel Shaw and Sarah Shaw, eds., *Edwardian Culture: Beyond the Garden Party*, London, 2017. This publication was the outcome of a series of conferences run by the Edwardian Culture Network between 2013 and 2017.


15 The work of Pamela Fletcher has been especially instructive here; see, for example, Pamela Fletcher, ‘Victorians and Moderns’, *Edwardian Opulence*, ed Trumble and Wolk Rager, p.99-108.

16 The pictures in the exhibition, and all the pictures here noted in possession of Agnew’s, are recorded in Agnew’s stock books 7, 8 and 9, Agnew’s Archive, London National Gallery, NG27/1/1/9, NG27/1/1/10 and NG27/1/1/11, hereafter cited as ASB7, ASB8 and ASB9.

17 ‘How is it that a Welshman of genius, Mr. Augustus John, is not represented at all?’, Bernhard Sickert, ‘Independent Art of To-day,* Burlington Magazine*, 8: 36, March 1906, 381–384; ‘The line had to be drawn somewhere’, Frank Rutter suggested years later, and Messrs. Agnew drew it at Augustus John’, Frank Rutter, *Art in My Time*, London, 1933, 127.

18 Consider, for instance, William Rothenstein’s description of Carfax & Co, the gallery where many of these artists exhibited, as dedicated to work ‘of a certain character’ – a ‘character’ he is reluctant to elucidate. For more on Rothenstein and his generation’s resistance to categorisation see Samuel

19 William Orpen’s later group portrait, Homage to Manet (1909, Manchester Art Gallery), which features MacColl, Sickert, Steer and Henry Tonks, alongside George Moore and the collector Hugh Lane, creates a greater sense of camaraderie, though there is still the sense that differences of opinion remain.

20 The whereabouts of Fry’s Chateau de Brecy has not been traced; the painting is described, however, in Frances Spalding, Roger Fry Art and Life, London, 1999, 106. The picture was sold at Christie’s on 11 March 1960, lot 167.


22 On Rothenstein, see Samuel Shaw, ‘Aliens at Prayer: Representing Jewish Life in the East End of London, c.1905’, in Carle, Shaw and Shaw, Edwardian Culture, 133–153; there are two other versions of McTaggart’s painting, one at the Scottish National Galleries in Edinburgh and the second at the Kirkcaldy Galleries, but the dimensions and provenance confirm that the painting exhibited at Independent Art is the earliest version now at Tate.


24 See, for instance the reviewer in ‘London Exhibitions’, The Art Journal, 68, 1906, 117–118, who defined the artists as ‘Not the Faultless Forty of the Academy, but a younger company, less orthodox, perhaps, but more exhilarating’.


The British Newspapers Archive records that nearly 200 papers commented on the Royal Academy exhibition in 1906.


On Agnew’s earlier relationship with shopping at the Royal Academy, see Barbara Pezzini, ‘1870: William Agnew’s Purchases at the Royal Academy’,

36 For a wider analysis of artists’ societies and their development during this period see Codell, ‘Artists’ Professional Societies’.

37 It is notable that not only were many of the artists involved in the 1906 exhibition associated with Carfax, but Carfax held an exhibition during the same summer which featured artists more typically associated with Agnew’s. This second exhibition represents a fascinating event in its own right, the implications of which will not be discussed in this present paper. For more on Carfax see Barbara Pezzini, ‘More Adey, the Carfax Gallery and the Burlington Magazine’, *Burlington Magazine*, 153: 1305, December 2011, 806–814; Barbara Pezzini, ‘New Documents Regarding the Carfax Gallery Exhibition “Fans and Other Paintings on Silk by Charles Conder”, 1902’, *The British Art Journal*, 13: 2, Autumn 2012, 19–28; Samuel Shaw, ‘The New Ideal Shop: Founding the Carfax Gallery, c. 1898–1902’, *The British Art Journal*, 13: 2, Autumn 2012, 35–43. On Carfax’s networks, see Anne Helmreich, ‘Traversing Objects: The London Art Market at the Turn of the Twentieth Century’, in Gould and Mesplède, eds, *Marketing Art in the British Isles 1700 to the Present*, 135–145.


42 For a detailed window on Agnew’s at the fin-de-siècle, see Pezzini and Corrokham, ‘Transatlantic Transactions’.


44 16 October 1903, ASB8, no.1028.

45 Sold to Jeremiah Colman on 9 March 1916, ASB9, no.1028.

46 This collapse has also been traced by historian of taste Gerald Reitlinger, The Economics of Taste, the Rise and Fall of Picture Prices 1760–1960, London, 1961. Martha Tedeschi, ‘How Prints Work: Reproductions, Originals, and Their Markets in England, 1840–1900’, PhD Thesis, Northwestern University, 1994, has connected this sea change in the market with the demise of the reproductive print trade; and Petri, Arrangement in Business, 16–18, has shown how artists who developed independently from that market, such as Whistler, also struggled to find the same public recognition and financial success that artists of the previous generation had enjoyed.

47 The Legend of ‘The Briar Rose’: A Series of Pictures Painted by by E. Burne-Jones, A.R.A in April–May 1890; Briton Rivière’s Daniel’s Answer to the King in November–December 1890; Wilfred Ball’s Drawings of Egypt in January 1894.

48 ‘Mr. Burne-Jones’s New Pictures, The Times, 25 April 1890.

49 English Art 1900, Agnew’s, London, January–February 1900. This show was called ‘English Art’ to mean ‘art produced in England’, as artists of other nationalities, such as the Dutch Lawrence Alma-Tadema and the Irish Stanhope Forbes, exhibited there. A catalogue of this exhibition is at the National Art Library, London.
This picture was bought from David Croal Thomson on 4 March 1901 for £35 and was sold two days later, without levying any commission, to George Mc Culloch, ASB7, no. 9765. [NGA27/1/1/9].

20 May 1904, ASB8, no.1282. According to the *Athenaeum* of 29 October 1904, this was a portrait of Alice Nielsen singing as Gilda in Rigoletto.

AsB8, no.1737. As noted above, Agnew’s tended not to sell on to other dealers, with occasional exceptions.

ASB8, no.1665.


For correspondence between Thomson and MacColl see University of Glasgow Special Collections, Reference No MS MacColl T17-T20. MacColl contributed a notice on Rodin to the *Art Journal* under Croal Thomson’s


65 D.S. MacColl, *The Administration of the Chantrey Bequest*, London, 1904, is the collection of these articles.


68 The same could be said for three other artist-critics, Charles Holmes, Roger Fry and Walter Sickert, who all might have offered valuable reflections on the show had they not been part of it.

69 Bernhard Sickert, ‘Independent Art of To-day’, 381.

70 Ross, ‘Fine Art – Canossa’

71 Van Wisselingh’s Dutch Gallery, Walter Sickert, 1895; Francis James, 1893, 1896, 1901, 1905; Shannon, 1894, 1900; Rothenstein 1894; Ricketts, 1902, Conder, 1903, Strang, 1904, 1906, the Carfax, Conder, 1899, 1900, 1901, 1902; Rothenstein, 1900-1902; Tonks, 1905; Fry, 1903; Ricketts, 1906, The Leicester Galleries, Conder, Rothenstein and Shannon, 1904, Lavery, 1904, Austen Brown and D.Y Cameron, 1905; Conder, 1905.


75 William Strang to William Rothenstein, 13 January 1906, William Rothenstein papers, Houghton Library Harvard, bMSeng1148. For more on


Our approach here is inspired by several scholars who have recently drawn fresh attention to the relationship between the Academy and artists operating outside of it, and between ‘Victorian’ and ‘modern’ painting in general. See, for instance, Pamela Fletcher, ‘Human Character and Character-Reading at the Edwardian Royal Academy’, Visual Culture in Britain, 14: 1, 2013, 21–35.

Sims started exhibiting at the RA in 1905 and would continue to do so regularly into the 1920s.

In the mid-1900s Henry Tonks, like many of his New English contemporaries, seems to have been exploring narrative painting: The Crystal Gazers, c.1905; shown at the NEAC in 1908) and, Rosamund and the Purple Jar, 1900, Tate, London, the latter of which was based on Maria Edgeworth’s 1823 moralistic story of the same name.


The Athenaeum, 17 February 1906.


This strategy, however, does not necessarily disrupt the ‘modern’ credentials of these artists, bearing in mind the longer tradition of invoking the Old Masters in the work of artists such as Edouard Manet, whose portrait of Eva Gonzalès would later feature in Orpen’s painting *Homage to Manet* (1909).


100 ‘Independent Art’, The Times, 10 February 1906.

101 This statement was added to Ross’s review in 1909, when it was reprinted as part of a collection of essays. See Robert Ross, ‘Non Angeli sed Angli’, 162.

102 White and White, Canvases and Careers, 94–98.


104 The vital importance of this business model for artists should not be underestimated as, by this stage, smaller galleries such as Carfax regularly operated on consignment, paying artists only a percentage of the sold work, a business model which greatly increased financial uncertainty for artists. The other paintings were either held on consignment or property of other collectors given on loan, a customary modus operandi of early nineteenth century galleries. Works on loan were particularly important because, marked as ‘already sold’ with a red dot in the gallery, they created an image of artists being in demand and commercially successful, see Pezzini, ‘New Documents’, 19–28.

105 This sum, adjusted for inflation, equates to ca. £500,000 in 2019, see the Bank of England Historic Inflation Calculator, online.


107 Sunset by Steer, ASB8 no.1794. For Darling, Who’s Who 1907, London, 1909, 443. Lord Justice Darling had purchased pictures from Agnew’s before; for example, on 26 November 1901 he purchased Winter Pasture by E. Stott for £80, ASB7, no.9812. He was the Judge of the 1917 Romney case when American collector Henry Huntington sued dealers Lewis and Simmons for selling them a picture falsely attributed to George Romney, ‘High Court of Justice’, The Times, 16 May 1917 and 19 May 1917. He introduced the Auctions (Bidding Agreements) Act of 1927, which made ‘rings’ of dealers at auction illegal.

108 ASB8, nos.1824 and 1825.

109 ASB8, nos.1729 and 1796.

110 ASB8, nos.1797 and 1739.

111 ASB8, no.1786 for £185; it is not known how much the picture by Rothenstein was sold for as it was one not in Agnew’s property and not recorded in the stock books. ASB8, no.1798. The National Gallery of
Victoria had considerable funds due to a recent bequest by Alfred Felton.

George Clausen in London acted as advisor to the museum at the time; for his purchases, with illustrations of the works by Mackie and Rothenstein, see ‘National Gallery of Australia’, *The Art Journal*, 68, 1906, 333–334.

112 It should be remembered that this was the total sum accrued over ten years; in one year the works sold only totalled £2,238, a loss of about 50% of the sum initially invested in them.


114 ‘Independent Art’, *The Times*, 10 February 1906.

115 In the 1920s Agnew’s held only two shows of living artists: the society portraitist Oswald Birley and sculptor Clare Sheridan.

