Obituaries

Francis Haskell (1928–2000)

LAST year, on 3rd November, already obviously ill, Francis Haskell recalled in a vigorous speech at the French Embassy in London how, between the ages of five and eight, he had attended the Lycée in South Kensington. From his lessons he retained only '*un vague souvenir de Pépin le bref et Louis le Fainéant – mais ce sont peut-être ces rois qui sont responsables pour ma passion pour l'histoire française*'. This was in reply to the French Ambassador, who had invested him as a chevalier of the Légion d'Honneur – an honour which, almost exactly half a century earlier, had been conferred on Francis's father, the distinguished ballet critic and director of the Sadler's Wells Ballet School, Arnold Haskell (1903–80). His mother, Vera Saitsova, a Russian *émigrée*, had met Arnold Haskell in Paris. French was their common language. Francis was born on 7th April 1928 and brought up in an exceptionally cultured and cosmopolitan home in London, one full of modern paintings and sculpture (Arnold Haskell, it should be remembered, published in 1931 *The Sculptor Speaks*, the first book on Jacob Epstein).

When the non-aggression pact between Hitler and Stalin was announced in August 1939 the family, which included Francis's younger brother and sister and his parents, was on holiday in France. The trains had been stopped, so a taxi was hired for the hasty return to Calais. The locals in one village were assembled in the square around a lamp and a radio. From them they learnt that all private vehicles might be claimed for military purposes. At Tours it was impossible to sleep as armoured vehicles rattled by all night. The next day, at the Hôtel de la Poste in Rouen, where roast chicken had been ordered, '*mon père nous expliqua que ce serait notre dernier bon repas jusqu'à le fin de la guerre qui, en effet, éclata quelques jours après notre arrivée en Angleterre*'. This further flash of autobiography from the speech at the French Embassy must strike a poignant note with those who knew Francis well: hopelessly insomniac and a connoisseur of banned sleeping pills; terrified of flying but an indefatigable traveller, fretting for hours in advance on the station platform; ever keenly alert to international news. His feeling for history, and for the histrionic, must have owed something to a father who could make such an announcement at such a moment. An exuberant pessimism would become the most distinctive feature of Francis's incomparable conversational style – self-consciously hyperbolic and highly emphatic, yet good humoured and convivial.

At Eton Francis determined to study medicine, but having passed his first exam he realised that he 'wasn't cut out for it'. He returned to France alone, fell in love with Paris, witnessed the trials of collaborators and in the evenings attended the plays of Giraudoux and Jules Romain. After military service he went up in 1948 to King's College, Cambridge, to read History, transferring to English literature in his final year. He quickly found himself in a circle which was at once sceptical and liberal, with little regard for hierarchy or orthodoxy but passionate in its attachment to intellectual honesty. He always considered the college to be his spiritual home. Under the influence of Dadie Rylands (who later removed hundreds of adjectives from Francis's thesis), student drama thrived. From his love of the stage Francis derived his rhetorical style of lecturing with its vigorous projection of the voice and careful timing – for which a stiff drink was an important preparation.

Offered, after success in his exams, a research studentship by King's, Francis sought the advice of Nikolaus Pevsner whose weekly survey lectures on art history he had attended. Pevsner proposed that he go to Rome and reconsider the '*Jesuitenstil*' which had so intrigued German students of '*Geistesgeschichte*'. Unencumbered by the mass of modern scholarly work on the subject that has appeared since then, Francis turned first to the early printed sources (Baglione, Bellori and Passeri), and then to the archives – 'as the delightful family with whom I was lodging, and from whom I learnt to read and write Italian, were extremely devout and *bien pensant* Catholics, I was soon introduced to an influential Jesuit and given access to the archives of the Society in Borgo Santo Spirito. There I was greatly helped by Padre Pirri, a most conscientious explorer of all documents concerning the arts and author of a history of the Gesù. And there too I came to a conclusion which (I hardly exaggerate) changed my whole career: there was no such thing as "Jesuit art", let alone a *Jesuitenstil*.'[1] Pevsner, to his great credit, was not dismayed.

By the time 'The Jesuits and the Arts in Rome between 1500 and 1700' was complete its author was in love with Italy and was proud to have overcome that 'legacy of distrust and, still more, of mocking contempt' for Italians which had affected many of his compatriots. He formed enduring friendships with Italian contemporaries and colleagues.[2] And his letters reveal him to have been a sharp observer of contemporary life. 'Here I am in Vicenza', he writes to 'Willy' (Mostyn-Owen) one July evening. At the Villa Valmarana, he found the *custode* 'pottering around the garden', in no hurry to admit him. When he was about to complain, a servant came up and addressed the *custode* as 'senatore'.

> After this he was quite friendly.
> We sat down, and he said, just like a character in Alice in Wonderland might have done, 'I'm a senator, you know'. Then he told me that it was a German who had discovered the Tiepolos in his villa. '*Sono bravi i tedeschi*', then, remembering that I said I was English, he added, rather lamely, '*anche voi siete bravi*', and to console me he produced a book on Italian gardens by a sort of female Edward Hutton with a water colour illustration of his villa, 1904 style – you know the sort of thing – a couple of columns against a mauve sky. After which it was relief to see the wonderful Tiepolos.

Francis, who was averse to 'fine writing', was capable of exquisite effects such as the flight of this deceptively simple final sentence with its three perfectly spaced Fs. Only on reflection do we appreciate how deftly he has extracted the historical dimension of the situation with a comedy and sympathy which are evident in numerous sketches in his subsequent publications.

In 1955 Francis took a junior job in the library of the House of Commons. The discreet view it afforded of people making history doubtless attracted him; he enjoyed all forms of research and loved libraries. In years to come, the libraries of the Fine Art Faculty of Cambridge University and of the History of Art Department in Oxford were to owe much to his care. The neglect of books always infuriated him, as did the betrayal of legacies, and in Oxford in the 1980s he organised bold commando raids on the basement of the Ashmolean Museum when he discovered that the rare topographical volumes of the Hope Bequest were decaying there, and he had to be rebuked by the University authorities for buttonholing plutocrats to pay for their rebinding (thus, perhaps, diverting them from endowing a chair in business studies).

Later in 1955, King's awarded Francis a fellowship to convert his thesis into a book. Eventually it was condensed into about ten pages, for Francis had expanded his field of enquiry to other forms of patronage, first in Rome and then in Venice. *Patrons and Painters* was published in 1963, and dedicated to his future wife Larissa and his friends in Italy. It was at the Ristorante Malamocco near

[1]This passage is from the original English of the preface to the German edition of *Patrons and Painters* written in Santa Monica in February 1996.

[2]The quotation is from the original English of a recollection of his friendship with Sandro Marabottini published in a *Festschrift* for the latter (G. BARBERA, T. PUGLIATTI and C. ZAPPIA, eds.: *Scritti in Onore di Alessandro Marabottini*, Rome [1997]). It was also written early in 1996.

St Mark's in August 1962 that Francis had been introduced by Alessandro Bettagno to Larissa Salmina, the vivacious, glamorous and keen-eyed curator of Venetian drawings in the Hermitage, then Commissar of the Soviet pavilion at the Biennale. Her recklessness in consorting with Francis must have been beyond official comprehension. They were allowed to marry in the Soviet Palace of Weddings in Leningrad in June 1965 and six months later Larissa arrived, with a visa but little else, in Cambridge. Francis was transformed by the happiness this gave him, and Larissa, in addition to supporting his ceaseless activities as a scholar and teacher, provided the hospitality that would make their house in Oxford a compact centre for higher international and interdisciplinary research for more than thirty years.

They settled in Walton Street when Francis was appointed Professor of Art History in Oxford in 1967. *Patrons and Painters* had by then been established as a classic and it was expected that its author would continue to explore the increasingly popular field of baroque art. Instead, he turned his attention to late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France and, to a lesser extent, Britain, investigating such topics as the rediscovery of the Primitives, the political language of art criticism or the influence of the Musée des Monuments Français – a paradoxical consequence of the Revolution's attempt to eradicate the past.[3] The history of taste began to interest him as much as that of patronage. Although he was never quite convinced that the derided and neglected painters of the nineteenth century were as worthy of study as Pietro da Cortona or Giambattista Tiepolo, the problems that he identified in his explorations of the activities and personalities of critics, connoisseurs, curators and collectors have transformed our understanding of the period. It is also in this field that his many pupils have made most impact. The Department in Oxford remained small but the scholarly resources he created there were remarkable and deserve wider recognition.

As a historian of taste, Francis was fond of dwelling on the significance of chance. Without the need for a new staircase in the Louvre, the *Winged Victory* could hardly have achieved the preeminence we now take for granted. His own debt to the Warburg Institute owed much, he confessed, to the central heating it shared with a clinic, when located in South Kensington – an incentive to leisurely exploration of its stacks during austere post-War winters. In 1976 the problem was different. Driven out of Paris by a heat wave, he spent hours walking in the shady gardens of Versailles, humbled to discover how little he knew – later, fascinated to discover how little was known – about the antique statues copied there. Soon afterwards I chanced to express similar sentiments and we instantly resolved to concoct a booklet to help any colleagues who shared our curiosity. We thought that a couple of weekends would suffice for this task. In 1981 *Taste and the Antique* was published. Francis wanted to know the exact hour at which every faun was excavated and he also extended our enquiries backwards from Versailles to Fontainebleau, and forward, from Batoni's *milordi* to Riefenstahl's Olympics. The same relish for minute particulars and the broadest panorama determines the character of *History and its Images* (1993) which grew out of such studies as that on the Musée des Monuments Français and out of some marginal enquiries in *Taste and the Antique*. It must have been about this time that he was reminded of Pépin le Bref and found the illustrated textbooks he had read as a child.[4]

He was always delighted and often surprised by the honours which descended on him: he was elected a fellow of the British Academy in 1991 and awarded its Serena medal in 1985, he was also an honorary or corresponding member of ten foreign or learned societies, elected honorary fellow of King's College, Cambridge in 1987 and of Trinity College, Oxford on his retirement in 1995 when he became Professor Emeritus. But he was untouched by self-importance and preferred meeting young research students to the most flattering official solemnities.

Francis was averse to generalisations (the brilliant, albeit carefully qualified ones in the conclusion of *Patrons and Painters* were added at the behest of his very close friend Benedict Nicolson), and often presented himself as a narrow empiricist. His distaste for theory was, in fact, partly due to his love of ideas. He had an intensely speculative mind but abstractions either bored or appalled him. Travel was always a stimulus (in the last decades of his life he explored Islamic Egypt and Bavarian baroque with equal enthusiasm) but still more distant Southern California somehow released him from many mundane cares which impeded productive thought. True, he was often lost there: 'We walked around in a most devout way, occasionally asking an "intelligent" question' – this was in a tour around the Voodoo exhibition at UCLA – 'How I longed to settle down with Voltaire for an hour or two.' But he was delighted by the incongruities of Wonderland, where the arrival of the 'celebrity car service' might interrupt the gay men's choir of San Francisco singing 'God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen' on television.

He should be there now, as a guest of the Getty Provenance Index, that great historical enterprise which he so passionately supported. But in December he learnt that he had cancer of the liver. He immediately resolved to re-read Shakespeare, Molière and Montale, and to watch his favourite old French films. Instead, he occupied himself with checking the Italian translation of a revised edition of *Patrons and Painters*, and planning the adaptation of his lectures on Old Master exhibitions as a book, work which was completed just before his death on 18th January.

Consoled by the thought that his first book had been prepared for a new generation, he could also discern a coherence in his life's work, for art exhibitions had been the subject of some of his earliest articles and were central to many of the themes illuminated in *Rediscoveries in Art* (1975) and in *Past and Present in Art and Taste* (1987). Amazed by the number of friends and pupils who came, many from abroad, to see him and whom he was only just able to summon the strength to greet, he could perhaps sense not only how much loved, but how influential, he had been. He would have been modest, as well as too pessimistic, to apply to himself Auden's line on the death of Yeats which he often quoted: 'He has become his admirers.' Not, of course that he approved of all his admirers. 'Whither art history?' was Francis's hypothetical title for the type of solemn professional overview that he most dreaded being asked to give. Yet he opened up many lines of enquiry – into the nature of patronage, the influence of museums and exhibitions, the misinterpretation of art as evidence, to name only a few – which will continue to affect a discipline in which he is already seen as a father, although he saw himself as something of an intruder.

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[3]'The Manufacture of the Past in Nineteenth-Century Painting' and 'Art and the Language of Politics', first published in 1971 and 1974, are among the selected essays in *Past and Present in Art and Taste*, New Haven and London [1987].
[4]These may be the books which feature in the film about him made by Renan Polles for the Louvre in 1991.

Leslie Parris (1941–2000)

IF anything can be said to symbolise Leslie Parris's relationship with the Tate Gallery, where he worked for over thirty-five years until his unexpected death from pneumonia on 6th January, it was his creation of the Gallery's *Manual of Catalogue Style*. This is a miracle in the management, the rendering coherent, of an almost impossibly intricate mass of material – as his specifications for the use of prepositions in provenances, for example, make very clear – and it was a Herculean task, involving the co-ordination of many different areas of expertise. It bound together the scholarly activity of the place in a common understanding of the basic medium by