PART I

The Grosvenor Gallery: an historical account

Introduction

The Grosvenor was the most celebrated private gallery to be set up for the display of paintings and works of art in England in the second half of the nineteenth century. Exhibitions of contemporary paintings, watercolours and sculpture, as well as historical and retrospective displays, were held in a splendid and richly decorated building in New Bond Street from the spring of 1877 through to 1890. Some works were for sale; others were borrowed from collectors; all were selected so as to please an audience which was avid to know more about the aesthetic experiments of the age. Sir Coutts Lindsay, whose brainchild the venture was, ran the gallery during the fourteen years of its operation, and succeeded in promoting it as one of the most fashionable venues of the day. Bohemia and high fashion mingled at the parties that he and his wife gave there. However, there was a serious purpose behind Lindsay's showmanship: in creating the Grosvenor Gallery this aristocrat with artistic ambitions provided London with something it had long needed – an exhibition space where a selection of the most remarkable works by contemporary artists might be seen, appreciated and admired. The 'greenery-yallery, Grosvenor Gallery', mocked by Gilbert in the comic opera *Patience*, provided the setting for a new and reverent attitude to the arts: paintings and works of art were perceived as self-contained in their message, and not dependent on narrative or personal association. As the philosophy of 'art for art's sake' took hold on the imagination of a wider audience, the Grosvenor Gallery became a temple for those who sought edification through aesthetic delight.

From the first, an extraordinary range of styles and degrees of modernity was represented, and artists of widely differing sensibilities were invited to exhibit. On the one hand, Edward Burne-Jones showed paintings which were perceived as combining a romantic strain inherited from Pre-Raphaelitism with a neo-classical austerity of subject; while on the other, James Whistler pioneered aesthetic abstraction in his views of the cityscape at night. Both Burne-Jones and Whistler had previously refused to send their works to the Royal Academy summer exhibitions and, because of the paucity of alternative gallery spaces prior to the opening of the Grosvenor, were virtually unknown to the public at large. The Grosvenor gave them their opportunity to assume the centre stage of English artistic life. Many others besides transferred their main allegiance to the Grosvenor – Walter Crane, Albert Moore and George Frederic Watts, for example – each of whom found Coutts Lindsay's gallery preferable to Burlington House. At the same time various prominent academicians, including among those who subsequently became presidents of the Academy, Frederic Leighton, John Everett Millais and Edward John Poynter, accepted Lindsay's invitations to participate in the Grosvenor exhibitions, and relished the prestige conferred on those who contributed to such a refined and exclusive display.

The third quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed an artistic renaissance in Britain. Pre-Raphaelitism of the 1850s had metamorphosed in the 1860s into a style of painting which, although still dependent upon rich colour and highly detailed surface, was principally concerned with the evocation of mood. Mythological and romantic subjects were adopted by many of the artists who maintained the tradition of Pre-Raphaelitism through to the late century. Landscape remained a principal subject matter of British art, but was seen increasingly as a means of transmitting information about the sensations to be experienced out of doors rather than a literal representation of the face of nature. In the same way, portraitists sought to convey the elegance and self-assurance of

their sitters, rather than conduct searching analyses of the physiognomy or personality of an individual. English painting was becoming increasingly intellectually ambitious, more open to the stimulus of the art of the past, and in closer touch with ideas about the purpose and value of art then being explored on the Continent.

With so many of these elements to the fore, it might have been predicted that the opening of the first Grosvenor exhibition would cause a sensation. In the event this proved more than a mere *succès de scandale*, for the gallery became the centre-piece of artistic life in London for a decade or so, continuing to serve and exploit the fervent interest in the arts which grew up in England in the 1870s. The exhibitions held there were the cue for virulent debates about the value and veracity of contemporary art. Lindsay's gallery played a vital part in the battle to throw off the stultifying influence of the Royal Academy – to which institution professional artists had for so long been shackled. Those who sought to make artistic experiments and to invent new styles of art, and who at the same time looked for opportunities to free themselves from the interference of hidebound selection committees and to show their works without risk of seeing them lost in unsympathetic schemes of display, gravitated towards the Grosvenor. As a result, the summer exhibitions there were for a time the most exciting and extraordinary manifestations of modern art in the English-speaking world. The Royal Academy itself was rocked by the competition which the much smaller, but for a while more prestigious, Grosvenor Gallery represented. The Grosvenor proved eventually to be a short-lived enterprise, but by its very success in showing the work of leading artists it demonstrated the need for a new type of gallery, serving the professional ambitions of different artists and attracting a wide spectrum of patrons and collectors.

Coutts Lindsay and the Victorian art world

The Grosvenor was the timely outcome of a public debate about the opportunities and restrictions of professional artistic life which had been under way since the middle of the century. Increasingly the Royal Academy was out of touch with the most exciting developments of the age, but instead merely served the interests of an entrenched art establishment. Young painters, without reputation or social influence, took their courage in their hands when they submitted their works to the Academy selection committees. On frequent occasions excellent works by painters who should have been encouraged were in fact excluded. Even for those who were successful the schemes of display at the summer exhibitions in Trafalgar Square, or from 1869 onwards at Burlington House, whereby works were hung frame to frame, floor to ceiling, without regard to harmony of colour, scale or treatment, were not encouraging. Many artists of distinction withdrew from this fray entirely; others, also perhaps proponents of styles of painting not condoned by the Royal Academy, or artists who worked in media other than oil, or who otherwise departed from the expectations of the Academy's aesthetically unadventurous audience and administration, continued to submit works to that body but were often spurned.

Various exhibiting societies were formed during the nineteenth century. Watercolourists, who felt particularly hard done by the Academy, set up the Old and New Water-Colour Societies in 1804 and 1832 respectively; these organizations were even more exclusive than the Academy, allowing space in their exhibitions only to members. The short-lived Hogarth Club provided an exhibition space and forum for discussion for various painters in the wider Pre-Raphaelite circle but never represented a serious alternative to the exhibition galleries of the Academy. The Dudley Gallery, founded in 1865 to provide an exhibition space for watercolourists, was perhaps unique among Victorian art associations in that it was open to all, no attempt being made to select or control the types of works which were displayed. Thus it was a boon to the mass of artists who sought to establish their professional careers but who, for whatever reason, were excluded from the academic fold, and it provided a professional spring-board for many artists whom Coutts Lindsay later invited to exhibit at the Grosvenor. From 1867 onwards the Dudley also staged a winter exhibition of oil paintings. None of these various galleries or exhibition spaces seemed to solve the problem of where artists who were unacceptable to, or dissatisfied with, the Royal Academy should send their works. On a number of occasions virtually impromptu displays of works rejected by the Royal Academy were set up – in 1862 for example Whistler sent his painting *Symphony in White, No. 1: the White Girl* to an exhibition in Berners Street, and the following year a similar 'alternative' exhibition was held at the Cosmopolitan Club in Charles Street. Each of these drew attention to the profound sense of grievance that many artists felt towards those who administered the Royal Academy.

Thus the scene was set for the establishment of a new kind of picture gallery, where the more advanced artists of the day would be welcome and to which they would be pleased to send their works. Burne-Jones had never sought to exhibit his paintings at the Royal Academy, indeed since 1870 when he had resigned his membership of the Old Water-Colour Society his work was virtually unknown to the public at large. Many others, Watts and Whistler for example among the artists who were to be prominent at the Grosvenor, were thoroughly discontented with the Academy. The Grosvenor was fraught with controversy throughout its

1 *Sir Coutts Lindsay outside the Grosvenor Gallery*, 1883, plate from *Vanity Fair*, 3 February 1883

fourteen-year history, but what was never in doubt was its significance as a showplace of modern art and as a force for change. Only when those who organized, or contributed to, the exhibitions held there ceased to believe in it as something vital and important, did the Grosvenor Gallery expire.

From his ancestry and upbringing Sir Coutts Lindsay (figure 1)[1] gained a passion for painting and literature. He was born in 1824, and his early childhood was spent at Brandsbury, a house near Edgware on the north-western outskirts of London, belonging to his maternal grandfather, Sir Coutts Trotter, Bt (to whose title Coutts Lindsay succeeded by special remainder in 1837). Lindsay's parents divided their time between London, where they had a house in Grosvenor Square, and Balcarres, on the northern shore of the Firth of Forth in Scotland. His mother, Anne, and his father, Colonel (later General) James Lindsay, were both intensely interested in the arts, and they made regular trips abroad in the course of which they studied and collected paintings and works of art. From 1838 through to 1840, Coutts made a long stay in Italy with his family (during which the English artist George Richmond was commissioned by Coutts's second cousin Alexander Lord Lindsay to make a watercolour drawing of James and Anne's four children (figure 2)). In 1841–2 Coutts was back in Italy in company with Lord Lindsay (later to succeed as 25th Earl of Crawford and 8th Earl of Balcarres) whose pioneering study of Pre-Renaissance art, *Sketches of The History of Christian Art*, was published in 1847 with a dedication to Coutts. The two equipped themselves with Maselli's edition of the works of Vasari 'in 2 large vols with notes, telling what has become of the different frescoes and works of art he describes, and mentioning others which he omits'.[2] They travelled as far south as Naples, where they made a study of the work of Solario. Later, in the spring of 1842, they left Rome to travel northwards through Umbria and Tuscany, in the course of which journey they took in frescoes by Signorelli in Orvieto, works by Perugino in Pieve, Piero della Francesca's frescoes in Arezzo (described by Coutts as being 'like the Elgin Marbles'[3]), and then on to Siena and Florence. Many of these works they were among the first of their generation to appreciate.

Coutts's stay in Italy was interrupted by the news that he had gained a commission in the Grenadier Guards. At Easter 1842 he left his cousin in Florence to travel to Leghorn, whence to embark for England. Despite the martial traditions of his family, he did not fit easily into the routines of regimental life, perhaps because he was bored, but also because he lacked self-discipline and professional commitment. His commanding officer wrote to Coutts's father expressing concern at his progress, and explaining his difficulties on the grounds that he had 'never been to a public school and until he came here I suppose he had very little opportunity of mixing with young men of his own standing'.[4] The soldier's life seemed hardly to inhibit Coutts Lindsay's enthusiasm for art: in 1843 he

2 George Richmond, *The Children of Anne and James Lindsay, at Rome* 1839, watercolour, 26¼ × 33 in. From left to right are seen Robert Lindsay, later Loyd-Lindsay, later still Lord Wantage; Margaret Lindsay, later Countess of Crawford and Balcarres; Sir Coutts Lindsay Bt; and Mary Anne Lindsay, later Mrs Robert Holford. Collection of the Earl of Crawford and Balcarres

interested himself in the Palace of Westminster mural competition, and the following year he took painting lessons from William Mulready. He wrote plays: 'Alfred - A Poetic Drama' appeared in 1845, and was followed by a series of similar treatments of English history. In 1850 he left the army with the intention of devoting himself to the arts. Still he showed promise, although in what direction he would apply his talents was unclear. His sisters wrote to one another in concern about his waywardness; Margaret Lindsay said of him in 1850 that 'he seems like some beautiful many-branching flower which straggles all over the bed . . . a good gardener would tie these branches to a stake and so form a beautiful mass of colour and stand firm and united - what Coutts wants is that stake'.[5]

In the early 1850s Coutts Lindsay lived in Paris, where he studied under Ary Scheffer; later he moved on to Rome, where he entered the salon of Mrs Adelaide Sartoris, and made friends with various British, French and Italian artists, some of whom twenty years later were to become Grosvenor Gallery exhibitors. Coutts's continuing absence abroad may also have been the consequence of demands made on him by his mistress Lizzie Chambers, who had borne

him two children but whom he was by this stage seeking to discard.[6] Coutts's brother Bob served with great distinction with the Scots Guards in the Crimea, and was awarded the first Victoria Cross for his bravery. This may have encouraged Coutts to contemplate a return to the colours; the Crimean War was entering its final stage when in the late summer of 1855 Coutts was invited to lead a regiment of irregular soldiers of the Italian Legion. Early in 1856 Coutts and the troops under his command were transferred to Malta in preparation for action, but shortly afterwards the soldiers of the Italian Legion were dismissed and at the end of March the Treaty of Paris brought the war to its conclusion.

James Lindsay died in Italy in the autumn of 1855. Coutts transported his father's body from Genoa to Balcarres, and assumed responsibility for his widowed mother. Back in London Lindsay found himself drawn into the Little Holland House set of artists and art enthusiasts, and he entered upon a close friendship – rumoured to have been a love affair – with Virginia Somers, wife of Earl Somers. Coutts Lindsay was regarded by his contemporaries as articulate and intelligent, and as someone with modern ideas. His immediate family, however, found him difficult, and his mother was particularly concerned about the way he was growing up. In 1856 she was moved to write of him after a day or two spent together:

> He is very kind and affectionate in manner. But he keeps me in a constant state of terror. He is so different from all of us. So liberal minded – so full of progress – looks down upon us *all* as old fashioned prejudiced narrow minded people who cannot keep up with the necessities of the age. He is so fluent and clever that you always – however you may know you are in the right – find yourself in five minutes quite in the wrong box . . . It is provoking that everyone should spoil him for he has an over opinion of himself and of his own powers. At the same time he has a most kind heart and I verily believe would do anything I asked him to do as a kindness – believing me at the same time to be a prejudiced old woman for wishing it . . . If he were not my son I should think him quite delightful.[7]

Money was always a problem for Coutts Lindsay. Although his mother and father owned between them fine houses in London and Scotland and could afford to collect works of art and live in relative comfort, they were not rich by the standards of their class. As a young officer in the Grenadier Guards Coutts Lindsay had occasionally lost heavily at cards, and on other occasions had been unable to settle his mess bills. In a letter to his father in which he pleaded his excuses, he expressed the belief that 'it seems as if the money had melted away from my hands'.[8] After his father's death, Anne expressed her fears for her son's future: 'He has the full intention of making himself acquainted with his affairs. In theory he has the utmost contempt for money. But I think he would probably spend a great deal.'[9]

In the late 1850s Lindsay made designs for a scheme of murals for Dorchester House, the palatial residence in Park Lane of the husband of his sister Mary, Robert Holford, and these were enthusiastically commented upon by a fellow member of the Little Holland House set, George Frederic Watts. In 1859 he made a series of designs for Minton's pottery. In 1862 Lindsay exhibited at the Royal Academy for the first time. The following year he offered a testimonial to the Royal Commission which was then considering how the Academy could be made more responsive to artistic needs. Lindsay believed that the existing institution should be expanded into a public body, under royal charter, of which there would be as many as 400 members representing every walk of artistic life and including foreign artists, views which placed him in association with the most advanced opinion. Lindsay continued intermittently to submit works to the Academy summer exhibition selection committees – portraits of Lord Somers and of Lindsay's wife Blanche, as well as works entitled *The Good Shepherd* and *The String of Pearls*, were shown there between 1866 and 1870. He continued to try his hand at pieces of criticism, although few of these were ever published. Around 1868 he wrote a long essay analyzing 'the progress made by the British school of Oil-painting during the last decade.'[10] This gives some idea of the tenor of Lindsay's thoughts and his hopes that the Royal Academy in its new quarters in Burlington House might offer greater opportunities to a wider range of artists. Having described the strengths of the rising school of painters of Ideal subjects – centred around Leighton and Watts – he concluded:

> Finally, the general direction of the school broadens towards a more liberal view of the profession, and many shackles are already broken; the others will soon fall; the several close societies which have upheld their own interests to the

exclusion of the outer world are changing their construction; the large galleries now opened to the public will give unlimited space to the yearly art-productions of the country without favour or affection – and the great desideratum for Art, namely, its publicity in a fitting place for its appreciation, will from henceforth be secured.

The academicians hardly thanked him for his approval. In 1872 his works were rejected, supposedly as a revenge on their part for a speech Lindsay made at a South Kensington Museum prize-giving ceremony in which he was mildly critical of the teaching methods followed at the Academy Schools.

Coutts Lindsay was perhaps encouraged by his family to look for an heiress for a wife. In 1864 he seemed to have made a successful match when he married Caroline Blanche FitzRoy (figure 3), the daughter of the late Henry FitzRoy MP, and Hannah FitzRoy, who was born Hannah Mayer Rothschild. Blanche was both accomplished and self-willed. Her family, particularly her Jewish maternal grandparents, were opposed to her marrying Coutts Lindsay (as they had similarly resisted her mother's match with Henry FitzRoy), but she was undaunted by their disapproval. She shared Coutts Lindsay's passion for the arts. In due course the couple assumed a prominent position in the fashionable life of the period; they entertained lavishly both in London, at their house in Cromwell Place, and at Balcarres, and they numbered among their friends many eminent painters.

If Lindsay was in some way discontented with his lot it may have been because he doubted whether his own abilities as an artist were equal to the role he had assumed as luminary and radical in the aesthetic sphere. Married to a wife who was both an artist (as a young woman Blanche had been permitted to study painting at Heatherley's School of Art) and a socialite, and with her great fortune at his disposal, he was more than ever ambitious to gain the centre stage of British artistic life. In the autumn of 1875 the painter Charles Hallé – son of the German-born musician and founder of the Hallé Orchestra, Sir Charles Hallé – was invited

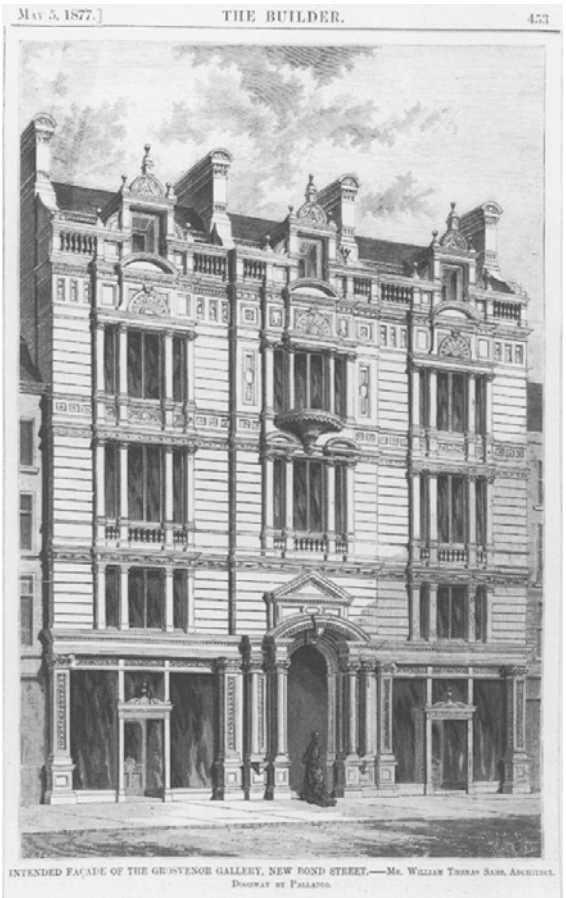
3 Thomas Buist, *Sir Coutts and Lady Lindsay*, carte-de-visite portrait photograph

to stay at Balcarres, so that Lindsay might discuss with him how together they might organize an exhibition of paintings and sculpture by contemporary British and foreign artists. In the course of these conversations the idea emerged of a permanent gallery where annual exhibitions might be held, and for this purpose Lindsay offered to contribute £100 p.a. towards the cost of renting a gallery in London. Hallé undertook to try to find suitable premises, and to determine which artists might be ready to participate.

Building the Grosvenor Gallery

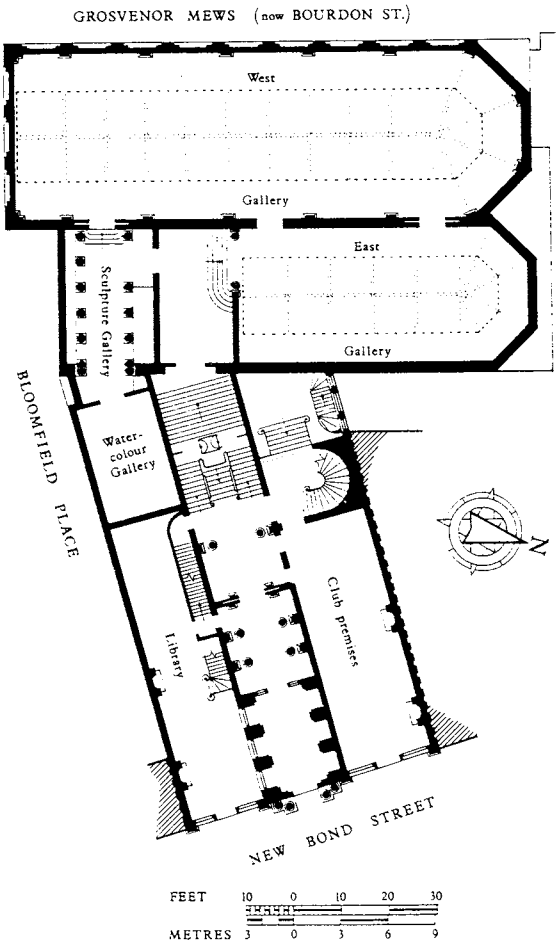
When it became clear that no satisfactory gallery was available, Lindsay took the decision to build one from scratch. A frontage was found on the west side of New Bond Street, immediately north of the narrow entrance to Bloomfield Place, and where previously three houses, numbers 135, 136 and 137, had stood on land belonging to the Corporation of the City of London. A particular advantage of the site was that it opened up at the back to incorporate the yards, stabling and outbuildings of a number of other houses to the north. It was on this ground, which belonged to the Grosvenor estate, that Lindsay intended to build the main exhibition galleries. A virtually unknown architect, William Thomas Sams, was commissioned to design and supervise the construction of the building; the firm of builders G. H. & A. Bywater began work in June 1876 and the building was virtually complete by the time the gallery opened in May 1877. Neighbours protested against the new construction on the grounds of loss of air and outlook; Lindsay crushed these objections by buying up the leases of their houses, and in any case he had gained approval for the scheme from the ground landlord, the Duke of Westminster. As a further precaution, extra teams of builders were brought in to finish the work before planning restrictions could be enforced.

The Grosvenor Gallery's façade on to New Bond Street (figure 4), which was dressed in Portland stone, represented an unhappy amalgam of architectural elements, the overall impression of which distracted from, rather than suggested, the building's purpose.[11] On the street level two plate-glass shop fronts appeared on either side of a marble portal, rescued, it was said, from Palladio's church of Santa Lucia, which had recently been demolished to make way for the Venice railway station. A mezzanine, two principal storeys, and an attic with gabled dormers rose above this.



4 *The façade of the Grosvenor Gallery*, line engraving

Windows framed with elaborate pilasters, divided by horizontally banded stucco, were distributed over the three wide bays of the building's frontage. The exterior of the rear part of the building was more austerely treated as a tall blind arcade of red bricks with white glazed brick infilling.[12]



5 *Grosvenor Gallery, plan in 1889*

6 *The Grosvenor Gallery, West Gallery*, line engraving

The interior of the Grosvenor Gallery was decorated in a grandiose Italianate style.[13] A vestibule furnished with green Genoese marble columns led to an imposing flight of stairs which rose up into the newly constructed block, behind the row of existing buildings in New Bond Street, the galleries of which were at first floor level (figure 5). At the head of these stairs the visitor might either turn right, up a further flight of steps into the East Gallery, or left into the Sculpture Gallery. From each of these galleries, doors led into the West Gallery (figure 6), the Grosvenor's principal and most prestigious exhibition space, which was aligned on a north – south axis. Here more architectural trophies were incorporated: the gilded Ionic pilasters which had previously decorated the entrance of the old Italian Opera House in Paris were used to divide the walls. The ceiling was coved along its length; the central area formed a longitudinal skylight of the type used at the South Kensington Museum; supporting this glazed roof were friezes by Lindsay depicting cherubs and cupids holding festoons of fruit and flowers; on either side were concave panels representing the phases of the moon – painted, according to Walter Crane, from designs by Whistler.[14] The walls of the West Gallery were covered with a crimson silk damask which was reputed to have cost more than £1,000. A dado was set low on the walls, and consisted of a richly carved rail and bunched folds of green velvet. Also on the first floor was a gallery for the display of water-colours, which was hung with green silk, a library and offices. On the floor below the main galleries was a dining-room.