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APOLLO

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Student debt



Among the challenges faced by museums in recent months has been the disruption to their education programmes. Back in April, widely reported layoffs of education staff at a number of international museums, among them MoMA, were a harbinger of the turmoil that the museum sector was about to face. At those museums that have since reopened, physical school visits are widely unavailable. At the time of writing, UK government advice – insofar as it is intelligible – does allow for ‘non-overnight domestic educational visits’, but it is understandable that institutions and schools are proceeding with caution.

Many museums have migrated their direct educational work online, offering virtual tours, lectures, workshops and the like. Some of the resources thereby created will hopefully prove not just a stopgap until some measure of normality returns, but also offer a future reserve for those teachers and students not within easy travelling distance from the institutions that have made them available. Many arts institutions have also taken the opportunity to encourage creativity at home. One of those arts leaders to have been recognised in the Queen’s Birthday Honours list this autumn is Sally Shaw, director of First Site in Colchester, who in the early days of lockdown devised a free-to-download art activity pack for children and young people, ‘Art is where the home is’, which has thus far reached 70,000 households.

For all the value of such projects, let us hope that schools and more young people will be able to return to museums and galleries soon. Art in person has a presence, an aura – call it what you will – that is lost in pixilation. For those of us who are going to museums, it may for now be an unusual treat to stand in front of great works with so few fellow visitors; but the unfamiliar silence of previously busy galleries is also a reminder of who is missing out on them. The relative absence of children from the National Gallery this autumn was writ large to me when I took my seven-year-old god-daughter to see its Artemisia Gentileschi exhibition (see Reviews, pp. 80–81). Was she really the only child in the museum?

For all that more people may be engaging with museums online than ever before,

trying to widen access to their physical collections must feel like a Sisyphean task at the moment. With online booking systems and other obstacles in place, I suspect that current audience demographics are heavily weighted towards middle-class visitors who had decided long before the current crisis that museums were places they couldn’t do without. The suspension of school visits will be widening the education gap. Let us hope that this is only a short-lived step backwards.

On the subject of education, in late September I spoke at an event celebrating the students who had recently completed A-level and EPQ qualifications in art history through Art History Link-Up (AHLU), a charity that provides these courses for free to young people in state education who would not otherwise have the opportunity to study the subject (according to the AHLU website, only eight state schools in the country offer it at A level). From the last cohort, all had been awarded their anticipated grades and several have recently embarked on degrees in art history at leading universities. Eighty students, the majority from widening participation backgrounds, have just started the course for 2020–21. With luck they will be able to return to physical lessons in the National Gallery and Wallace Collection before long.

This was a hybrid event, with the speakers, including a number of students, addressing a small audience at Christie’s in King Street and broadcasting to other students and supporters via Zoom. For me, it was one of the most optimistic moments of recent months. To hear three students in conversation about what art history had come to mean to them pointed to an emboldened, progressive future for the subject. And it was a joy to listen to three young women eloquently discussing paintings from an upcoming modern British art sale, in front of the works in question – an instructive demonstration of how ideas form in the process of close looking and, in the perspectives these students opened up for me, a heartening reminder of how education is a two-way street. In committing resources to students, we can all learn from them. **A**

Thomas Marks, Editor