



ANTHONY BLUNT

*Courtesy of the Courtauld Institute of Art*

# Anthony Frederick Blunt

## 1907–1983

### Introduction

IT IS MORE than thirty years since Blunt died, too long for the kind of appreciation normally accorded to the recently dead, yet perhaps not quite sufficient for him to have receded far enough into the depths of time past for the abnormal circumstances of his life to be reviewed without disturbing the calm detachment needed for straightforward historical research. He is still, though only just, within the living memory of those who could be said to have known him at all well, and the embers of feelings that once ran high in the aftermath of his exposure in 1979 may be rekindled by this belated reopening of the inquest. It is not meant to be an exculpation of his clandestine activities, though it may seem like that to some, since it attempts to correct the disproportion between the attention that has been given to the spying episode, and his academic life and career. It is still possible for this to be done, though there are few of us left who had insight into, or sympathy with, his thought world, and time is running out.

The reasons why art history has been consistently underrated or ignored in the literature about Blunt are that the authors have not been art historians themselves, and that the art historians of the Courtauld Institute who could have done something about it declined to do so. Even Miranda Carter, who in her admirable biography made a determined effort to ensure that her readers were aware that there was an art-historical side, seems to have done so in order to moderate the all-importance of the spying, instead of from a realisation that it was the core activity, and the

spying peripheral.<sup>1</sup> A glance at the chronology should make that obvious. When he died in 1983 Blunt was nearly 76. His life divides into two nearly equal parts in 1947, when he took up the directorship of the Courtauld. The whole of the later part was preoccupied with art-historical matters. His involvement with Soviet intelligence lasted less than ten years of the first part, in fact the actual espionage was effectively confined to the five years that he spent in MI5 during the war, when art history was on hold. The rest of the first part was a preparation for the second.

Put like that, the spying was not ‘another life’, but an integral episode in his one and only art-historical life, and how to make sense of that is the besetting problem about Blunt. Figuratively it might be seen as a malignant cancer which, after a short period of activity, was in remission though not dead and, in the end, destroyed him. But a descriptive analogy, however graphic, is not an explanation. One does not take up spying in the way that one gets cancer. There were serious reasons for his decision to spy for Russia, and there is abundant evidence from both MI5 and Moscow that he did so with the zeal of a dedicated communist.

Relocating art history to the centre of attention does not make it any easier to understand how Blunt squared this particular circle, but it does get the perspective right in which the enigma should be seen. And, if nothing else, by bringing art history out of the shadow of the spying, it allows due acknowledgement to be made of what he achieved in the academic field, which is, or should be, the principal concern of the Academy.<sup>2</sup>

## Up to the war

Blunt’s parents were late Victorian middle class, not wealthy, but eminently respectable and well connected. His father was a clergyman; his mother was the daughter of a magistrate in the Indian civil service, and a distant relative of Princess Mary of Teck, who married the Duke of York, later King George V. Anthony was their third and youngest son, born on 26 September 1907. The family background was predominantly Church of England. His paternal grandfather had been the suffragan Bishop of Hull, and in an earlier age one at least of the brothers would have gone

<sup>1</sup>M. Carter, *Anthony Blunt, His Lives* (London, 2001).

<sup>2</sup>For a summary of the debate on his fellowship in 1980 see Peter Brown’s contribution to the memoir of Sir Kenneth Dover—D. A. Russell and F. S. Halliwell, ‘Kenneth James Dover 1920–2010’, *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy*, XI (2012), pp 153–75.

into the Church. But the mind-set of the new century was moving away from religion and all three turned their backs on the clerical profession. The eldest, Wilfred, took up art and ended as art master at Eton; Christopher went into the city, but found time to make a name for himself as a distinguished numismatist.<sup>3</sup> Anthony's academic vocation was in no way exceptional.

There was one black sheep among his relatives: Wilfred Scawen Blunt (1840–1922). Not that he was in any way close, and his parents almost certainly made every effort to keep his face turned firmly to the wall. The one thing they could not do, however, was to inoculate their sons against the contagion of his notoriety—he was too well known, too much talked about. Scawen Blunt cultivated the image of an anti-establishment bohemian dilettante. This began with his conversion to Catholicism, and proceeded step by step down the road to perdition, which he delighted in parading before the public, to the outrage of his respectable relatives. He was not much interested in the visual arts, but his offences included open approval of dissident and avant-garde poets such as Yeats and Ezra Pound, who were far better known than painters. It is unlikely that young Anthony ever met him, but that did not matter. It needed only the inevitable curiosity of prurient schoolboys about his name to alert him to the existence of an alternative life style.

In 1911 his father became chaplain to the British Embassy in Paris, and the family went to live there for the next decade. It was during his boyhood years in France, mainly in Paris, that his life-long interest in French art and architecture began. When the war ended, Blunt was sent to a prep school in England, and in 1920 he won a scholarship to Marlborough College, as his brothers had done before him. He was at Marlborough for five years.

In 1973, when the Courtauld summer school which had planned to go to Cyprus was aborted on account of the Turkish invasion, an alternative programme had to be improvised at short notice, and Blunt agreed to give a lecture on his early life at school, university and up to the Second World War. It was repeated at the Institute in 1974, shortly before he retired, and that time it was recorded.<sup>4</sup> In retrospect it can be seen that the account was very carefully tailored. For obvious reasons one whole chapter was simply left out, along with details that would have been superfluous. But with these

<sup>3</sup>See I. Stewart, 'Christopher Evelyn Blunt 1904–1987', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 76 (1991), pp. 347–81.

<sup>4</sup>Courtauld Institute Archive, no accession number.

reservations, there is no reason to doubt the essential accuracy of what he tells us about the formation and development of his ideas about art.

The greater part of the lecture was taken up with his time at Marlborough. In the history of the College, Blunt is briefly mentioned as one of a group of ‘aesthetes’, along with Louis MacNeice and John Betjeman, who, among other things, were responsible for a short-lived magazine called *The Heretick*.<sup>5</sup> In the lecture he fills in some of the details, and they sound a pretty stropic lot, hell-bent on mischief-making at the expense of their bêtes-noires. But he also amplifies the connotation of ‘aesthetes’. This was more than just a schoolboy affectation; it meant that they had discovered Bloomsbury. In the 1920s Bloomsbury was still the latest thing in fashionable intellectual circles, and that was clearly how it appeared to these precocious sixth formers. It allowed them to feel superior, and provided them with coherent sets of ideas that were shocking to their elders who did not know how to answer back. Bloomsbury was a kind of aesthetic ideology, which in its Cambridge brand made contact with the ethical philosophy of G. E. Moore. Not that the Marlborough aesthetes got that far. MacNeice and Betjeman were interested in its literary theories; for Blunt it was the artistic doctrine of ‘significant form’, preached by Roger Fry and Clive Bell.

What he understood by the ‘significance’ or ‘purity’ of form was not really made clear in the lecture, but whatever else it may have been, formal properties were the only ones that mattered in deciding whether a work of art was good or bad. They didn’t take risks. The all important thing was to get the answers right; that put you among the angels, so in practice Blunt took his cue from Roger Fry, which meant that Cézanne was the peak of excellence, and the pre-Raphaelites were uniformly execrable. He candidly admits that they were extremely dogmatic, extremely intolerant and extremely naïve. At Marlborough they were cocooned in their certainties. Politics were never discussed, the rest of the world did not exist. And, rather surprisingly in view of his remarks about the school, ‘we were very happy’.

These were the views they took with them when they went up to university in 1926, MacNeice and Betjeman to Oxford, Blunt to Cambridge. It might have been expected that with his command of French he would opt for modern languages, but in the event he got a mathematics scholarship to Trinity. This was passed over in silence in the lecture. Until the post-First World War years, Marlborough had a poor record in Oxbridge

<sup>5</sup>T. Hinde, *Paths of Progress* (London, 1992), p. 148.

scholarships.<sup>6</sup> The dramatic improvement was largely due to the headmaster at the time who encouraged academic ambitions in potential high flyers, and Blunt was evidently considered to be one. His maths must have been good if Trinity was prepared to take him. It was the prestige subject at Cambridge, and the reputation it acquired through a succession of distinguished mathematicians—Bertrand Russell, G. H. Hardy, J. Littlewood, S. Ramanujan, Ludwig Wittgenstein—made it the Mecca for those aiming for the top. Blunt was ambitious enough, but if he was hoping that maths was the route, he was in for a shock. He was very unhappy during his first year,<sup>7</sup> which suggests that he was out of his depth, and when at the end of it he took part one of the tripos and only got a second, he gave up. He switched at once to modern languages and with his customary ease got the first that had been anticipated.

Whether art history played any part in his decision to do languages is an interesting question. There is no compelling reason to think that it did, but there are indications that it might have done. Ostensibly his second language was Italian, which was almost as perfect as his French, and Italian art and architecture were as prominent as French in his subsequent art-historical career. But for the degree it was German. The explanation could be that German was the language of the principal art-historical publications, and that Blunt was already thinking of an academic future in that field.

In 1927 that would have been a very risky gamble without a private income, which Blunt did not have, unless he was aware of a possible development that was still at the exploratory stage, and almost certainly under wraps. At that time no British university had an art history department. There was a widespread feeling that it was not a fit subject, but part of the know-how of practical activities that lay outside the realm of thought and language. Its only *raison d'être* was as an asset in the operations of the art trade and, if it had to be taught, the proper place was an art school.

This attitude was poles apart from the dominant perception of art history in Mitteleuropa, where it had come to be held in high regard as one of the humanities, and an integral part of the concept of *Bildung*, i.e. shaping in the sense of cultivating the well-rounded personality of a civilised human being. In 1810, when he presided over the establishment of the new University of Berlin, Wilhelm von Humboldt took *Bildung* to be the fundamental purpose of a university education. Under this generous

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>7</sup>Carter, *Anthony Blunt*, p. 46.

remit, the visual arts of the past could take their place alongside literature, religion and philosophy in the accredited achievements of the human enterprise that are worth studying for their own sake. This gave art history its academic legitimacy.

There were a few academics in Britain who knew about this Continental alternative, and would have been delighted if it could displace the ingrained, insular prejudice; but they were too few to get anywhere themselves. The initiative had to come from outside the universities, and in 1927 there was a glimmer of hope. Lord Lee of Fareham began to seek support for his idea that an academic institute for the study of the history of art should be set up somewhere in the country. Lee was not thinking of the Continental model. He saw his institute as a way of improving the competence of the trade, perhaps because he had been badly stung by wrong attributions when he was collecting the pictures that he donated to Chequers. There was also the example of the dealer, Joseph Duveen, who fortified his attributions with the magisterial judgements of the distinguished American art historian, Bernard Berenson. It took Lee four years to bring his proposal to fruition, but in 1931, with the financial support of Samuel Courtauld, who put up most of the money for the endowment, and the good offices of Sir Robert Witt, the Courtauld Institute of Art in London University came into existence. After a brief stay at the Adelphi, it moved to 20 Portman Square, Courtauld's town house which he vacated when his wife died in 1932. It was to be the Institute's home for the next fifty years, and Blunt's for the twenty-eight years that he was director.

If he was aware of the Courtauld project as early as 1927, Blunt must have been told about it by someone in the know. My guess is that this was Andrew Gow, a classics don at Trinity. Gow had a formidable reputation, austere and caustic as a person, exact, meticulous and hypercritical in his scholarship. The clarity, though not the prolixity, of Gow's scholarship rubbed off on Blunt's own. Gow's other distinctive trait was his interest in the visual arts. In the course of his life he assembled a notable collection, mainly drawings, much of it with Blunt's advice. It was this that brought them together. One of the classics masters at Marlborough who had encouraged Blunt's exploration of the avant-garde art world may have contacted Gow to ensure that he had a sympathetic *patron* when he went up to Cambridge. If so, he succeeded. Blunt had an almost filial devotion to Gow that lasted a lifetime, and it was reciprocated. In 1965 Gow moved from his rooms in Trinity, and the Courtauld photographers were sent to photograph some drawings that had been left behind. Almost everything had gone, but on the mantelpiece was a faded postcard of a

group of youthful freshmen, with Blunt among them, the most youthful of them all.

Gow was in touch with the London art market, and well-placed to pick up rumours of what Lord Lee was trying to do. He also had the weight needed to persuade the French department to allow Blunt to write his post-graduate thesis on a highly unorthodox art-historical subject: Poussin and his Italian literary sources. It was accepted in 1932, and Gow may have been instrumental in making sure that it found its way to W. G. Constable, the first director of the Courtauld, who was very impressed. From then on the way to the Courtauld was wide open.

There was no mention of any of this in the 1973 lecture. Gow was still alive then, and the absence of his name has been construed as implying that he had been involved in the spying business, though I doubt it.<sup>8</sup> If nothing else there would have been confirmation from Moscow, and no shred of it has ever surfaced. Gow's main role in Blunt's life was as a benign facilitator, though it is quite likely that he helped to focus his sights on the European perception of art history as one of the humanities. At first, however, Blunt may have found it difficult to distinguish that idea from the thought world into which he was about to be drawn.

According to Blunt, 1933 was the year in which Marxism hit Cambridge. This is where, with the benefit of hindsight, it can be seen that the narrative has been tailored. He gives the impression that his Marxism was quite innocent, like catching the common cold, something that happened to 'every intelligent undergraduate' in that year. There were just minimal references to the Marxists with whom he was acquainted at Trinity, notably Guy Burgess. Allegedly the sole importance of Marxism was its devastating impact on the aesthetics of Bloomsbury. Almost everything that had been taken for granted at Marlborough was now rejected out of hand, and superseded by an entirely new set of criteria for judging works of art. The aesthetic idyll was confronted by the harsh political realities of the outside world. Pure form gave way to socialist realism, and art acquired a mind-shaping function. It came reinforced by an ideological doctrine that really did put art into history, as that was understood by the party pundits. It was heady stuff for immature minds, barely out of adolescence, all the more so for being the first political movement to equip itself with a fully worked out philosophical underpinning, to which its critics had no answer.

<sup>8</sup>B. Sewell, *Outsider II* (London, 2012), p. 138.



In the lecture Blunt gives the impression that his reactions were immediate and total, like a religious conversion. In the event, however, it was not quite like that. He never actually joined the party, and he never subscribed to the Marxist interpretation of art and art history. There were equivocations which suggest that unlike the commitment of his colleagues Burgess and Philby, which was total, his was always qualified. My guess is that his sights were already too firmly fixed on the Courtauld to risk jeopardising the prospect of a future there. As with many bright young men at the time, his affectation of Marxist sympathies was viewed with indulgence by the Establishment, and put down to youthful idealism he would grow out of. No man of his demeanour was ever less convincing as a would-be communist.

However, he did try. At the end of 1932 Blunt became art critic of *The Spectator*, and from then until the war there was a steady output of journalism, dogmatic and judgemental in tone, deliberately provocative, controversial, even offensive in its avant-garde pugnacity—in other words a repetition on a grander scale of his early efforts at Marlborough and the complete antithesis of his later writing style. It was left-wing from the start, and only became overtly Marxist after 1936. The critical moment was his review of Picasso's *Guernica* in the Spanish Government's pavilion at the Paris international exhibition in 1937, which he praised as an expression of the horror of right-minded people at the barbarism of the fascists in the civil war, but found wanting for doing nothing practical to help the Republican cause.

The Spanish Civil War was a turning point for Blunt in many ways. It marked the moment when the politics of the external world began to intrude on the enhancement of his art-historical education, which had been going on alongside the journalism throughout the thirties. Not that it impeded progress. On the contrary, it added a measure of urgency, which conspired to make it desirable that certain arrangements should be clarified before the big war began and everything was shut down for an indefinite duration.

Turning himself into a qualified art historian was a self-managed exercise for Blunt. It was centred on the Poussin thesis and the enlargement of part of it into his first book, but it was mainly a matter of broadening the horizons of his experience, both visual and intellectual. Gow introduced him to Renaissance art, and Constable at the Courtauld put him in touch with Walter Friedländer, who was the leading expert on Poussin. But by far the most important factor was the arrival in England in 1933 of the Warburg library from Hamburg, together with the community of scholars

attached to it. They were mostly Jewish and all formidably learned. In 1937 Blunt left Cambridge and came to London. He went straight to the Warburg, where the director Fritz Saxl created a sinecure for him, and the next two years were an intensive introduction to German art history. The Warburg library was a revelation to him. It must have been a humbling experience to discover the vast resources of historical material that were at the disposal of Warburg scholars which exposed his journalism as crass juvenilia, and made it only too clear that the art of the past was a closed book to him.

The Warburg was also an insulation against the extreme forms of Marxist art history. It was in London that Blunt made contact with Friedrich Antal, an émigré Hungarian who came to England in 1934. He was a hard-line communist, now remembered, if at all, for a remarkable study of early Renaissance painting in Florence, in which the dialectic was used to collate the avant-garde style of Masaccio with the emerging capitalist economy of the city.<sup>9</sup> They must have discussed this highly theoretical approach and, given Antal's overbearing personality, he would undoubtedly have tried to turn Blunt into another hard-liner. If so, he failed. In the introduction to his first book Blunt acknowledges Dr. F. Antal 'for instruction in a method which has, I fear, been applied in an only too slipshod manner ...'.<sup>10</sup> But if he got nowhere on the theory front, Antal may have put ideas of another sort into Blunt's mind.

Blunt's move to London in 1937 was almost certainly connected with events at the Courtauld. In that year W. G. Constable resigned as director. From the start there had been latent friction between him and the founding fathers over the basic policy of the Institute. Constable resented the sneer that the Courtauld was a young ladies' finishing school and wanted to develop the postgraduate side to improve its academic standing, perhaps even to make it entirely postgraduate. Lee, Courtauld and Witt, fearing that he would turn it into something as exclusive as the Warburg, were determined to keep the undergraduates and to attract students from the widest possible sections of society. Constable's resignation was probably not meant to be taken seriously, but it was accepted, and the question of who should succeed him became important. It seems to have been agreed that Blunt would eventually be the man for the job. He was already lecturing there, but in 1937 he was still considered to be too young—he was not

<sup>9</sup>F. Antal, *Florentine Painting and its Social Background: the Bourgeois Republic before Cosimo de' Medici's Advent to Power, XIV and XV Centuries* (London, 1947).

<sup>10</sup>A. Blunt, *Artistic Theory in Italy, 1450–1600* (Oxford, 1940), p. vi.

yet thirty. Finding a *locum tenens* was not easy, but in the end T. S. R. Boase from the Oxford History School, and totally unqualified as an art historian, was willing to do it for a short period, probably two years, until Blunt was ready. The likely date for him to take over was the autumn term of 1939; the war broke out on 3 September.

### The spying issue

In the brouhaha that erupted after his exposure, someone asked Blunt why he had spied for the Russians, and his rather flippant reply was 'for the hell of it, I suppose'.<sup>11</sup> It was the sort of answer that was guaranteed to exasperate his inquisitors, but I think it was his evasive way of declining an impossible task: how to explain to an audience that lived in a different world, and knew no history, that what now seemed like blatant treachery could once have seemed an intelligent course of action. He revealed a little more at the press conference held five days after Mrs Thatcher's statement in the Commons, when he said that he 'bitterly regretted what he had done' and now 'realised that he had been totally wrong'. As an all-but confession of his iniquities, this had a hollow ring, and no one was taken in by it. Blunt was never remotely repentant in that sense. But that is not what he meant, and if the linking word had been 'because' instead of 'and' the meaning would have been clearer. What he regretted was getting it wrong. Getting it wrong inflicted a wound on his innermost being that would never heal, and it happened twice: first about Russia; and then about Poussin after the exhibition at the Louvre in 1960. For a man who spent his life trying to get at the truth of things, to have failed twice, once in each of the fields to which he had committed himself on the certainty that his insight could be trusted, must have been excruciating. Blunt was a proud man, quite unable to forgive his own failures.

How he got himself into the situation that ended with his disgrace can only be surmised. One assumption is fairly safe. When the first contacts were made, the likelihood that they would lead to the kind of spying that Blunt did was infinitesimal. The Marxism to which he succumbed in 1933 had much more to do with the Comintern than with Russia. The Comintern existed to promote Communist revolution in countries world-wide, not to make them into Russian satellites, and it was behind the widespread feeling on the political left in Britain before the war that a revolution was

<sup>11</sup> Carter, *Anthony Blunt*, p. 491.

inevitable and imminent. This was when Blunt first knew Antal. Antal had a political past. In 1919 there was a short-lived Communist *coup d'état* in Hungary, led by Béla Kun, a Lenin type of hardliner, in which all private art collections were promptly nationalised, catalogued and put on exhibition. Antal was in charge of this operation, and one might wonder whether Blunt ever saw himself as commissar of culture in a future Communist government, empowered to follow Antal's example; though it can never have been one of his more realistic expectations.

Blunt may have been under pressure from Burgess to commit himself before he left Cambridge, but it was the Spanish Civil War that brought things to a head. In 1962, I was in Versailles with him, getting illustrations for his book on Poussin, and in the first real conversation I ever had with him he asked me what my views were about the Civil War. I told him that I thought both sides were as bad as each other: 'Ah,' he said 'for us it was the moment of truth.' I did not know him well enough to take it any further, but in retrospect that is precisely what it was: the pivotal moment when indecision turns into purposeful activity. For intellectuals like Blunt the Spanish Civil War transformed the communist party from an agency for social change in domestic politics into the physical arm of resistance to the onward march of fascism on the international stage. The failure of the western democracies to lift a finger to help the legitimate government of the Spanish republic left the issue clearly defined as an ideological conflict. Spain was seen as the prologue of the greater war that was shortly to break out, and the obvious conclusion was that the only great power with the will and the means to take on the fascists was Soviet Russia. Two of his Cambridge friends, John Cornford and Julian Bell, were killed in Spain, and he may have been stung by the taunt: what were you doing about it? At any rate, in 1937, when he got to London, he was recruited by the NKVD, the Russian intelligence service, for clandestine work in the future, as yet unspecified. By what must have been a coincidence, no sooner was Blunt recruited than the NKVD's operation in this country was closed down and remained dormant for the next three years.<sup>12</sup> During this time the Comintern was converted into an instrument of Soviet foreign policy, and Blunt took the opportunity to acquaint himself with serious left-wing thinking about the international situation.

I do not know whether Blunt ever read a book by E. H. Carr called *The Twenty Years Crisis, 1919–1939*. It was written between 1937 and 1939, and published at the outbreak of war. For most of the twenty years

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 181–2, 198–200.

Carr was a civil servant in the Foreign Office, and he retired in order to write his book. Philby, who was in the Foreign Office when he was there, must have known him, and he made no secret of what it was about. Ostensibly, it purported to be an impartial examination of British foreign policy between the wars in the light of what he called the science of international politics; but in effect it was the damning exposure of a preference for pussy-footing with pious hopes instead of facing up to the realities of the situation created by the peace treaties. This was a clear sign that the effort to win the First World War had irretrievably drained the reserves of British power, and that the great power status that Britain had enjoyed since Waterloo was coming to an end. The fiction was maintained in the book, but the true state of affairs was shortly to be revealed to the world by Britain's ignominious expulsion from Europe at Dunkirk, and confirmed two years later by the disastrous surrender at Singapore, which sounded the death knell of the Empire.

If the spies had ever been called to account for their conduct, Carr's analysis provided a viable explanation for what they did. Britain was finished; there was only Russia. At the outbreak of war Blunt volunteered for the military police, and was in France with the army when the Germans struck. He got out through Boulogne, just in time, under no illusion that the situation was extremely precarious. It was then that he applied to MI5, and was accepted, presumably on the strength of his languages. He was already established there when the NKVD came back to life, and his spying career began. There was almost certainly a fortuitous element in this conjunction of circumstances, though he took full advantage of it. He probably did find spying exhilarating, and considered it his personal contribution to the war effort. The thanks he received from Russia for information that helped them to win the decisive tank battle of Kursk in 1943 must have given him particular satisfaction.<sup>13</sup> There is no doubt that he was in breach of the law, but it does not follow *ipso facto* that he was a traitor—which is not to say that he was never guilty.

Up to a certain point, perhaps after Kursk, when it at last became evident that the Russians were going to win their war, and the prospect of a communist Europe became a distinct possibility, Blunt might have hoped that he was going to be justified by events. But what the spies failed to foresee was that the Americans would come in and take over from the

<sup>13</sup> Carter, *Anthony Blunt*, p. 270; C. Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm: the Authorized History of MI5* (London, 2010), p. 280.

British in the west. This completely upset their calculations. Insofar as they thought at all about the Americans, they seemed to be safely locked up in their isolationism. The success of the Anglo-American invasion of 1944 ensured that when the war ended, at least the western half of Europe would be kept out of Russian hands, and the conditions were in place for the ideological war between left and right to be continued, albeit with the roles reversed and in non-violent form, for another forty-five years.

It had not been meant to end like this. When Blunt resigned from MI5 in 1945 the cold war was already in its early stages and he must have been apprehensive that the switch from Russia the ally to Russia the notional enemy would inevitably cause MI5 to take a close look at what he had been up to during the war. It was not long before he was under suspicion, and the unending rearguard action to keep exposure at bay began, at precisely the same time that he took up his appointment as director of the Courtauld Institute.

### Blunt at the Courtauld Institute

Blunt became director of the Courtauld in October 1947. The Institute had been kept open for all but the first year of the war in a state of suspended animation, due largely to the efforts of Margaret Whinney, one of the old staff, a nucleus of which was still there when he took over from Boase. But almost at once he embarked on what was in effect a fresh start, the tone of which was set by his first two appointments.

In entirely different ways, these must have seemed peculiar to most people. The first was Johannes Wilde, ethnically German but a Hungarian national. He came from Vienna in 1939, and the one thing about him that would have been known to British immigration was that he had been Antal's assistant in Béla Kun's short-lived communist government in Hungary after the First World War. Whether he was ever a communist is doubtful, but the taint stuck and it helped to get him interned and deported to Canada in 1940. Thanks to influential friends in England he was allowed to return in 1941, and it was then that Blunt got to know him.

What mattered for Blunt was that Wilde spent eighteen years between 1920 and 1938 in the art-history world of Vienna. After the failure of Béla Kun's coup, it was expedient for Wilde to get out of Hungary, and a timely invitation from Max Dvorak at the University of Vienna enabled him to do so. Dvorak, who was impressed by his early work, had plans for Wilde

at the university, but he died the following year and they came to nothing. Short though it was, the contact was long enough for a bond of like minds to form, and Wilde was as much a personal friend of Dvorak's as his intellectual heir. He spent the next eight years getting Dvorak's posthumous papers into print. The first set appeared in 1924 under the title *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte*, which became the label for the point of view that Dvorak ended up trying to promote.<sup>14</sup>

Dvorak seems to have been one of the few really creative minds in the Vienna School, where well-established lines of thought came together, shedding fresh light on old subjects, and detecting the presence of unsuspected stylistic refinements such as 'mannerism' lurking in the borderland between the great conceptual entities. Wilde plunged into this exhilarating ferment of new ideas in his capacity as Dvorak's literary executor. But what set him apart from the rest of the younger art historians was the decision he made in 1923 to leave the university for the Kunsthistorisches-museum, where during the next fifteen years he made a systematic study of individual paintings in the collection. In other words, for Wilde the works of art took precedence over the ideas that were exemplified in them. It was this forensic approach that convinced Blunt that Wilde should be the cornerstone of art history at the Courtauld.

Blunt's second appointment was totally out of character. This was Christopher Hohler, who succeeded Boase as the house medievalist. Like Boase, Hohler was a product of the Oxford History School, and Boase had known him as an undergraduate. During the war he was in military intelligence in the Middle East, and Boase met him out there in 1943. Four years later, when he left the Courtauld to return to Oxford, he remembered Hohler's intensely personal perception of the Middle Ages, and I suspect that he thought it would be no bad thing if an insular maverick were there to offset the Continental bias that he saw in Blunt's first appointment. It is said that when Boase put the offer to him, Hohler protested that he knew no art history, to which Boase replied: 'that's all right Christopher, you know everything else, you'll soon pick it up'; a fair indication of what the Oxford History School still thought about art history. At the time Hohler had no prospects of a job, and decided to give it a try. He stayed for over thirty years.

It is doubtful whether he ever did pick it up. He never thought of himself as an art historian, and was totally uninterested in artists, craftsmen

<sup>14</sup>M. Dvorak, *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte*, Johannes Wilde (ed.) (Munich, 1924), p. 169, nos. 1, 4.

or style. In his later years he made no secret of his intention to protect the Middle Ages from art historians who knew nothing—which was not a bad description of what he was doing during the whole thirty years. Put like that, it sounds as though he was out of place at the Courtauld, but turned around it could be construed as an inverted plea for medieval art to be seen as an integral part of everyday life in the Middle Ages, which is not all that far from the Dvorak–Wilde position. In Hohler’s hands ‘everyday life’ meant top people who could afford to surround themselves with status symbols in the form of art objects of every kind, from castles at one end of the scale to cutlery at the other.

How Blunt got on with Hohler, and vice-versa, is another puzzle. Hohler’s politics must have been anathema to Blunt and in the house they had little to do with each other. I wonder whether Boase knew more about Blunt’s wartime activities than has been made public. Behind his bland façade, he was very shrewd, and it would be like him to get a man from military intelligence into a position where an eye could be kept on a suspect from MI5. But there is no proof.

Despite their differences, the triumvirate of Blunt, Wilde and Hohler set the tone of the place during the first fifteen years of Blunt’s tenure. Brian Sewell, who was an exact contemporary of mine, summed it up extremely well in his autobiography:

... art history was the history of painting, sculpture, architecture and associated skills, from the ... Italian Renaissance ... to the present day; it was the history of those who worked in those fields; it was the history of patronage from the Church, the state and individuals; it was also the history of nations, dynasties, the middle classes and the poor, the history of political ambitions and the conflicts of religion—it was indeed the history of history itself. We recognised art’s connections with literature and music, theology and heresy, philosophy and theory.<sup>15</sup>

Suitably amended, a medievalist would concur with every word. In effect, it was the blueprint for a *Bildung* education.

Something of this sort might be seen as the Institute’s mission statement, but Blunt and Wilde had something else in mind as well. They were on the lookout for the high flyers who would go on to do research, and eventually join the teaching staff as new specialisms formed and the syllabus expanded. Courtauld students were under continuous assessment of a very discreet kind. The principal talent spotter was Wilde, though Blunt always had the last word. During the 1950s a succession of students of the

<sup>15</sup>Sewell, *Outsider II*, p. 141.



requisite calibre duly surfaced: John White, Michael Kitson, John Shearman, Alan Bowness, Andrew Martindale, Michael Hirst—all of whom were members of the teaching staff at some time; two of them, John White and John Shearman, were entirely home-grown, the rest were Oxbridge postgraduates. I think I must have been the only one of Hohler's students who eventually made it on to the teaching staff, though George Zarnecki and I were *de facto* members long before we were formally co-opted.

In those days there was no such thing as competition for places. Blunt and Lionel Robbins, who became chairman of the Management Committee in 1948 and remained there for the rest of Blunt's time, ran the Institute like a private fiefdom. You were simply invited. They knew what they wanted; it saved a lot of trouble. None of the new recruits was a replica of his tutor. They chose their own research topics, were never coerced, and left to develop at their own pace. By the 1960s they were ready to take charge of the subject. Wilde had retired in 1958, and his influence began to fade. Blunt's own position imperceptibly changed.

The enlargement of the teaching staff was one of a series of mutually connected expansions. The primary one was the steady increase in student numbers. In 1938 there had been forty-five; when Blunt retired there were 220. By the 1960s the pre-war syllabus no longer coincided with what students wanted. There was a tidal wave of interest in twentieth-century art, to cater for which entailed the complete restructuring of the entire course. The Renaissance lost its privileged status, and modern art was put on equal footing with the earlier periods. Blunt's *Guernica* lecture became an annual event, but he was happy to leave the rest of the subject matter to Alan Bowness.

Art history was a worldwide success story in the second half of the twentieth century, and the prestige of the Courtauld brought growing numbers of overseas students to the Institute. Many of them came to the annual summer schools, started in 1957, which were the direct result of Blunt's personal friendship with Barbara Robertson, a relative of Roger Fry, and the wife of Charles Robertson, the jam manufacturer. They continued until 1981. Starting in Bath, the school went to many countries in Europe and beyond. The student traffic went both ways. Courtauld graduates found jobs in the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand; members of staff took an active role in the increasing number of international conferences; and Blunt himself was honoured by the rare distinction of being invited to preside over the major exhibition of Poussin's paintings at the Louvre in 1960.

At home the glory days of the Courtauld probably peaked during the last decade of Blunt's regime. This came in the wake of the Robbins report of 1963, which led to the setting up of a series of new universities, most of which wanted departments of art history. Blunt was invariably consulted about the staffing, and the outcome was a scattering of Courtauld enclaves across the country. Older universities which had art history departments felt it incumbent to recruit Courtauld graduates, and most of those that had so far done without, like Cambridge, made good the deficiency. At first sight it looks very impressive, but it was an ephemeral ascendancy. The proliferation of Courtauld progeny soon put an end to Courtauld pre-eminence, and in the 1970s the flow of ready money began to dry up. Blunt's retirement in 1974 coincided closely with the end of an era.

The one thing, apart from the spying, that is generally known about Blunt is that he put art history on the academic map, and this alone would be sufficient for him to be remembered with respect. But whether, or how much of, the expansion was due to him is another matter. It was certainly not something that he set out to do in 1947, and once the ball was rolling it gathered momentum of its own accord. In effect he was the managing director of the only firm in the business that could have done the job and, that said, he handled the expansion with exemplary competence, in the best interests of the subject rather than the Courtauld. But I do not think that this was what he wanted to be remembered by.

When he returned to his academic life after the war, Blunt was obliged to devote a good deal of time and effort to the task of keeping a substantial part of his personal life very private indeed. Even what was nominally open to public scrutiny was bewilderingly enigmatic to those who had known him before the war. The contrast between his pre-war and post-war personas was a consummate performance of the dissimulation techniques and self-control that he perfected in his MI5 days. The confrontational journalist with Marxist sympathies simply evaporated—a wartime casualty. The fledgling Warburg scholar survived, but he had matured into a man of the world beyond the university, and was no longer just another academic don. The students at the Institute recognised this. Except in classes where he could let his guard down, they saw him as a somewhat remote, Olympian figure, hinting at connections which they took to be with the higher echelons of the social order. Quite correctly, Blunt surmised that if he was under suspicion of treason, there was no better place to be than in the Establishment itself. Services to the royal family at the end of the war opened the way to his appointment as Surveyor of the King's Pictures in 1945; a knighthood followed in 1956. After his exposure he claimed that

he had never wanted these honours, which may be true. Nevertheless, he did want it to be widely known that he had them. For the same reason he took on all manner of public commitments to augment the image that functioned as protective clothing. But authentic academic honours came his way as well, offered and accepted as due recognition of his contribution to the world of learning. Foremost among these were his election as a Fellow of the British Academy in 1950 (followed by service on its Council and from 1965–6 as a Vice-President), and his appointment to the French Légion d'honneur in 1958. There was any number of honorary doctorates.

The nurture of his good name on the public stage was a necessity, but one that wasted far too much of his time. Blunt was only really happy when he was doing research. He was one of those true intellectuals for whom there is no experience to compare with the eureka moment, when an obsessive problem finally dissolves into a pattern of intelligible connections. This was the Warburg scholar in Blunt, or the adherent at one remove of Max Dvorak's school of thought, and he wanted above all to round off his career as an art historian with a tour de force in which the paintings of one of the world's great artists would be shown to be a complete vindication of this approach. This was, of course, Poussin.

Among his many publications are five books, four of which could, in varying degrees, be seen as preparation for the fifth. The first was the work that came out of his fellowship dissertation; the second was a monograph on Mansart, Blunt's counterpart to Poussin among the architects who were his contemporaries; the third was a catalogue of the French drawings in the royal collection at Windsor Castle, many of which were by Poussin.<sup>16</sup> Most of the work on these books was done before the war. The fourth book was *Art and Architecture in France, 1500–1700* for Pevsner's Pelican History of Art series, in which Mansart and Poussin were located among their artistic peers.<sup>17</sup>

The last of his Poussin studies was the magnum opus. It did not appear until 1967, seven years after the exhibition at the Louvre, by which time his critics were well prepared. Blunt never changed or concealed his perception of Poussin: 'To appreciate him as an artist, it is essential to understand the intellectual climate in which he worked, and the ideas—religious,

<sup>16</sup> Blunt, *Artistic Theory*; A. Blunt, *François Mansart and the Origins of French Classical Architecture* (London, 1941); A. Blunt, *The French Drawings in the Collection of His Majesty the King at Windsor Castle* (Oxford, 1945).

<sup>17</sup> A. Blunt, *Art and Architecture in France: 1500–1700* (London, 1953).

philosophical, or aesthetic—in which he believed, and which affected his method of work as well as his paintings.<sup>18</sup> In other words pure *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte*. As a display of Blunt's erudition, his Poussin book probably is the masterpiece that he always wanted to write, but if he expected the art world to fall about in agreement with his cerebral reading of Poussin and that 'it would soon be taken for granted everywhere',<sup>19</sup> he was on an ego trip. This naïve streak in Blunt was his Achilles' heel. Worse still was the criticism on stylistic grounds of his chronology of the paintings, which in the end he reluctantly had to admit was right. He took this very badly. His *amour propre* as an art historian was bruised, and it punctured the confidence with which he had identified himself with Poussin throughout his life. It hurt so much that for once his perfect manners failed him, and his behaviour in dealings with Denis Mahon was regrettably peevish.<sup>20</sup> He was never the same again.

I think it was no accident that Blunt's last major book was a study of the Italian architect, Borromini, 'one of the greatest—perhaps the greatest—genius of Baroque architecture. Furthermore he was a neurotic and unhappy man, constantly dogged by disaster.'<sup>21</sup> The book was about the genius rather than the darker side of Borromini's life, but it was based on the last series of lectures that Blunt gave at the Courtauld before he retired, and they were rather different. I heard those lectures. His usual dry, objective style was notably absent; instead we got a vivid sense of the empathy he felt for a man whose abstract forms so eloquently expressed the pain of personal misfortunes. For Blunt, that made him a perfect surrogate. As a farewell to the Courtauld it was distinctly low key, but that was not entirely out of character. He preferred to slip quietly away.

Blunt's private duel with MI5 went on throughout his directorship. He was under suspicion from the start, but there was no evidence that could be used in court, and it became a question of whether he would confess. After the defection of Burgess and Maclean in 1951 there was no longer any doubt, and after Philby's defection in 1963 there was no longer any point in holding out. MI5 got their confession in the following year in return for a promise of immunity. But that was not the end of the interrogation. MI5 was not interested in an exposure that would merely reveal their own incompetence, but they did want details and the names of anyone

<sup>18</sup> A. Blunt, *Nicholas Poussin* (London, 1967), p. ix.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. x.

<sup>20</sup> For an account of the disagreements with Mahon, which ran for several years, see Carter, *Anthony Blunt*, pp. 421–35.

<sup>21</sup> A. Blunt, *Borromini* (London, 1979), p. 13.

else who was involved, and on that Blunt remained silent. The constant pressure inevitably wore him down. His health was affected, the consumption of alcohol escalated, but he might have got away with it had it not been for the American Freedom of Information Act, over which MI5 had no control. His name was mentioned by someone he had recruited at Cambridge in the 1930s.

The exposure, when it came in 1979, was the nemesis that had been threatening to overtake him for more than thirty years. He could be thankful that his life's work had not been contaminated, and perhaps that is why on this occasion his behaviour was immaculate. The calm stoicism with which he took the only course open to him, which was to ride out the storm without making any effort to defend himself, may not have won him many friends, but it did preserve his integrity, and infuriate the media. The issue may have lapsed, but no settled verdict has ever been reached. Personally, I suspect that historians in the future will be less censorious than his contemporary critics, and see his decision in 1940 to spy for Russia as his way of trying to keep the war against fascism going, at a time when most right wing opinion in the country was prepared to give up and get on with the Germans. He may have been naïve, but who is to say that his misreading of the situation was any worse than theirs?

His art-historical legacies are also equivocal. As I was in a different branch of the subject, I can only offer personal opinions on their lasting value. I have always felt that his best work was in architecture, revaluing underdogs like Mansart and Borromini, or resurrecting the virtually unknown Sicilian, Rosario Gagliardi. His reading of Poussin was far too closely bound up with his identification of himself with the artist to stand a chance of being accessible to a wider public. One would have to be another Blunt to see the connection between the paintings and the intellectual milieu. Denis Mahon was not that sort of man. An Anglo-Irish spokesman for the traditional English instinct to rate seeing above thinking, he probably won the argument on this side of the Channel. In France the issue may still be open. There was no French translation of the Poussin book in 1997, and the situation does not appear to have changed.

On the other hand, Blunt's search for evidence that sheds light on the meaning of works of art put him in touch with Michael Oakeshott's dictum that history is inference from evidence, and that has endured. Post-Blunt research students are second to none in trawling the archives for the last scrap of information that might have a bearing on their subject, and though historians have no use for style it is evidence, and cannot be excluded. They may misuse evidence, or wilfully ignore evidence that

endangers their pet hypotheses, but those are occupational hazards to which all branches of history are exposed. Perhaps Blunt's most important achievement was that he did more than anyone else to break down the prejudice in British universities that art history is not really history, and to secure a rightful place for it among the humanities.

Anthony Blunt died on 26 March 1983.

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