



Review: Malcolm Quinn, *Utilitarianism and the Art School in Nineteenth-Century Britain*

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This is a fascinating, original study. It penetrates to the radically democratic core of Bentham's aesthetic ideas. Deemed pure philistinism by many an anti-Benthamite, these were imperfectly grasped and followed through on by many of Bentham's own followers. In a keynote quote from Bentham's *Rationale of Reward*: "Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry. If the game of push-pin furnish more pleasure, it is more valuable than either." This does not mean that Bentham dismisses the aesthetic. In fact, he calls for government support of arts education, for instance, naming the Royal Academy of Arts as a body proper to support. Quinn details the push by 19th C. Benthamites for state fostering of education in the arts. His focus is the visual arts, and he makes a contribution comparable to Franklin Court's in *Institutionalizing English Literature*, which treats Utilitarian efforts on behalf of literary study. Quinn shows strong beginnings, traditionalist opposition, conceptual faltering and revisionism, bold advance, but ultimate foundering.

Bentham is always hyper-alert to the dynamics of interest and the ability of the powerful to press their own interests at others' expense. "Sinister interest" is frequently embedded at a level that is unaware, impervious to critique. It is "interest-begotten prejudice," operating through tradition, language, taste. To set "prejudice apart" is very difficult, but Bentham believes it can and should be done. Looking to expose the complacency and snobbery in "good taste," he delivers a humorous shock to ordinary

thinking when he lines up push-pin for comparison with music and poetry with the only standard of judgment to be the quotient of pleasure rendered.

Quinn unfolds a history from the creation of the Select Committee on Arts and Manufactures of 1835-36. Well stocked with Utilitarians, such as William Ewart and John Bowring, it paved the way towards foundation of the first publically funded art school, The School of Design, in 1837. But the Constitution of the School's governing council became a battleground. Ewart and Bowring wished to promote standards of taste along democratic lines but were unable to define what those might be as against the traditional standards that the Royal Academy stood ready to provide, with the prestige it enjoyed from royal patronage and aristocratic connections. Academicians gained ascendancy on the council, insuring that the School of Design would not threaten the Royal Academy as the stronghold of high-art standards and would be restricted to turning out "ornamentalists."

The next important development was formation of the Department of Practical Art in 1852 for the purpose of redirecting the School along the original Benthamite path. The key leader was Benthamite Henry Cole. Cole aimed to promote elementary instruction in drawing and modeling and provide instruction in practices of ornamental art, with resulting advantages to manufacturing, while the centerpiece of his reform effort was to advance "the Art-Education of the whole people." This required reengagement with the issue of aesthetic standards, which were to be determined according to utility and not the "interest-begotten prejudice" of high-class, high-art advocates and manufacturers and artisans accustomed to accommodate a distinction between elite and

mass taste. Such standards were to be taught not only to practitioners but also to the public.

Cole's approach was through exhibition. He launched exhibitions in 1852 as teaching occasions for students in the School and for the public at large. Student work was presented along with the models used in instruction—an ornamental cast collection and arts of manufacture. Cole sought to make evident the disparate interests entering into design, those of manufacturer, artisan, and consumer. While he articulated principles of excellence, posting them in wall-mounted texts, the primary lesson of an exhibition was the importance of wide survey, comparison, and critical thinking. He included negative examples in a “chamber of horrors,” as a *Times* article called it, also capturing the point that the school “afford[s] the public the opportunity of testing the accuracy of the canons it enforces.” Dickens makes wonderful fun of the “chamber of horrors.” A householder returns home to find he “had been living among horrors up to that hour.” His wife and daughter are surrounded by them. He is agonized by horror when his daughter approaches the piano. This is satire, but it might be offered in support of Quinn's contention that Cole teaches a true “testing” of aesthetic standards. Can the householder continue to live in a state of pure recoil following the shock to his former principles of taste? Might he start thinking for himself?

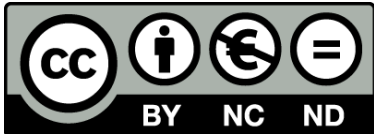
Cole's experiment ultimately came to grief. This was in 1875 with the retirement of his close collaborator as Director of Art at South Kensington (the current exhibition venue) and the installation of a loyalist to the high-art tradition as Director and Principal of the National Art Training School. The experiment foundered amidst incomprehension

and resistance in high places, complicated administrative shuffles, and revisionist backsliding among Benthamites.

Quinn references Mill's essay on "Bentham" and other writings for feeding an idea of Bentham as philistine defender of push-pin as against the arts. He might have addressed Mill's comments in "Utilitarianism" on "higher" versus lower pleasures, enjoyed by "higher," more cultivated faculties. These indeed seem to affirm a hierarchy such as Bentham humorously prods us to reconsider. William Stanley Jevons, in *Methods of Social Reform*, brings the matter more directly to visual arts education and South Kensington. He sees no educational benefit in a "nightmare" array of heterogeneous objects viewed by heterogeneous people interested only in passing the time. Jevons holds that exertion is essential to attainment of pleasure of "the highest grade." According to Quinn, Jevons does not want a museum to indulge working-class aesthetic inertia but to set standards according to the expertise of artistic professionals, thus demanding a more effortful, in effect, higher-class response.

But does Bentham or Cole make things easy? To set prejudice apart is not easy. It requires critical thinking to consider the merits of push-pin or the "horrors" of one's home décor.

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