

# A Victorian Entrepreneur's Extraordinary Collecting Project

By TIM BARRINGER



**Editor's Note:** Now touring the U.S., the exhibition *Paintings from the Reign of Victoria: The Royal Holloway Collection*, London features 60 canvases, most not seen outside England before. Dr. Barringer's article is adapted from his introduction of the authoritative catalogue that accompanies the project, and therefore references several essays also in that publication. Details on where to see the exhibition and purchase the catalogue appear below. Located in Egham, Surrey — 19 miles west of London — Royal Holloway College is a branch of the University of London and currently has an enrollment of 7,700 students who originate in 120 countries.

The climax of any visit to Royal Holloway College is its lofty picture gallery, with works crowded in true Victorian fashion across darkly colored walls. The overall result is a magnificent assault on the senses: a veritable Babel of narratives, colors, and textures competing for the viewer's attention in a clamorous marketplace of the visual.

Something of the kind could be also seen at the Royal Academy's great summer exhibitions around the time the pharmaceutical manufacturer Thomas Holloway (1800-1883) amassed his large collection — in the astonishingly short period between May 1881 and June 1883. Queen Victoria herself was impressed by the "fine specimens of modern art" that Holloway had accumulated when, in 1886, she officially opened the college and saw these works in the same room they inhabit today. <sup>1</sup>

## PATENT MEDICINE FOR SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Holloway's philanthropic endeavors, inspired and encouraged by his wife Jane, were directed toward perceived social problems in Victorian Britain. First, he built a sanatorium in Surrey for people suffering from severe mental illnesses. <sup>2</sup> But more elaborate were the plans for Holloway College, which was founded in 1879 "to afford the best education suitable for Women of the Middle and Upper Middle



WILLIAM SCOTT (1819-1905)

THOMAS HOLLOWAY

1845, OIL ON CANVAS, 45 1/2 X 33 IN.

WILLIAM POWELL FRITH (1819-1909)  
*THE RAILWAY STATION*  
 1862, OIL ON CANVAS, 46 x 101 IN.

Classes.”<sup>3</sup> This offered a partial solution to the “woman question” that so exercised the mid-Victorians: the idea that there was a surplus population of women with neither domestic nor professional capabilities. Careful to ensure that his benefactions made the maximum impact, Holloway sought advice from the leaders of two other educational institutions for women, Vassar College in America and Girton College in Cambridge.

The idea of adding a picture gallery came quite late in the planning of the college, but once he had settled on it, Holloway pursued it with customary vigor, despite having reached 80 years of age. It was a radical scheme since, as art historian Dianne Sachko Macleod, PhD, notes, this would become “the first art gallery in Britain specifically created for female viewers.”

Holloway was the epitome of the Victorian capitalist. Although contemporary accounts portrayed him as a self-made man, many aspects of his life-history are shrouded in myth. Most crucially, he came up with the recipe for a patent medicine, Holloway’s Pills, a panacea that became proverbial throughout the British Empire for its curative properties, particularly for digestive disorders.

Holloway’s philanthropic impulses represented a piecemeal approach to social problems, rather than a single panacea. Undoubtedly he achieved lasting effects: His sanatorium did not close until 1981, while Royal Holloway, now a co-educational college within the University of London, is one of Britain’s premier academic institutions. The exhibition now touring the U.S. — and its accompanying publication — afford a chance to review Holloway’s achievements as a collector and, more significantly perhaps, to look at a collection of Victorian art that does not reflect the hierarchies imposed by subsequent curatorial taste.

EDWIN LANDSEER (1802-1873)  
*MAN PROPOSES, GOD DISPOSES*  
 1864, OIL ON CANVAS, 36 x 96 IN.





## A VICTORIAN SAATCHI

This is by no means a predictable collection. Neither, as Macleod explains, is it simply an indexical reflection of everything to be found on the London market in 1881-1883. Holloway was very much his own man. Although he stunned the art world by spending £84,000 on 77 paintings within two years, Holloway's passion for the visual was not the lifetime preoccupation of the true collector. He by no means suffered from that happy disorder that Macleod has elsewhere described as "the psychopathology of the collectomaniac."<sup>4</sup> Rather, he was a determined man with a point to prove. At his home in Berkshire was a large collection of Old Master paintings, including such celebrated masterpieces as Giovanni Bellini's *St. Francis in Ecstasy* (c. 1460) and Gerard David's *Deposition* (c. 1510-1515), both now in The Frick Collection in New York City. London's National Gallery, however, was already well established as a repository for the "Foreign Schools."

The collection for the college, by contrast, was clearly premised on a wish to trace the development of *British* art. Like his predecessors, John Sheepshanks and Robert Vernon, whose collections went to what are now the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) and Tate, Holloway aimed to demonstrate the triumph of the British School in the present

day, a parallel phenomenon to the triumph of British commerce (of which he was an architect and a beneficiary) and of the British Empire.<sup>5</sup> Sheepshanks and Vernon's treasures have been absorbed into the massive collections of large institutions, yet Holloway's remain together as a group and can be seen as such in the exhibition now touring the U.S.

Holloway chose to introduce the British School with landscapes and rural imagery. Among the most important works he purchased was Thomas Gainsborough's *Peasants Going to Market* (c. 1768-1771), in which a hopeful farm-boy sits backward on his horse, the better to stare at the demure beauty riding next to him. Holloway's purchase of John Constable's *Sketch for a View on the Stour near Dedham* (1824) represented something of an avant-garde choice, as appreciation of such "sixfoot" sketches would not become widespread until the 1890s. The triumph of the British School was undoubtedly enshrined in J.M.W. Turner's *Van Tromp Going about to Please his Masters, Ships at Sea, Getting a Good Wetting* of 1844. This historical landscape demonstrates Turner's unparalleled mastery in representing the sea, a high point in British art recognized by the Victorians thanks largely to the eloquent championship of John Ruskin.

Quite controversially, these three benchmark works — the Gainsborough, Constable, and Turner — were sold by Royal Holloway



EDWIN LONGSDEN LONG (1829-1891)  
**THE BABYLONIAN MARRIAGE MARKET**  
 1875, OIL ON CANVAS, 68 x 120 IN.



College, with permission from Britain's Charity Commissioners, in 1992-1993 as a response to the crisis in British universities. <sup>6</sup> This was found necessary in order to protect key aspects of Royal Holloway's educational mission no longer adequately supported by government funding. They do not, consequently, form part of the present exhibition; but their shadows remain. <sup>7</sup>

Holloway was energetic in his collecting of the successors to Constable and Turner in the genre of landscape. In the catalogue, Andrew Wilton eloquently assesses this aspect of the collection, noting that Holloway veered away from artists whose works took up the more radical implication of Ruskin's writing. <sup>8</sup> Typical of Holloway's taste are artists of an earlier age such as Ruskin's teacher, Anthony Vandyke Copley Fielding, and accomplished men of his own generation such as John Linnell and Thomas Creswick, whose deftly constructed landscapes offered a tranquil alternative to the harsh modernity of the Victorian city.

Other names in the collection — such as the Scots Peter Graham and John MacWhirter — are worthy candidates for reassessment, capable of stark and dramatic compositions such as the latter's *Spindrift* (1876). <sup>9</sup> Many of the landscapes collected by Holloway depict rural life and, in doing so, as Christiana Payne notes, they tend to emphasize "the benefits of a simple existence in the countryside rather than its drawbacks." Like many wealthy Victorians who had made their fortunes in the city, Holloway retired to rural seclusion in Berkshire, and clearly appreciated artistic constructions of the simple rural life that were a far cry from social and economic conditions in England's villages during the long agricultural depression that had begun in 1872.

#### TELLING TALES

The greatest strength of the Holloway collection lies in its figure paintings, most marked by a strong narrative element. As Mary Cowling makes clear, Holloway generally preferred genre scenes of everyday life,

JOHN EVERETT MILLAIS (1829-1896)  
**THE PRINCES IN THE TOWER**  
 1878, OIL ON CANVAS, 58 x 36 IN.

LUKE FILDES (1843-1927)  
*APPLICANTS FOR ADMISSION TO A CASUAL WARD*  
 1874, OIL ON CANVAS, 54 x 96 IN.

or historical paintings notable for their reconstruction of the quotidian details of another period, rather than the promotion of grand, abstract themes such as Reynolds had advocated. His collection excels in the currently unfashionable category of historical genre, from Edwin Long's elaborately descriptive (and frankly anti-Catholic) *The Suppliants: Expulsion of the Gypsies from Spain* (1872) to John Everett Millais's iconic *Princes in the Tower* (1878), a work whose sentimental appeal to the viewer is — contrary to modernist opinion — entirely consistent with its superb artistry.

However, the most startling and original works in Holloway's collection are those that interrogate the very city in which he had made his fortune, London. William Powell Frith's *The Railway Station* of 1862 was already almost two decades old when Holloway bought it; something of a period piece, it was well known to the world through the steel engraving deftly marketed by the art dealer Victor Flatow.<sup>10</sup> As Mary Cowling writes, Frith's painting is a compendium of ethnic and social types from the mid-Victorian city, replete with fragmentary, miniature narratives. Its view of the contemporary world is ultimately a celebratory one, despite occasional hints of anguish and alienation that flash across a few faces among the Dickensian cast of characters.

By contrast, Holloway also bought two more recent paintings that essay a darker and more affective social realist style, Frank Holl's *Committed for Trial* (1878) and Luke Fildes's *Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward* (1874). These works survey a range of characters who have fallen on hard times, some as a result of their own ineptitude (like the comical drunk standing among the indigent in Fildes's depiction of the homeless in a snowstorm) but others (like the honest workman holding a baby) dislocated by the forces of Victorian free-market capitalism.

But the strangest and most disturbing work in the collection is Edwin Landseer's monumental canvas of 1864, *Man Proposes, God*



*Disposes*. One can only imagine the effect that Holloway might have believed this work would have on the minds of the “Women of the Middle and Upper Middle Classes” who first beheld it at Egham. (Even today, it inspires superstition in the students who find themselves seated close to it, while taking their final examinations in the Gallery.) The title suggests a conventional assertion of the divine ordering of things, and the painting may represent an updating of Turner's favorite theme, the “fallacy of hope,” or the foolishness of human aspiration. It depicts polar bears devouring the surviving remnants of Sir John Franklin's doomed attempt to discover the Northwest Passage begun in 1845.

Given this context, one is tempted to see the work as an allegory of the free market — the economic and social forces that consigned the starving applicants to the casual ward while it also provided Thomas Holloway with massive wealth from the sale of perhaps fraudulent medicines. Landseer's Darwinian vision of the brutal and merciless competition between living things, a spectacular history painting for the age of capital, was enshrined at the very heart of Holloway's philanthropic educational establishment for young ladies. It may be interpreted as both an allegory of the processes by which Holloway had become rich, and a demonstration of his beneficence in disposing of that fortune.

#### POST-MODERN VICTORIANS

Holloway's pictures, the architecture framing them, and the donor's pious, didactic impulses undoubtedly epitomize everything that modernists found risible in Victorian culture. How wrong they were — and are. That spectacular room in Egham is alive with themes and strategies that once again preoccupy artists at the beginning of the 21st century. The eclecticism of styles; the focus on the human body, and on questions of ethnicity and gender; the love of masquerade, of covering, uncovering, and re-covering identities; the outbursts of rage at social inequality; the insistent interrogation of national identities and a melancholy preoccupation with loss, whether of time or place: these are concerns that ricochet around the displays of the Venice



JOHN MACWHIRTER (1839-1911)  
*SPINDRIFT*  
 1876, OIL ON CANVAS, 32 x 56 IN.

JOHN CALLCOTT HORSLEY (1817-1903)  
**THE BANKER'S PRIVATE ROOM: NEGOTIATING A LOAN**  
 1870, OIL ON CANVAS, 40 x 50 IN.

Biennale or *Documenta*, the great bazaars of contemporary art, yet they can all be found in Holloway's collection.

Through sheer force of spectacle, works such as *Man Proposes, God Disposes*, *The Railway Station*, and Long's meticulously researched but essentially imaginative reconstruction of the ancient world, *The Babylonian Marriage Market* (1875), seem to will into existence the high-definition visual world of cinematic Technicolor or the digital fantasy-land of the Internet. Such works truly belong more vividly to our world than modernist exercises in paint for paint's sake from the last century. ■

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## Endnotes

My thanks to Jason Rosenfeld for commenting on an earlier draft of this text.

- 1 Quoted in Jeannie Chapel, *Victorian Taste: The Complete Catalogue of Paintings at Royal Holloway College* (London, 1982), 14.
- 2 The biographical material on Holloway here derives from Chapel, *Victorian*



*Taste*, 9-15, and from T. A. B. Corley, "Holloway, Thomas (1800-1883)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004 [oxforddnb.com/view/article/13577, accessed 10 Jun 2007]. See also Anthony Harrison-Barbet, *Thomas Holloway: Victorian Philanthropist* (2nd ed., 1994).

- 3 Quoted in Chapel, *Victorian Taste*, 11.
- 4 Dianne S. Macleod, "The 'Identity' of Pre-Raphaelite Patrons" in *Re-framing the Pre-Raphaelites*, ed. by Ellen Harding (Aldershot, 1996), 13-15. The phrase is quoted from Emily Apter.
- 5 Vernon's collection was the subject of an important exhibition in 1993. See Robin Hamlyn, *Robert Vernon's Gift: British Art for the Nation 1847* (London, 1997).
- 6 The Turner is now in the Getty Museum and the other two are in private collections.
- 7 See Anonymous, "Betrayal of Trust," *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. CXXXV, no. 178 (Jan. 1993), 3.
- 8 See Tim Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* (New Haven, 1989), chapter 2.
- 9 See Tim Barringer, *Opulence and Anxiety: Landscape Paintings from the Royal Academy* (Warwickshire, 2007).
- 10 See Jeremy Maas, *Gambart: Prince of the Victorian Art World* (London, 1975), 135-137.

**Information:** Organized and circulated by Art Services International (Alexandria, Virginia), Paintings from the Reign of Victoria: The Royal Holloway Collection, London can be seen at the following venues, and additional dates on the tour are available. (Please contact dshawn@asie exhibitions.org). The catalogue that accompanies it can be ordered for \$49.95 at [artservicesintl.org/Pub/Aview.asp?ID=48](http://artservicesintl.org/Pub/Aview.asp?ID=48)

through April 12, 2009: Delaware Art Museum (Wilmington, DE)  
 May 7-July 26, 2009: Yale Center for British Art (New Haven, CT)  
 August 15-October 25, 2009: Brigham Young University Museum of Art (Provo, UT)  
 November 21, 2009-February 15, 2010: Huntsville Museum of Art (Huntsville, AL)  
 March 12-April 18, 2010: Society of the Four Arts (Palm Beach, FL)  
 May 19-July 25, 2010: Cantor Center for the Visual Arts (Palo Alto, CA)  
 November 20, 2010-January 30, 2011: Fresno Metropolitan Museum (Fresno, CA)  
 February 19-May 1, 2010: Chrysler Museum of Art (Norfolk, VA)

All photographs courtesy Royal Holloway, University of London

DAVID ROBERTS (1796-1864)  
**A STREET IN CAIRO**  
 1846, OIL ON CANVAS, 30 x 25 IN.



# Paintings That Still Matter

By MARY COWLING

“Being here has determined the course of my life,” is a comment that numerous students have made to me about their time at Royal Holloway. Holloway himself would have been delighted that his endowment continues to be so much appreciated, for he did not stint on the millions he invested in the college building, and also intended its art collection as a key element in the education of the students.

In 1887 Charles William Carey, who had trained at the Royal Academy Schools, was appointed curator of the collection. Photographs show students seated primly on little chairs in the gallery as Mr. Carey delivers his lecture. He also offered lessons in painting and drawing. One of his protégées, Kathleen Lathbury (1919-21), who excitedly recorded her first drawing class in the college magazine, later abandoned a career as a research chemist to become a successful portrait painter.

Many of the students who choose to study at the college’s Victorian Centre have been drawn to it because of the paintings. As children they had discovered major works like Frith’s *Railway Station*, Fildes’s *Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward*, and Millais’s *Princes in the Tower* through sources ranging from school history books to jigsaw puzzles and greetings cards. Nowhere could be more conducive to learning about the Victorian period than Royal Holloway, but it is not only the Victorian specialists who appreciate the paintings, because the gallery has always been at the very center of college life. At the beginning of each session, it is used as a student registry, and later in the year as an examinations hall.

Since the college first opened, the gallery has served as a ballroom (although in the early years the students were allowed only to invite their brothers), and it is also used for degree ceremonies, dinners, and other social events. The gallery acts as a rehearsal room and concert hall for the music department and is regularly transformed into a theatre for drama students by the erection of a stage at the east end. The very first theatrical performance was in October 1887, when students enacted playful tableaux based on characters in the paintings, including Millais’s ill-fated Princess Elizabeth and the conspiratorial cardinal in John Pettie’s *State Secret*. In the gallery today, watching *The Importance of Being Earnest* or a Gilbert and Sullivan opera, one feels transported to a private performance in a particularly palatial late Victorian drawing room.

The paintings are used by a number of departments for teaching, the large figurative paintings lending themselves most readily to this purpose. Long’s *Babylonian Marriage Market*, Frith’s *Railway Station*, and the social realist paintings of Fildes and Holl invite comparisons with literature, history, and drama, and also reveal much about Victorian views of subjects as diverse as the ancient world, the political and social evolution of Britain, and the role of women.



PERIOD PHOTOGRAPH OF ROYAL HOLLOWAY COLLEGE'S PICTURE GALLERY

The occasional picture has interacted particularly closely with college life. In the 1930s the custom of the “Slave Market” was established, based on Long’s painting, which shows girls being auctioned off as brides in order of beauty. At the beginning of the academic year, freshers were lined up in front of Long’s painting, for their elders, in order of seniority, to select a dinner partner. This custom was thankfully abandoned, but another one established in the 1950s, and relating to Landseer’s *Man Proposes, God Disposes*, survives to this day. Its worrying message inspired the legend that any student seated next to it in an examination would fail. The solution decided on was to cover the canvas with a Union Flag for the whole of the examination period.

The collection of paintings in its magnificent architectural setting is the most distinctive feature of Royal Holloway, and one that colors the experience of every student. All of them have good reason to be grateful to Thomas Holloway. They — and indeed Holloway himself — must be also be grateful to a former principal, Miss Janet Bacon, who in the 1940s, at a time when Victorian art was deeply unfashionable, opposed the recommendation of a college committee to dispose of, or even “give away,” a large proportion of the collection, since most of the pictures dated from “an unusually bad period of British art.” Miss Bacon predicted that their time would come, and she was right. ■

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