

In Conversation with **Sir Christopher Le Brun**

Alexander (Sami) Kardos-Nyheim

Born in Portsmouth in 1951, Sir Christopher Le Brun is a painter, printmaker, and sculptor. As President of the Royal Academy 2011–19, he oversaw the most significant redevelopment in its history, and is widely acknowledged as having revitalised its reputation. He served as a trustee of many major British art institutions, including Tate and the National Gallery. He was knighted in 2021 for services to art.

CJLPA: What do you think about the current state of the world, and art's part in it?

Sir Christopher Le Brun: The topic is so vast I'm sure you'll understand if I keep my remarks specific to art. Apart from the very many of those bravely working to keep us safe, or overwhelmed by misfortune or circumstances, our enforced isolation this year has allowed for those moments of quiet observation or exercise of imagination that have always characterised art. Many of us have become uncoupled in this period from outside work or social obligations as the circle shrank to family and home and we have come to rely more on ourselves. By contrast, the cultural world in its public aspect has been busy, seeming to queue up to embrace what might be thought of as the opposite—art as an adjunct of social or political activism.

CJLPA: Arts funding: a public or private affair?

CLB: One of the reasons I have been so committed to the Royal Academy as a private institution follows my experience of the practical difficulties faced by our publicly funded institutions. Their funding comes with considerable and, to some extent necessary, bureaucracy. The tension between these two is becoming increasingly acute. I want to stress that my remarks concern the visual arts specifically, without comment on the merit of any causes. It is primarily about their effect on the training of young artists and the practice and display of art. Those who have not sat around the table when these funding and policy conversations take place would be surprised to find that there is an almost universal consensus amongst key decision makers for what deserves support. That it renders silent a group normally so disposed to awkward individualism and freedom of thought is a further puzzle.

But current issues are bringing rapid changes, to question which few are brave or reckless enough to even try, so much so that there is now a diminishing relation between what is said or thought privately and in public. While this continues, the general understanding of what art is and how people spend their own money, remains consistently (stubbornly some might say) attached to the same few forms—primarily

of painting and sculpture—and they continue, and this is the important point, to be loved not for the issues they raise, but for their own sake.

There are surely sound reasons for the special regard in which they are held and which the events we are living through have clarified. Perhaps these reasons now deserve renewed respect. The so-called 'plastic' arts are all characterised by touch and presence—they are personal—all qualities that people are naturally attracted to and instinctively trust. Almost everyone feels what it is like to draw, to write, to make something by hand. Isn't it remarkable (and literally 'touching') that in every infant's drawing we find the least technological and most innocent of beginnings sharing the very same media that in other hands are miracles of sensibility?

It is perfectly reasonable for the income derived from popular exhibitions to cross-subsidise the introduction to the public of new things of real quality. However, it is unsettling, and unsustainable in the long term, for the intellectual basis of public funding to be tolerated in a passive sense, rather than welcomed.

CJLPA: In a revolution, statues tumble. Are we witnessing a revolution?

CLB: No, this is more like a permanent tendency that is no longer being resisted or at the least challenged properly. Art and its history are a delicately balanced system that has suffered from the continual chopping away at and clearing the ground of the larger trees, as it were. What is needed is integration rather than substitution. As the American poet Archie Ammons put it: 'How many shocks of enlightenment burn out a tradition!'

Groups and their leaders seek causes that unite them. It might be seen to be a waste of time discussing and disagreeing over aesthetic merit rather than demonstrating art's subservience to meaning and message. I'm distressed to see art's essentially spiritual nature thus dismissed.

CJLPA: Institutions such as the Royal Academy are the shapers of taste. How did you view this responsibility during your time as President?

CLB: I'm impressed that you think that is still the case! I would like to think it's true in the context of our exhibition and education programmes. I certainly had an ambitious vision for what the Academy could once more become, and I am proud to say we did drive through and transform the Academy's reputation utterly. My aim was to consolidate the RA's prestige and influence, so that artists and architects would have their own strong platform and their independent voices could contribute more fully to public policy. In relation to contemporary art, I was absolutely focussed on getting the very best artists and architects to become Academicians, not to represent our time, which would turn us into mere delegates, but to raise the quality of art—which in fact is our founding mission. We were certainly getting there by the time of the 250th anniversary celebrations in 2019, when we opened the new united campus on Piccadilly at the heart of London... I wanted the Royal Academy to be central again, both here and internationally.

But you ask an important question about the shaping of taste. If ever you wanted instant controversy, then debating 'taste' is an ideal way of getting it. If you are even able to agree broadly on terms (whose taste?), then that nicely undisturbed green field would get instantly trampled to mud, with all the participants and spectators too. It would draw attention to division because we are living through a time that is experiencing an accelerating form of 'context collapse'. Like all controversial things, taste is somehow central. In my mind I associate it with what in German is called *Bildung*, the individual soul's journey of self-improvement. What could be more important?

CJLPA: In 1863, the Paris Salon rejected the works of Courbet, Manet, Pissarro, Jongkind, and Whistler. Today's great art contests, such as the RA Summer Show, are sometimes viewed not as competitions but as lotteries. Do you think there is a risk of great works falling through the cracks? And might there be scope, as there was in 1863, for a Salon des Refusés?

CLB: Of course, things are missed. To deal with the RA Summer Exhibition first, we received over 18,000 submissions this year in all categories, and we hang about 1,000 pieces in our very large galleries, so apart from the purgatory it might inflict on spectators, the statistics alone show how overwhelmed a Salon des Refusés would be. The question I would put is rather different. What is the equivalent, what has the authority of the Salon now? It is far more likely to be state organisations and museums tasked with the collecting and promotion of art on behalf of the public. Unquestionably over the last ten or 20 years a majority of significant works will have been uncollected. To be fair, without foresight and unlimited funds, this is almost impossible to get right. But it is not helped by the increasing tendency to make decisions based on the artists themselves, rather than the quality of their works, on whether they do or do not fit the officially acceptable progressive criteria. Another difficulty may be because the already limited budget and time spent fundraising must now, as a matter of policy, accommodate collecting representative samples of art from across the entire world.

CJLPA: How do you view your place in the discourse of contemporary art?

CLB: In the musing around words and phrases that can occasionally come into the mind while painting, an imaginary essay title in the form of a rhetorical question presented itself. Most of the time, the sententious nature of these things doesn't last five minutes, but in this case, it stayed. 'What is the responsibility of English painting?' Surprisingly, the beginning of an answer came too: 'Nature is the simple responsibility of English painting...'

I feel this is a way of answering your question—which is the most difficult and that you have saved until last. The first surprise is that I even mention responsibilities, since I strongly resist the idea of burdening art with anything. The next is that the question specified 'English' painting. Why should I put it that way? We are definitely more reluctant to identify our art like this than many other countries. We have grown used to art being removed from any but the broadest of contexts, but there are few things that touch us as much as a sense of belonging. Indisputably the word carries a charge. Remove it and the question moves from major to minor, it no longer seems to matter. It is the particularity in the phrase that is striking and in fact forms the essential content. It is the lack of particularity that increasingly characterises art now.

Expanding on this topic would take me further than this interview allows. In the twentieth century, the presence of an avant-garde was the sharpest indication of an active discourse. The last time this was broadly recognised or even possible was in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the canon was essentially Western European, and the cities of its sway in the contemporary art world could be numbered on one's fingers. Exhibitions such as 'A New Spirit in Painting' in London and 'Zeitgeist' in Berlin, in which I participated, are amongst the last examples of how a close argument based on an uninterrupted history is shared from hand to hand. I have a place in that continuing discourse. It could be said it has its limitations (although that seems unduly negative for such a vast and rich field) but that is the point—that is precisely what enables depth. Depth, with its nuance and difficulty, preserves the imagination and the rare individual accent within history. It forms an effective resistance by pushing back at coercive (and frequently commercial or political) visions of reality. The many positive virtues of an ever-widening canon have to be balanced, sadly, against how much we can truly understand or experience in person. As for Nature as an answer, surely its importance is self-evident (hence the reinforcing 'simple' in the answer) and 'a sense of nature' ever more essential.

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