



MARGARET WHINNEY

## MARGARET DICKENS WHINNEY

1894-1975

MARGARET DICKENS WHINNEY was born at 19 Margravine Gardens, Hammersmith, on 4 February 1897. Her father, Thomas Bostock Whinney, was an architect, founder of the firm of Whinney, Son, and Austen Hall, notable for the design of branch banks for the London, City and Midland Bank from 1895, and many commercial buildings. Her mother was Sydney Margaret Dickens, a granddaughter of the novelist. She was educated at private schools and subsequently attended the lectures of Professor Tancred Borenius at University College, London, taking the Academic Diploma in the History of Art in 1935, in which year she joined the staff of the Courtauld Institute of Art in a junior capacity. At the Courtauld she remained for the rest of her career, developing her latent academic and teaching abilities and making an important contribution to the Institute's work as well as to the literature of art.

Whinney's first published work was a brief study of *The Interrelation of the Fine Arts in England in the Early Middle Ages* (1930), in the series of University College, London, monographs on English Medieval Art edited by Professor Borenius. Her theme was the direct translation of the motifs of one craft into another in the arts of the twelfth century, and the writing of the book no doubt gave her that sense of the indivisibility of the arts which is apparent in her later work. A preference for architectural studies soon developed, however, perhaps partly as a result of her family background, but more certainly through the presence of Geoffrey Webb as a lecturer at the Courtauld in the late thirties.

Architectural history at that time did not exist in England as an academic discipline. Webb, indeed, who had been influenced by Roger Fry, was almost the only architectural writer whose approach was coloured by the methods of continental art historians. Writing about architecture was mainly either antiquarianism or essay-writing, the former prevailing in the medieval field and the latter in the writings of such architect-authors as Reginald Blomfield, H. S. Goodhart-Rendel, and Trystan Edwards. The impact of the Warburg Institute, which arrived in

England in 1933, was only beginning to be felt when the Second World War began in 1939.

In that year the Courtauld Institute closed. Students were called up and most of the staff transferred to various war-time occupations. In 1940, however, total closure was relaxed and Margaret Whinney was entrusted with the conduct of such academic life as the times allowed. She took up residence ('camped out' would be nearer the mark) in Home House, arranged occasional lectures, and even gave tuition to such students as were able to pursue their studies. It was in these years also that she undertook a detailed re-examination of the seventeenth-century drawings, mainly at Worcester College, Oxford, and at Chatsworth, for Whitehall Palace, attributed by long tradition to Inigo Jones. The results of her researches were submitted for a D.Litt., awarded by the University of London in 1940, and were published by the Walpole Society (vol. 31) in the same year.

No serious attention had been given to these designs since J. A. Gotch, in 1912, had reached the conclusion that they were not by Inigo Jones at all but entirely the work of his pupil John Webb. In his *Inigo Jones* of 1926 Gotch adhered to this view, dismissing the statement of Colen Campbell that the set of drawings which he published in *Vitruvius Britannicus* were presented by Inigo Jones to Charles I in 1639 as clearly erroneous. This view might have continued to hold the field had it not been for the discovery by E. S. de Beer, in 1939, of a reference to a contribution of 'a very ample sum of money' by the citizens of Londonderry in connection with an incident which must have taken place in the late 1630s, the money to be devoted to a new Whitehall on a model by Inigo Jones.

The discovery seemed to invite the possibility that some, at least, of the drawings were, if not in Inigo's own hand, at least products of his thought. There are some seventy drawings in all, representing not one but an arguable number of different schemes, none represented by a complete set of drawings and only one bearing a date. The problem was to distinguish the various schemes and place them in a significant chronological order. This Whinney achieved with admirable judgement. She did not proceed to a stylistic analysis of the designs and in this respect there are still mysteries to be penetrated. But future students of these famous drawings will necessarily build their speculations on the solid chronological foundation which Whinney established.

A by-product of these Webb studies was a paper published in

1943 (*Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vi, pp. 142–50) on 'Some Church designs by John Webb'. In this, stylistic analysis figured prominently, showing that the drawings were not, as Gotch and Blomfield had tended to believe, studies for actual building projects but the products of a very immature designer, well-informed as to the major church buildings of Renaissance Italy, but still somewhat inept in his handling of architectural syntax—in short, works belonging to the apprenticeship of John Webb.

In 1950 came a picture-book of St. Paul's cathedral with notes by Whinney and in 1952 a slim paperback, *Renaissance Architecture in Britain*, in the series 'Arts in Britain', published under the auspices of the British Council in 1952. This prepared her for the major work which she wrote in collaboration with (Sir) Oliver Millar as part of the coverage planned, under the editorship of T. S. R. Boase, as *The Oxford History of English Art*. The several contributions of the two authors to *English Art 1615–1714* (1957) are not distinguished from each other in the text and as a seamless literary collaboration the book is something of a curiosity. Whinney's hand is clearly recognizable in the chapters on Inigo Jones, Wren, and Vanbrugh, which give the book an appropriate structural rigidity; while the close association of architects, masons, and sculptors in the seventeenth century involved her with a subject which, in her next work, she was to make peculiarly her own.

This was the volume *English Sculpture 1530–1830* (1964) in *The Pelican History of Art*. Here was a daunting subject which nobody had tackled. Daunting for two reasons: first because the material was widely dispersed, much of it lurking in obscure country churches or private houses, and secondly because there were plenty of people ready to say that a whole volume in the Pelican series dedicated to English sculpture was grossly out of scale with the Pelican pattern and in fact hardly worth writing. Whinney herself realized that she was mothering the Cinderella of the series and chapter I begins rather sadly: 'the history of English Sculpture in the sixteenth century is a sorry tale.'

But there was another side to the subject and to the author. As a reviewer observed (*TLS*, 4 March 1965, p. 160) Whinney was not only an art historian but a devoted Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries. If the gauche effigies on Tudor and Jacobean monuments were unimpressive as art they were, none the less, eloquent material for the lives of the nobility and gentry who fashioned and adorned the history of the nation. The fusion of

artistic and antiquarian interest made strong appeal to Whinney, as it had done to two scholars whose researches had preceded hers: Mrs Arundell Esdaile and Rupert Gunnis. Mrs Esdaile's approach was essentially antiquarian but tinged with an amiable, if sometimes slightly eccentric, passion for identifying the styles of different sculptors. Gunnis's *Dictionary of British Sculptors 1660-1851* (1953) was more the work of a connoisseur and collector, attempting to garner the lives and works of British sculptors much as Howard Colvin was doing at the same time for English architects.

Whinney's approach was neither of the antiquarian nor the collecting kind, notwithstanding her sympathy with both. Her method was strictly that of the art historian. Her book was to be the companion of Ellis Waterhouse's *Painting in Britain 1530-1790* (1953), one of the first Pelican histories to appear, and Waterhouse's crisply elegant handling of a vast quantity of factual material clearly had its influence. The structure of the book, too, reflects Waterhouse. There are seven parts (Waterhouse, stopping at 1790, has six), each part containing a series of short monographic chapters. A comparison of the two books, published eleven years apart, brings out some of the historiographical changes of the decade. For instance, where Waterhouse introduces his Part 5 as 'The Classical Age', with a brief account of the arrival in England of history painting and the type of painting made primarily for public exhibition, Whinney entitles her equivalent Part 6 'Neo-classicism' and introduces it with a longish excursus involving Clement VII, Mengs, Winckelmann, and Piranesi, as well as Sir Joshua Reynolds. Clearly, between 1953 and 1964, the Neo-classical explosion had happened and the lamps had been lit which were to blaze so splendidly at Burlington House in 1972.

*Sculpture in Britain* was well received. Thoroughly researched, scrupulously accurate, richly and intelligently illustrated, it is also a pleasure to read. Whinney's critical assessments are no mere academic sing-song: they have 'bite'. The things which she discusses have been felt as well as observed. She can make us look again at sculptors long ignored and attract our sympathy, for example, to Francis Bird's pedimental sculpture at St. Paul's, which most of us have been conditioned (by Horace Walpole among others) to pass blindly by.

Whinney's next publication was a catalogue, compiled in collaboration with Rupert Gunnis (1967), of the Flaxman models at University College. This was followed immediately by a work of a very different kind, her account of *Early Flemish Painting* (1968).

This was a subject which she had been teaching at the Courtauld for some years. She had already contributed the article on it to *Chambers's Encyclopaedia* (1950) and produced a short work on Roger van der Weyden in 1966. The book of 1971 gives a useful account of the period without entering into too many of the controversial issues with which the period bristles.

In 1969 Whinney was back with English architecture, her meticulous study of the history and fabric of 20 Portman Square (Home House) appearing in that year. Next came *Wren*, in Thames and Hudson's 'World of Art Library'. At least seven books on Wren had been published since Geoffrey Webb's short, unillustrated, unindexed, but fresh and penetrating *Wren* of 1937. Most of them were popular recapitulations of varying merit. My own *Sir Christopher Wren* (1953) in Collins's 'Brief Lives' series attempted to bring some coherence to the scattered evidence on Wren's 'science'. Eduard Sekler's pioneering *Wren and his Place in European Architecture* (1956) effectively explored his continental sources, and Viktor Fürst's *Architecture of Sir Christopher Wren* (1956) speculated on the workings of his mind. But the great change since the thirties was, of course, the completion in 1945, under Arthur T. Bolton's editorship, of the Wren Society's set of twenty volumes, placing virtually the whole corpus of Wren drawings at the scholar's disposal. Whinney's book, written for a 'middle-brow' series, made no pretensions to original research but was a compact up-to-date presentation of the subject and remains, on the whole, the most lucid and best-illustrated work in the ever-lengthening list of Wren monographs.

It remains to say something of Margaret Whinney the teacher. A tribute from one of her pupils comes, as it happens, in the very year of her *Wren* and, oddly enough, from the author of a book on the same subject published in the very same year. Kerry Downes, in the preface of his *Sir Christopher Wren* (1971), in the Penguin Press's 'Architect and Society' series, wrote: 'her teaching laid the student foundations of my knowledge of Wren and his period, and in building upon them her generosity with ideas, information and positive criticism has helped me constantly over many years.' Other Courtauld pupils would be ready with similar acknowledgement of her unselfish encouragement of research. She was an admirable lecturer, with a rather severe manner, aiming at and achieving maximum clarity. Sensitive and sensible, she was a remarkable judge of a student's potentialities and was never deceived by pretensions. The Courtauld Institute, where she was Reader from 1950 to 1964, owes her much and she, indeed, owed

much to the Courtauld, which gave her precisely the opportunities for the exercise of those talents as administrator, teacher, and historian with which she was endowed.

Margaret Whitney was elected Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in 1944, was vice-president from 1960 to 1964, and from 1960 to 1971 represented the Society on the board of Sir John Soane's Museum. In 1967 she was elected a Fellow of the British Academy and in 1969 the Royal Institute of British Architects made her an honorary Fellow—a felicitous recognition not only of her achievement but of her family connection with the profession. She died on 29 August 1975.

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*Note.* It is a pleasure to acknowledge the advice and information given to me by Miss Lilian Gurry in the writing of the above memoir.