Alfred Drury: The Artist as Curator

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A photograph of the sculptor Alfred Drury's studio (*Fig. 1*) records a display of his works, with some small pieces by his master Aimé-Jules Dalou interspersed, arranged by the artist for the visit of the Sir Thomas Elder Memorial Committee.[1] The visit to Drury's studio, behind his house at 6 Gunter Grove off Fulham Road in London, took place at some point during 1900, and probably before March, as the plaster version of Drury's statue of the enchantress *Circe* of 1893 is visible in the corner of the studio. *Circe* was shortly afterwards sent off to Paris for the 1900 Exposition universelle, where the statue was awarded a gold medal (it had previously been awarded a silver medal at the Brussels international exhibition in 1897).[2]

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[1] The draft of a letter by the sculptor Alfred Drury (1856–1944) to the Agent-General of South Australia, dated 19 December 1899, exists along with two related photographs of his studio in the archive of the Drury family. In the letter Drury accepted the commission for the memorial statue to the businessman and philanthropist Sir Thomas Elder in Adelaide: 'I have much pleasure in accepting the commission to execute the bronze statue, under the following conditions viz: — the statue to be 9ft high & executed in the best possible manner together with four bronze panels for the pedestal, illustrative of the events in the life of Sir Thomas Elder. The whole to be delivered to Adelaide for the sum of £900. I shall put in hand shortly the sketch model of the complete work, to be placed before the executive committee. . . I estimate that the full size statue will be completed in about 12 to 18 months from the time the sketch model is approved.' Alfred Drury, draft letter, 19 December 1899, Drury Family Archive. For Alfred Drury, see, most recently, *Alfred Drury and the New Sculpture*, ed. by Ben Thomas, exhibition catalogue (Canterbury: Studio 3 Gallery, 2013). The only monograph dedicated to Alfred Drury remains C. J. Mitchell [now J. Winfrey], 'A Notable Sculptor: Alfred Drury R.A. (1856–1944)' (unpublished masters dissertation, University of Leeds, 1993). On the New Sculpture movement, see Susan Beattie, *The New Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); David J. Getsy, *Body Doubles: Sculpture in Britain 1877–1905* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

[2] 'The only important work at my disposal is "Circe" which was exhibited at the Brussels International Exh: [*sic*] Should you be in favour of this group I should be glad if you would communicate at once to Col. T. Walter Harding P.P. Chairman City Art Gall [*sic*] Leeds to get his permission. In the event of his not complying to this request I could let you have the original plaster model which is bronzed & looks equal to the original & easy to pack on account of arms & drapery being made to take off.' Alfred Drury to Isidore Spielmann, 14 February 1900, London, National Art Library, 86.PP.15/ MSL/1999/2/720.

Fig. 1: Photograph of Alfred Drury's studio in Gunter Grove, London, *c*. 1900. Drury Family Archive.

A second photograph (*Fig. 2*) records Drury presenting his model for the Elder memorial to a group of clients, probably led by John Alexander Cockburn who was the Agent-General of South Australia in London at this time.[3] *Circe*, an Alphonse Legros etching hanging on the wall, and Drury's terracotta *Triumph of Silenus* of 1885 can just be made out in the background of this second photograph, demonstrating that the two photographs are closely related and were taken on the same occasion.

[3] The award of a knighthood was recorded to 'The Honourable John Alexander Cockburn, M.D., formerly Premier of South Australia, and now Agent-General in London for that Colony' (*London Gazette*, 2 January 1900, p. 2). Cockburn was an interesting figure: a Scottish doctor who, after emigrating to Australia, entered on a political career that culminated in the premiership of South Australia. He was a liberal with progressive views, a freemason who published on esoteric topics, and a supporter of women's suffrage. See John Playford, 'Cockburn, Sir John Alexander (1850–1929)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/cockburn-sir-john-alexander-5701/text9637> [accessed 3 March 2016]. Drury executed a portrait bust of Cockburn, which he exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1901, and he subsequently donated a bronze version of it to the Art Gallery in Adelaide in 1903, to coincide with the unveiling of the Elder memorial. See Jane Winfrey's catalogue entry for the bust of John Alexander Cockburn in *Alfred Drury and the New Sculpture*, ed. by Thomas, pp. 48–49.

Fig. 2: Photograph of the Thomas Elder Memorial Committee in Alfred Drury's studio, *c*. 1900. Drury Family Archive.

In a sense, the photograph of the studio display is the nearest thing we have to a visual record of an exhibition of Drury's works curated by the artist himself. In this arrangement he demonstrated the range of his accomplishments, from exhibition pieces to more modestly sized works intended for the home; he tolerated the replication of different versions of the same

work by including two versions apiece of *The Age of Innocence*, *Griselda*, and *The Little Duchess*; and he invited a comparison of his own works with those of Dalou.[4] The display necessarily excluded the artist's more monumental works — such as the Elder memorial that the committee had come to discuss — in what is a relatively small studio space for a sculptor (Drury would eventually move to a purpose-built studio at Lancaster Lodge on the edge of Wimbledon Common in 1910). Drury's public works, his larger scale memorials and architectural sculpture, would come to dominate his oeuvre increasingly during the twentieth century — so, in a sense, this informal exhibition could also be considered a mid-career retrospective of sorts, reviewing the exhibition pieces of the 1890s that had made his name.

It is also interesting to contrast this relaxed and homely display intended for known patrons (note the details of the coal scuttle, the kettle on the stove, the towel draped over the back of a chair. . .), with the more impressive yet more anonymous exhibition of sculpture for an international public to which *Circe* would shortly travel. The Paris Exposition universelle of 1900 represented the culmination of Drury's fame as an exhibiting artist — but it was also the occasion for an innovative experiment in artistic self-curation by a sculptor that Drury knew and admired, when Auguste Rodin put on a retrospective of his own sculpture, alongside, but apart from, the official international exhibition in the specially constructed Pavilion de l'Alma, thereby implicitly criticizing the institution of the world's fair as an effective venue for the display of sculpture. A solo exhibition was unusual for a sculptor (Drury would never have one). Here in Rodin's exhibition, as Ruth Butler has argued, 'an important aspect of the show's novelty was the loose and open arrangement of the works, in stark contrast to the rigidity of the official sculpture exhibitions.'[5]

The photograph of Drury's own arrangement of his works in his Gunter Grove studio was a key point of reference during the process of curating the exhibition 'Alfred Drury and the New Sculpture' (Studio 3 Gallery, University of Kent, 30 September to 20 December 2013, and the Stanley & Audrey Burton Gallery, University of Leeds, 15 January to 13 April 2014). At first, its interest was principally documentary, as one of the chief aims of the exhibition was to advance historical research into a significant artist who had been somewhat unfairly neglected in recent accounts of Victorian and Edwardian sculpture (admittedly a field teeming with talented artists). The photograph was also of logistical interest as it recorded a

[4] For a further discussion of the contents of this photograph, see Jane Winfrey, 'A Gallery of Statuettes — Alfred Drury's Domestic Sculpture', in *Alfred Drury and the New Sculpture*, ed. by Thomas, pp. 18–22.

[5] Catherine Lampert and others, *Rodin*, exhibition catalogue (London: Royal Academy, 2007), p. 156; Ruth Butler, *Rodin: The Shape of Genius* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 349–61.

number of Drury's works together, versions of which were available as loans from different sources for the exhibition: for example, the two versions of the plaque *The Little Duchess* in plaster and bronze — the first leaning on the shelf forming a type of 'mantelpiece' to the stove, the other hanging from the picture rail above — modelled from Gracie Doncaster, the daughter of family friends, which Drury would exhibit at the Royal Academy in 1900. Increasingly, however, as I considered it, the photograph seemed to offer the solution to certain practical problems of effectively arranging the display of smaller works in a large, 'white cube'-style gallery, and, furthermore, to point the way to a particular curatorial approach towards Drury's works in the exhibition.

Studio 3 Gallery is situated in the Jarman Building, built in 2010 for the School of Arts at the University of Kent. It is a space 144 square metres in dimension, with a concrete floor, a high ceiling spanning two storeys of the building, and unadorned white walls. Although this space has hosted exhibitions of contemporary sculpture by the artists Ana Maria Pacheco and Richard Rome to impressive effect, it is not a natural fit with late nineteenth-century sculpture, especially works of a modest size. Experiments carried out in Studio 3 Gallery with Drury's statuette *Spring* (1890), which is 42 cm high, showed that placed on its own plinth the work appeared lost and diminished in this large and hard-edged gallery space. Grouping together smaller sculptural works, as Drury had done in his studio, was potentially a way to overcome this problem by enhancing their visual impact as a series of composed tableaux, giving the display greater coherence and a sense of flow through this unforgiving space.

To achieve this, it seemed clear that some form of architectural intervention would be necessary to mediate between the gallery space and the small to medium-sized sculptural works available as loans from private collections (the most imposing works by Drury in the exhibition in terms of scale were the paired bronze figures of *Inspiration* and *Knowledge* of 1907, both 61 cm tall, and the larger of two versions of *Griselda* from 1896, which measured 45 by 50 cm). Here, a visit to the impressive Dalou exhibition at the Petit Palais in Paris gave me the idea of emulating the substantial display cases used there, while using them like internal walls.[6] In this way it was possible to use two cases, each 220 cm high by 200 cm long by 100 cm wide, to group together works from key periods in Drury's artistic career (under the titles 'The New Sculpture' and 'The Royal Academician'), and to divide the gallery into two sections, one representing Drury's works intended for the home, and the other for his exhibition pieces.[7] At this

[6] Amélie Simier and Marine Kisiel, *Jules Dalou, le sculpteur de la République*, exhibition catalogue (Paris: Paris Musées, 2013).
[7] For the idea of 'sculpture in the house', see the series of articles by Edmund Gosse, 'The Place of Sculpture in Daily Life', *Magazine of Art*, January 1895, pp. 368–72, 407–10; January 1896, pp. 9–12.

point, the idea of staging a tableau based on Drury's photograph of his studio became increasingly seductive, as it seemed an effective way of unifying the overall design by presenting the visitor with an impressive piece of scenography on entering the gallery. As I explained in an interview for *Circumspice*, the journal of the Public Monuments and Sculpture Association, 'I wrestled with this idea, going back and forth with it for a long time — was it respectfully working with the grain of the artist's vision, or simply a kitsch exercise in reconstruction?'.[8]

As it was finally realized, the tableau of 'The Studio' was not a straightforward facsimile of the photograph of Drury's Gunter Grove studio, but a creative response to it (*Fig. 3*). On a mantelpiece (skilfully constructed by the University of Kent's estates maintenance team) were placed a smaller terracotta version of *The Triumph of Silenus* (1885) to the one in the photograph, the bronze statuette of *Spring* (1890), a small bronze version of *Griselda* (1896), Dalou's plaster model of a *Praying Peasant Woman* (1877), which was in Drury's original arrangement, and a terracotta bust of a *Boy's Head* (*c*. 1887), which was not. Drury's best-known work, *The Age of*

Fig. 3: Installation photograph of 'Alfred Drury and the New Sculpture' in Studio 3 Gallery, University of Kent, 2013.

[8] 'Interview with Ben Thomas', *Circumspice*, 47 (2013), 20–22.

Innocence (1897), was placed on its own plinth so that, from the perspective of the visitor entering the gallery, it also appeared to be among the works on the mantelpiece, while it was physically situated in the 'exhibition' section of the display. On the wall above the mantelpiece hung the Legros etching from the photograph, and both the plaster and bronze versions of *The Little Duchess*, while at a discrete distance to the right of the tableau the bust of *John Alexander Cockburn* was displayed, in allusion to the studio visit that had caused Drury's display in the first place. Two of the original chairs in the photograph were placed alongside the mantelpiece to 'domesticate' this half of the gallery, but the coal scuttle (still in the family's possession) was not included in the scene — that would have been a touch too much authenticity! As the exhibition plan shows (*Fig. 4*), the visitor was presented at first glance with Drury's principal works: from left to right, *The Age of Innocence*, the Dalou-inspired early work *The First Lesson* (1886), *Griselda*, the academy piece *Lilith* (1913), and *Inspiration* and *Knowledge*. The logic of this arrangement was primarily visual, prioritizing aesthetic experience over curatorial 'interpretation', and unapologetically theatrical in effect. While the gallery space at the Stanley & Audrey Burton Gallery in Leeds was not big enough to include the two display cases, that version of the exhibition also took its cue from the tableau based on the photograph of the artist's studio, and the complementary rhythms of Drury's works harmonized across that more intimate space in an arrangement expertly devised by the Burton's curator, Layla Bloom (*Fig. 5*).

To emphasize the visual dimension of curating the show is not to concede that 'Alfred Drury and the New Sculpture' lacked an art-historical argument or an academic rationale. It did have a thesis, and a straightforwardly coherent one: that Drury was due a reappraisal because his art was completely characteristic of the New Sculpture due to his closeness to Dalou and his devotion to Alfred Stevens (whose drawings he collected). The late nineteenth-century revival of British sculpture that Edmund Gosse named the 'New Sculpture' began, according to this critic's series of articles in the *Art Journal* in 1894, when Lord Leighton exhibited *Athlete Wrestling with a Python* at the Royal Academy in 1877, and culminated in the works of William Hamo Thornycroft and Alfred Gilbert. By contrast, Gosse saw Drury as 'a mannered Kensington student, somewhat under the influence of Dalou'.[9] In response, the principal wall text in the exhibition argued that

> Drury was one of the key figures in the New Sculpture movement because he combined in his art the French realism of Aimé-Jules Dalou, with whom he had a long professional relationship, and the Michelangelo-esque vision of Alfred Stevens.

[9] Edmund Gosse, 'The New Sculpture, 1879–94: Fourth and Concluding Article', *Art Journal*, October 1894, pp. 306–11 (p. 310).

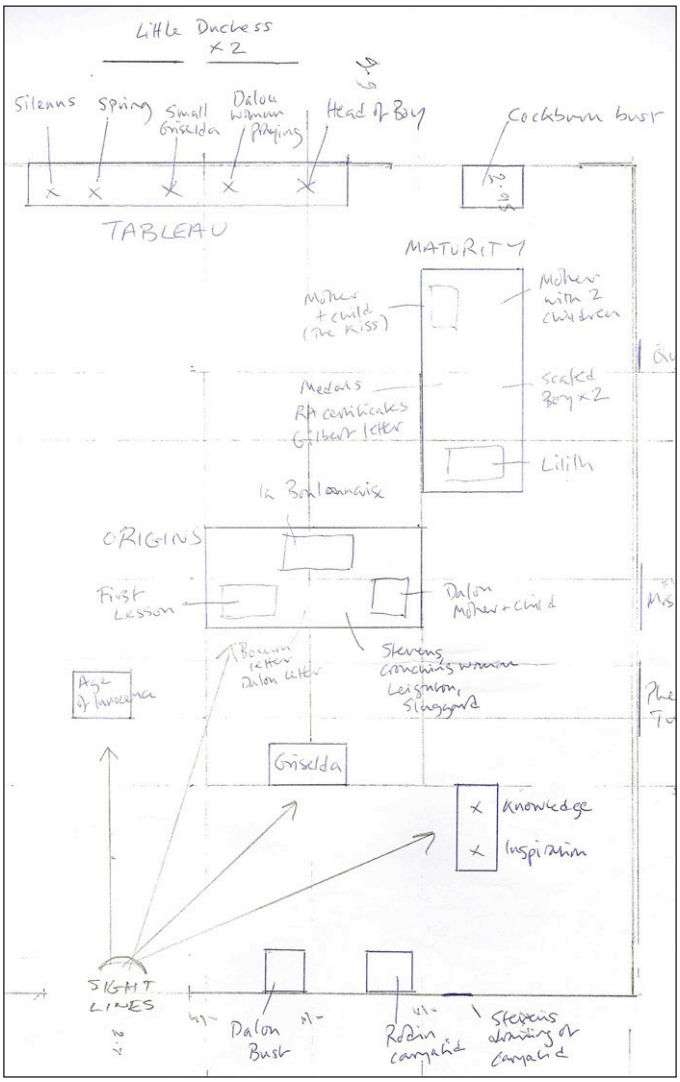

Fig. 4: Ben Thomas, Installation plan for 'Alfred Drury and the New Sculpture' in Studio 3 Gallery, University of Kent, 2013.

> Dalou and Stevens were seen as the most important influences in the reform of British sculpture by a slightly later generation of critics to Edmund Gosse, including Marion Spielmann and Alfred Lys Baldry.[10]

[10] Simon Poë in an interesting review concluded that 'Alfred Drury's turns out to be a very good case study through which to examine the New Sculpture'. 'Alfred Drury and the New Sculpture', *British Art Journal*, 15.1 (2014), 128–34 (p. 128).

Fig. 5: Installation photograph of 'Alfred Drury and the New Sculpture' in the Stanley & Audrey Burton Gallery, University of Leeds, 2014.

Exhibitions, however, always pose problems when judged as art history, notably because the works of art available to display may achieve a prominence that exceeds their art-historical significance.[11] Arguably, the

[11] For a discussion of this and related issues, see Francis Haskell, *The Ephemeral Museum: Old Master Paintings and the Rise of the Art Exhibition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

one work in the photograph of Drury's studio display that most tellingly asserts his allegiance with the New Sculpture is the *Prophetess of Fate*, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1900, for which the opera singer Lillian Nordica posed, but which is now lost. For example, there are clear resemblances between this work and George Frampton's *Lamia* of 1899–1900, although, as Susan Beattie points out, it 'lacks the threatening, highly charged quality of *Lamia*' (p. 174). Clearly, a missing work cannot be displayed, but, equally, concerns about conservation and transport, budget constraints, or simple unavailability can exclude a key work. Environmental concerns, for example, excluded the drawings by Alfred Stevens owned by Drury from the Studio 3 Gallery version of the exhibition, and instead a separate display was curated at Canterbury's Beaney House of Art & Knowledge by Krystyna Matyjaskiewicz. It was, however, possible to include a selection of Stevens's drawings at Leeds, where they joined Dalou, Rodin, and Leighton in the supportive cast of 'influences'.

It can be argued, therefore, that while exhibitions can be definite in stating a clear visual proposition — in this case about Alfred Drury's role in the New Sculpture — they can never be definitive. Indeed, there were significant differences between the two versions of the exhibition in Canterbury and Leeds, both in content and display, with the Leeds version drawing on additional loans from a local collector. While the exhibition had been conceived for Canterbury, the very presence of major works by Drury in Leeds — *Circe* in Leeds City Museum, and the statue of *Joseph Priestley*, and the pairs of nude lamp standards *Morn* and *Even*, in City Square (1903) — made Leeds a more resonant context for Drury's art, and consequently a more authoritative version of the exhibition. Similarly, the exhibition catalogue, although it carried contributions by leading scholars of nineteenth-century sculpture, and brought to light many new archival discoveries from a campaign of research funded by the Mellon Centre for British Art, can be no substitute for a catalogue raisonné of Drury's oeuvre.

In concluding these reflections on the experience of curating 'Alfred Drury and the New Sculpture', I would like to discuss some interrelated curatorial problems that the exhibition posed. The first is simply the intrinsic difficulty of exhibiting sculpture — the difficulties of multiple viewpoints, sightlines, and lighting that Baudelaire stressed in 1846 when he notoriously dismissed sculpture as 'ennuyeuse' and essentially an ancillary art form.[12] With few exceptions — such as Rodin's 1900 exhibition — the problem of exhibiting contemporary sculpture was not solved during Drury's lifetime, and in 1921 the critic Kineton Parkes com-

[12] Charles Baudelaire, *Écrits sur l'art* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2010), pp. 228–32.

plained that 'the exhibition of sculpture has always been a difficulty, and it has generally been done in the most perfunctory manner'.[13] Judging by the differing critical response to two ambitious and complex exhibitions of nineteenth-century art that opened in Britain in 2015 — 'Sculpture Victorious' at Tate Britain and 'Inventing Impressionism' at the National Gallery — convincing the critics of the merits of sculpture relative to painting remains as much of a challenge for the curator as in Baudelaire's time.[14]

The problem of systems of display, and whether to arrange objects strictly according to argument or to maximize visual effect, remains a curatorial dilemma — as it was during Drury's long life — as can be illustrated by two distinctive if unrelated examples. In 1894 the creation of new museum galleries in Oxford gave rise to an interesting correspondence between the collector Charles Drury Fortnum and the keeper of the Ashmolean Museum, the archaeologist Arthur Evans, concerning the display of Fortnum's collection in the new Ashmolean building: Fortnum had been making a list of the ceramics from his collection, 'to enable you to arrange them after a while in their natural order of local production'.[15] In reply, Evans assured Fortnum that he wanted to have large labels made indicating the geographical grouping of majolica ware, 'to make the scientific principle of the arrangement as clear as possible'.[16] However, in spite of his intention of following a taxonomic mode of display, Fortnum's letters contain remarks and sketches that display how aesthetic concerns like

[13] Kineton Parkes, *Sculpture of To-day*, 2 vols (London: Chapman and Hall, 1921), I: *America, Great Britain, Japan*, 197–98. For recent research on this issue see the special issue of *Sculpture Journal*, 23.2 (2014), edited by Michael Hatt and Jason Edwards.

[14] While 'Inventing Impressionism' received very positive reviews, the response to 'Sculpture Victorious' was mixed, with several reviewers basically agreeing with Martin Gayford that 'the Victorians were not much good at sculpture' (*Spectator*, 28 February 2015 <http://www.spectator.co.uk/2015/02/sculpture-victorious-tate-britain-review-entertainingly-barmy/>). Richard Dorment criticized Tate's exhibition for 'using works of art to illustrate what amounts to an extended academic lecture' (*Daily Telegraph*, 23 February 2015 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-reviews/11429728/Sculpture-Victorious-Tate-Britain-review-its-incoherence-is-frightening.html>). By contrast, Ben Luke commented of 'Inventing Impressionism' that 'pleasingly, the National's curators have been sensible enough to realize that this is an exhibition and not a sociological art history lecture' (*Evening Standard*, 3 March 2015 <http://www.standard.co.uk/goingout/exhibitions/inventing-impressionism-national-gallery-exhibition-review-10081773.html>) [all articles accessed 3 March 2016].

[15] Fortnum to Evans, 19 October 1894, Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, Fortnum Archive, F/7/xi/29.

[16] Evans to Fortnum, 20 October 1894, Fortnum Archive, F/7/xi/30.

symmetry, pattern of ornamentation (regardless of date of manufacture), or even personal affection for certain objects, affected his thinking about the arrangement of their display. In 1944, the final year of Drury's life, the abstract expressionist painter Barnett Newman curated an exhibition of pre-Columbian sculpture for Betty Parsons at the Wakefield Gallery in New York. Newman presented these products of ancient American cultures as works of art rather than as ethnographic objects. Writing for *La Revista Belga* he explained:

> It was an exciting experience to see this sculpture presented purely from an aesthetic point of view, freed from the distractions of the usual ethnological jumble of sculpture, pottery, textiles, and other artefacts, which although of genuine interest to the student of archaeology and ethnology, is a source of confusion to those looking for an aesthetic experience. Here the sculpture was to be enjoyed — as sculpture.[17]

To what extent the aesthetic effect of artworks is enhanced or impeded by the mediating interpretation of the curator is a perennial question and a complicated matter of emphasis. Similarly, the merits of what can be termed a 'historicizing' approach to display are debatable: arrangements like the tableau based on the photograph of Drury's studio vividly engage the imagination of the spectator by conjuring up an evocative historical environment. Another effective example is the opening room of the National Gallery's 'Inventing Impressionism' show that effectively restaged a photograph of Paul Durand-Ruel's Paris apartment. However, the danger of what is ultimately a Romantic gesture is that the work of art appears to derive its meaning from the 'tout ensemble' rather than as an autonomous object in its own right.[18] The opposite approach — to detach the artwork from its historical context and present it in a transcendental present — also has its risks (although it is interesting here to note Camille Pissarro's comment in 1883 that, 'for an exhibition to be staged correctly, we [artists] must be the ones to take care of it. . . I have left plenty of spaces between the pictures').[19] Faced with this dilemma, it is reassuring to reflect that the

[17] Barnett Newman, 'Pre-Columbian Stone Sculpture [1944]', in *Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. by John P. O'Neill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 62–65 (p. 64).
[18] For example, for Lenoir's 'period rooms' in the Musée des monuments français as an 'appeal to sentiment and the historical imagination', see Francis Haskell, *History and Its Images* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 243. For the problem of anachronism in curating, see Debora J. Meijers, 'The Museum and the "Ahistorical" Exhibition', in *Thinking about Exhibitions*, ed. by Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 7–20.
[19] Cited in Sylvie Patry, 'Durand-Ruel and the Impressionists' Solo Exhibitions of 1883', in *Inventing Impressionism: Paul Durand-Ruel and the Modern Art Market*, ed. by Sylvie Patry, exhibition catalogue (London: National Gallery, 2015), p. 106.

temporary nature of the exhibition is actually a positive asset, as whichever approach is adopted it only presents the work of art in a provisional rather than permanent arrangement. After all, in order to see the masterpieces of the New Sculpture in the form that Drury and his contemporaries intended them we have only to turn to the public works — such as the familiar *Joshua Reynolds* in front of the Royal Academy.