



## PRIVATE VIEWS

### William Powell Frith, Harry Furniss and Oscar Wilde

Anne Anderson

Public views, called ‘private’, where everybody goes,  
To see and be seen by everybody that everybody  
knows.<sup>1</sup>

Harry Furniss, *Royal Academy Antics*, 1890

By the time Frith painted *The Private View*, 1881 (*The Private View at the Royal Academy*, 1881), he had become one of the richest painters in a century that produced many rich painters (Fig. 68). He had enjoyed seeing five of his paintings shown at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibitions protected by a rail and in one case by a policeman. Securing the accolade of ‘Picture of the Year’ was a great achievement, both in terms of critical acclaim and financial success. The public flocked to see his great panoramas of modern life: *Ramsgate Sands: Life at the Sea-Side* (1854), *The Derby Day* (1858) and *The Railway Station* (1862). They seemed to embody the spirit of the age, with their huge cast of characters, from aristocrats to criminals, brought together on a beach, a racecourse or at – that iconic site of Victorian modernity – a railway station.<sup>2</sup> For a public hungry for good stories, these paintings offered plenty of anecdotal episodes: an arrest at Paddington railway station, a young lad about to lose his shirt on Derby Day or a charming little girl taking her first paddle at Ramsgate. It was like reading a novel by Charles Dickens. With the bar set so high, what new subject could be found that would similarly fire the public’s imagination?

A private view at the Royal Academy offered Frith the opportunity to celebrate the institution that had brought him fame and wealth. It would also provide him with a glittering array of celebrities – politicians, writers, grandes dames and ‘professional beauties’, whose fame rested on mass-circulation illustrated periodicals and photographs, as well as his fellow artists. The public would be keen to spot the famous faces in his picture, to be carefully identified on the frame and in the key to the print version (Figs. 69 and 70). The inclusion of the year in the title indicates Frith’s intention to depict an actual event, the private view that took place in 1881, on the Friday before the opening of the Royal Academy’s annual Summer Exhibition. This was an important fixture on the capital’s social calendar, representing the start of the London Season, which ended with Goodwood Races in July. From 1872 to 1912 the Summer Exhibition opened on the first Monday in May, so the private view painted by Frith took place on Friday 29 April 1881.

Frith planned his *Private View* meticulously. The Academy minutes record: ‘Leave was granted for Mr. Frith to have a drawing made during the usual hours before the opening of the Exhibition of Gallery No. III’, the largest and most imposing room in Burlington House.<sup>3</sup> Later in the month, a photograph was taken recording the hang, a practice not normally condoned by the Academy. Given the uneasy relationship between painting and photography, Frith was always cagey about his reliance on this mechanical



Fig. 68  
*The Private View, 1881 (The Private View at the Royal Academy, 1881)* 1882–83, exhibited 1883, oil on canvas 103 x 195.5 cm,  
A. Pope Family Trust, courtesy Martin Beisly (Cat. 00)



Fig.69  
After Frith *Private View, Royal Academy, 1881* published  
2 February 1885, photogravure, 59 x 98.5 cm, Royal Academy of  
Arts, London (Cat. 00)

medium. However, despite his desire for authenticity, Frith cherry-picked the paintings he actually represented in the scene. Those on the left include Heywood Hardy's *Sidi Ahmed ben Avuda and the Holy Lion* and James Sant's *Susan and Ethel, daughters of Arthur Wilson, Esq.*, with further right John William Waterhouse's *A Summer's Day in Italy*.<sup>4</sup> John Everett Millais's portrait of Benjamin Disraeli, who had died shortly before, stands in the archway at the back, included at the special request of Queen Victoria after the official deadline for submissions had passed.<sup>5</sup>

There had been a dramatic increase in attendance at the Summer Exhibitions when the Royal Academy moved from its rooms in the National Gallery building to Burlington House, Piccadilly, in 1868, and a further increase after 1878, when Frederic Leighton became president. In 1881 the attendance was 390,000 (in comparison, the 2016 Summer Exhibition attracted around 220,000 visitors).<sup>6</sup> From 1852, when the press was allowed entrée, the Academy's

Private View was transformed from a worthy official event into a major social function.<sup>7</sup> An invitation to the Private View, which could only come from an Academician or an Associate Member, meant acceptance into the very crème de la crème of society, where 'Rank, Wealth, Fashion and Beauty are represented'.<sup>8</sup> The *Pall Mall Gazette* declared that the Private View allowed 'Nobodies an opportunity of rubbing shoulders for a brief space with a very considerable number of Somebodies'.<sup>9</sup> 'Official life is largely represented at the [Royal Academy] private view', one 'lady correspondent' told her readers, by 'ambassadors and other public functionaries, the peerage, members of parliament, and distinguished people either in science or literature'.<sup>10</sup> This was an important occasion for those who wanted to see and to be seen and, for some, celebrity spotting was more important than picture gazing. A Royal Academy Private View promised 'an exhibition of pictures living and inanimate'.<sup>11</sup> Such 'low entertainment' stands in sharp contrast to the high ideals of academic or avant-garde art, turning a prestigious event, ostensibly denoting exclusivity, into public spectacle. Cartoons and critiques suggest a mass of humanity all crowding and pushing, not a rarefied,

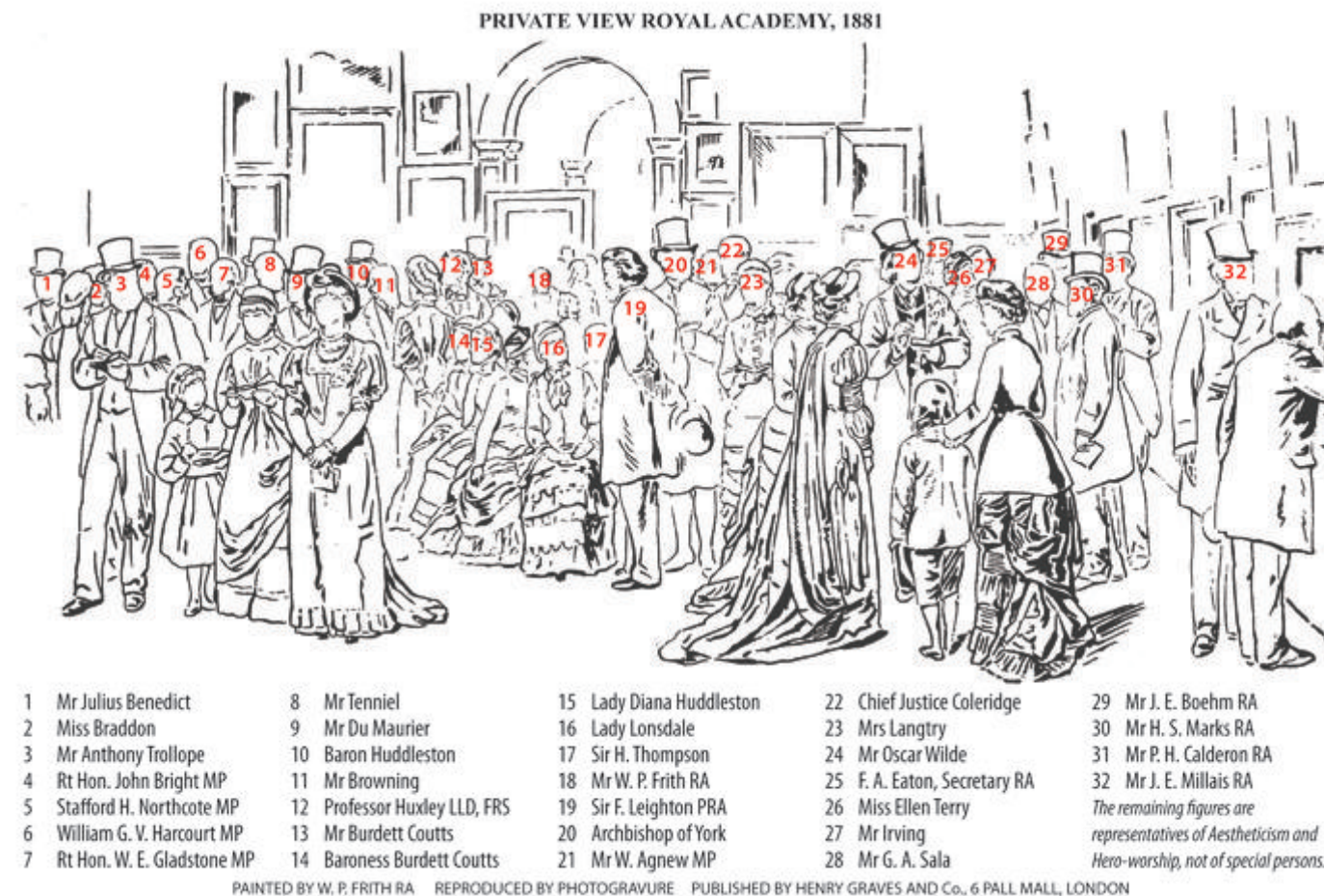


Fig. 70  
Richard Kelly, key to Figure 69

ordered viewing public. John Everett Millais, elected as an Academician in 1864, penned a little ditty describing the 'crush' at the Private View, including the lines:

Elbow and push  
Your way through the crush [...]  
Go on with the tide.  
Observe the Skyed.  
For you'll see little more.<sup>12</sup>

According to *Punch* cartoonist Harry Furniss, the Royal Academy was 'Vanity Fair, and that is all that Fashion cares about – as she goes there, not to see, but to be seen'.<sup>13</sup>

Frith's *Private View* features 'celebrities of all kinds, statesmen, poets, judges, philosophers, musicians, painters,

actors and others'.<sup>14</sup> These included artists Sir Frederic Leighton and John Everett Millais, 'Professional Beauties' Constance, Lady Lonsdale and Lillie Langtry, politicians William Gladstone and Sir Henry Stafford Northcote, serious authors Robert Browning and Antony Trollope, alongside the popular novelist Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and stars of the stage Ellen Terry and Henry Irving. Frith mingles his characters across the composition, suggesting the sort of cultivated high bohemia that he himself inhabited. Writing much later in his *Autobiography*, and with the benefit of hindsight, Frith maintained:

Beyond the desire of recording for posterity the aesthetic craze as regards dress, I wished to hit the folly of listening to self-elected critics in matters of taste, whether in dress or art. I therefore planned a group, consisting of a well-known apostle of the beautiful, with a herd of eager worshippers

surrounding him. He is supposed to be explaining his theories to willing ears, taking some picture on the Academy walls for his text. A group of well-known artists are watching the scene. On the left of the composition is a family of pure aesthetes absorbed in affected study of the pictures. Near them stands Anthony Trollope, whose homely figure affords a striking contrast to the eccentric forms near him.<sup>15</sup>

### A 'Self-Elected' Critic

The 'well-known apostle of the beautiful' was, of course, Oscar Wilde. He stands in the foreground with his face uplifted and brilliantly lit; he could be a saint or a prophet.<sup>16</sup> For Frith, however, he was a false prophet. He is being observed, disapprovingly, by representatives of the art establishment and the church: the gentleman in the top hat, in the centre, is the Archbishop of York, while Frith's fellow Academicians, Philip Hermogenes Calderon, Henry Stacy Marks and Sir Joseph Edgar Boehm, on the right of the canvas, all gaze with disbelief at the interloper. Professional journalist George Augustus Sala (red faced and wearing his signature white waistcoat) looks particularly aggrieved, as Wilde was metaphorically stepping on his toes by setting himself up as an art critic.

By 1881 Wilde was riding the crest of the Aesthetic wave. Benefiting from the founding of the Grosvenor Gallery in 1877, the 'haunt of the very aesthetic', Wilde had assumed the role of 'Professor of Aesthetics': 'This remarkable youth, a student at the University in Oxford, began to show himself everywhere [...] it was to him that Art owed the great social vogue she enjoyed at this time'.<sup>17</sup> A rival to the Royal Academy, founded and financed by Sir Coutts and Lady Lindsay, the Grosvenor possessed the 'the glamour of fashion'.<sup>18</sup> Wilde was anxious to identify himself with the Grosvenor Gallery. His first published work in prose was a review of its opening exhibition for the *Dublin University Magazine*.<sup>19</sup> He followed this with another review for the *Irish Daily News* in 1879.<sup>20</sup> However, Wilde was clearly an outsider at the Royal Academy: many of the academic paintings,

moralising religious parables and heroic battle scenes, would not have been to his Aesthetic tastes. A 'self-elected' critic, Wilde is denounced by Frith as an imposter who exploits a fad rather than endorsing the traditions of the Royal Academy. Aestheticism would pass, but the values of the Academy would endure.

At this point Wilde was 'the young dandy [who] sought to be somebody, rather than do something'.<sup>21</sup> Wilde's aspirations certainly offered the *Punch* cartoonist George du Maurier an easy target. His features were sometimes imposed on Prigsby, a bogus art critic, or on Jellaby Postlethwaite, a narcissistic poet. In *Distinguished Amateurs. – 2. The Art-Critic*, it is made abundantly clear that Prigsby knows nothing about classical art (Fig. 71). Overhearing Prigsby comparing the head of a modern portrait with 'the head of the Ilyssus [*sic*]', the river god on



Fig. 71  
After George du Maurier *Distinguished Amateurs. – 2. The Art-Critic and The Ilyssus!* published in *Punch*, 13 March 1880, wood engravings

the west pediment of the Parthenon, the Colonel (in the cartoon) discovers, on checking, that *Ilyssos* is headless!<sup>22</sup> Prigsby is exposed as a rank amateur with a very limited knowledge of art.

This cartoon might well have provided Frith with his central motif, as Prigsby's audience is composed of female acolytes hanging on his every word; one of his worshippers, who looks adoringly at her hero, is wearing outlandish Aesthetic garb. Wilde's effete 'poetic' persona was apparently attractive to women. As Michèle Mendelssohn reminds us, 'today Wilde's semi-seduction seems surprising because we think of him as a homosexual, and not – as the Victorians did – as a lover of women'.<sup>23</sup> The first cartoon to feature Postlethwaite appeared in February 1880: in 'Nincompoopiana – The Mutual Admiration Society', Mrs Cimabue Brown sighs 'Is he not beautiful [...] Look at his grand head and poetic face, with those flowerlike eyes and that exquisite sad smile!'<sup>24</sup> Gilbert and Sullivan's comic operetta *Patience*, which had premiered in April 1881, pitted two rival poets, Reginald Bunthorne and Archibald Grosvenor, for the affections of a chorus of 'lovesick maidens'; many believed that the effete Bunthorne was based on Wilde. In 'The Grosvenor Gallery: A Lay of the Private View', published in May 1881, *Punch* imagined Wilde setting female hearts a-flutter:

The haunt of the very aesthetic  
Here comes the supremely intense,  
The long-haired and hyper-poetic  
Whose sound is mistaken for sense.  
And many a maiden will utter  
When OSCAR looms large on their sight,  
'He's quite too consummately utter,  
As well as too utterly quite.'<sup>25</sup>

Frith implies that Wilde is a phony art-flirter, the shadow rather than the substance, a ruse feigned to attract gullible women. Even the pictures behind him appear to undermine Wilde's credibility. Catherine Roach argues that Frith, like Hogarth, used the trick of a 'picture within a picture' to expand on his commentary.<sup>26</sup>

Behind Wilde we can spot *Disraeli*, *The Earl of Beaconsfield* by Pieter van Havermaet, Berthold Woltze's *Her First Trouble* and the equestrian portrait of *Lieutenant-General Sir Garnet Wolseley*, commander of the forces in the Zulu War, by Albert Besnard.<sup>27</sup> Did Frith deliberately select these works by foreign artists as a critique of the upstart Irish Wilde who was posing as an Englishman?<sup>28</sup> Wilde maintained that although he was born in Ireland he chose to be British. Emulating, for his sitter, a pose used by Joshua Reynolds, the founding president of the Royal Academy, Besnard positions Wolseley within British Imperial and visual traditions. His lasting achievement stands in contrast to Wilde's ephemeral celebrity.

However, there is another 'painting within the painting' which might add to this supposed dialogue. On the right a myopic connoisseur, identified in the key to the photogravure as among the anonymous 'representatives of Aestheticism and Hero-worship', is staring intently at Lawrence Alma-Tadema's *Sappho and Alcaeus*, deemed one of the 'Pictures of the Year'. Combining mastery of technique with the 'Art for Art's Sake' credo, Alma-Tadema exhibited at both the Royal Academy and the Grosvenor. Positioning *Sappho and Alcaeus* so close to the edge of the scene, Frith may be implying that the Anglo-Dutch artist was an interloper challenging the values of the Royal Academy; he had only recently been admitted into the fold, being elected an Academician in 1880. Alma-Tadema was clearly a rival, an artist as meticulous Frith but whose evocative recreations of the ancient world and vivid colours posed a threat to the painter of 'dull' modern life.

Open to interpretation, with no obvious narrative or moral content, *Sappho and Alcaeus* raised the spectre of sexual ambiguity. It is tempting to conjecture that Frith had read 'An Academical Dialogue', which appeared in *Punch* on 14 May 1881. This dialogue centres on whether Sappho, in Alma-Tadema's painting, is a man or a woman. Conscious of an audience, a 'Wise Young Judge' prevaricates, pointing vaguely at the painting, very cleverly pretending to be suddenly short-sighted. A 'Critical Lady' demands to know 'was SAPPHO a man or a woman?' Painfully aware of utter ignorance on the point, and gaining no instruction

from the catalogue, the 'Wise Young Judge' confesses 'I forget what SAPPHO was'.<sup>29</sup> Wilde's proximity to *Sappho and Alcaeus* could be read as a snide jibe: could *he* be a *she*? During his 1882 tour of North America, Wilde's 'womanly air' baffled onlookers, his 'soft effeminate flesh' and the 'almost boyish fullness and effeminacy of his face' were confusing.<sup>30</sup> Some claimed that he 'conveyed at first the appearance of a woman in male attire, [but that] his strong masculine voice quickly dispelled that illusion'.<sup>31</sup> Wilde may be instilling dangerous Aesthetic values, even 'the Love that dare not speak its name'.<sup>32</sup>

Dressed in a brown frock coat with a jaunty buttonhole, rather than formal evening black, Wilde stands out as an Aesthete.<sup>33</sup> Frith's portrayal is measured, Wilde's attire sober compared to the flamboyant garb associated with his American tour. Leighton is similarly dressed, though positioned by Frith with his back to Wilde, which might be construed as censure. *The Queen*, a ladies' magazine, was affronted by Leighton's garb, protesting: 'the hideous brown suit in which it has pleased the artist to represent him [...] is surely about as unlike the special character of the original's handsome and active form as possible'.<sup>34</sup> Yet Leighton consistently asserted his individuality through an unconventional dress code and demeanour: robed in chocolate brown in George Frederic Watts's portrait of 1881 (National Portrait Gallery, London), he is the quintessential Aesthete. Leighton might stand for 'English respectability, and seek 'the homage of the great' but, argued J. McLure Hamilton, he was 'an artist in everything' including his dress.<sup>35</sup> Leighton's central position in *The Private View* raises the vexed topic of the Academy's relationship with Aestheticism, namely the anxiety caused by the infiltration and acceptance of Aesthetic values within the establishment. While condemning Wilde's sham-Aestheticism, Frith expressed great admiration for Leighton, whom he designated 'the most perfect President of the Royal Academy that we have seen in the past or are likely to see in the future'.<sup>36</sup> Frith may be drawing a distinction between genuine Aesthetes (Leighton) and false Aesthetes (Wilde), the latter merely posing.

While there is no evidence that Wilde sat for the painting, Frith did ask for his coat. While in America, Wilde received a letter from his mother (in February 1882): 'I had a note from Frith the painter. He wanted your brown coat to paint the collar. I went to see him with Willie and Miss Drew – He said he would now wait until you came back as the picture must be delayed. So many portraits have to be taken. I did not find the coat so I suppose you have it with you'.<sup>37</sup> Frith probably relied on one of Napoleon Sarony's famous studio portraits, taken on the eve of Wilde's lecture tour in January 1882, as his source.<sup>38</sup>

### Aesthetic Dress and High Fashion

Following the publication of his *Poems* in June 1881, Wilde was openly lampooned in Edward Linley Sambourne's cartoon *O.W. Oh, I feel just as happy as a bright Sunflower! Lays of Christy Minstrelsy*.<sup>39</sup> The sunflower, alongside the lily, had been associated with the Aesthetes since the 1860s: drawing on the myth of Clytie, it signalled 'hopeless longing and unfulfilled desire'. Those within the coterie adopted the sunflower as a badge, alongside muted colours (olive green, ochre and terracotta or russet), aptly illustrated by the 'family of pure esthetes absorbed in affected study of the pictures' in Frith's painting. Even Lady Wilde admitted that 'tints of decomposed asparagus and cucumber do not suit the long, pale English face'.<sup>40</sup> Frith tells us that 'in some cases the costumes were pretty enough, in others they seemed to rival each other in ugliness of form and oddity of colour. There were – and still are, I believe – preachers of æstheticism in dress; but I think, and hope, that the preaching is much less effective than it used to be.' Frith hoped to contrast 'the really beautiful costumes of some of the lady *habituées* of our private view and the eccentric garments of others'.<sup>41</sup> Can we assume the lady in the ochre gown, gathered up to reveal an ivory ruffled-satin underskirt, embodies Frith's 'ugliness' and 'oddity'? Has she donned this outlandish garb to attract attention? As Mrs Haweis observed, 'Now is the time for plain women. Only dress after the Præ-Raphaelite [*sic*] style, and you will be astonished to



Fig. 72  
After George du Maurier *Flippancy Punished* published in *Punch*, 14 April 1877, wood engraving

find that so far from being an 'ugly duck' you are a full fledged swan!<sup>42</sup> The plain girl who adopted quaint garb now stood out in the crowd. In contrast, her beautiful companion would look good in whatever she wore. Her quasi-medieval 'Florentine' dress, red hair and far-away expression are clearly aping a Pre-Raphaelite 'stunner'.<sup>43</sup> While Dante Gabriel Rossetti was responsible for forging this new kind of beauty, du Maurier, who ironically is positioned directly behind, had popularised the type in his cartoons. Mrs Cimabue Brown and her circle, seen in *Flippancy Punished* for example, provided the source for Frith's costumes (Fig. 72).<sup>44</sup> Frith's little girl, sporting a mob-cap, recalls du Maurier's cartoon *Train up a Child*: having been offered a day at the Zoo followed by a 'good blow-out at the Langham Hotel [...] and the Pantomime at Drury Lane', Master Cimabue declares he prefers the National Gallery, while his sister Miss Monna Givronda would 'soonah hear Handel's *Judas Maccabæus*' than see any pantomime (Fig. 73).

Frith's 'herd of eager worshippers', gathered around Wilde, includes an Aesthete wearing a pale terracotta robe with a 'Watteau pleat', named after the French Rococo painter, falling from her shoulders and looped to the side of her dress (as seen in 'Flippancy Punished'). This artistic



Fig. 73  
After George du Maurier *The Cimabue Browns ("Train up a Child," &c)* published in *Punch*, 3 January 1880, wood engraving

dress stands in sharp contrast to the hourglass-corseted figure to the right. Yet, despite his desire to 'hit the folly' of blindly following fashion, Frith appears to have tired of the project; while he expended considerable effort creating his Aesthetic types, his high-fashion costumes had been seen before. The bustled crimson dress had previously featured in his painting *For Better, For Worse* (1881; Fig. 74). Moreover, Lillie Langtry, that icon of fashion, appears in a 'recycled' dress, also seen in *For Better, For Worse*. Known for wearing either black or (as here) white, Langtry endorsed Frith's advice to his daughters to dress in monochrome at private views, 'black because it was unobtrusive, and white because it would not interfere with the colour on the walls'.<sup>45</sup>

The quintessential Professional Beauty, Langtry's relationship with Wilde was reciprocal: both benefited from each other's notoriety. The presence of the Professional Beauties was keenly sought, even though, according to the *World*, at private views they showed no interest in the paintings and merely walked two or three times around the room to make sure they were noticed.<sup>46</sup> Wilde cultivated the notoriety of the 'PBs' and hosted 'beauty parties' alongside Frank Miles when they shared rooms in Salisbury Street. In a letter to Harold Bolton,



Fig. 74  
*For Better, For Worse*  
exhibited 1881, oil on canvas,  
155 x 127 cm, private  
collection

dated 1879, Wilde writes: 'I was very sorry you did not come to tea as I could have introduced you to some very beautiful people Mrs Langtry and Lady Lonsdale and a lot of clever beings who were at tea with me'.<sup>47</sup> In an interview published in several newspapers (including the *Brisbane Herald*) in 1882, Langtry recalled:

I went to London and was brought out by my friends. Among the most enthusiastic of these

was Mr Frank Miles, the artist [... he] begged me to sit for my portrait. I consented, and when the portrait was finished he sold it to Prince Leopold. From that time I was invited everywhere and made a great deal of by many members of the royal family and nobility. After Frank Miles I sat for portraits to Millais and Burne-Jones and now Frith is putting my face in one of his great pictures.<sup>48</sup>



### Harry Furniss's *Private View*

Until recently it was generally assumed that Harry Furniss, the *Punch* cartoonist, lampooned Frith's *Private View* in *The World*, a popular weekly paper (Fig. 75).<sup>49</sup> It certainly looks like it. Not only does Furniss show a private view at the Royal Academy but he includes many of the people who feature in Frith's painting: Frederic Leighton (welcoming the Prince and Princess of Wales as guests of honour), John Everett Millais, Henry Irving, Ellen Terry, George Augustus Sala, Sir Henry Thompson, Anthony Trollope and Oscar Wilde. However, Furniss's *Private View* was published in the 1882 Christmas issue of the *World*, four months before Frith's painting was displayed at the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition of 1883. As in Frith's picture, Wilde plays a prominent role in the cartoon. Donned in the Aesthetic attire associated with his American tour, a velvet smoking jacket, shirt with a turned down 'Byron' collar and loosely knotted cravat, Wilde is surrounded

Fig. 75  
Edmund Evans after Harry Furniss *The Private View* published in the Christmas Number of *The World*, 27 December 1882, wood engraving printed in colour, 00 x 00 cm, Russell-Cotes Art Gallery & Museum, Bournemouth (Cat. 00)

with theatrical celebrities: J. L. Toole, H. J. Byron, W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, Squire Bancroft, Frank Burnand and Henry Irving. Rather than looking back to Wilde the art critic or lecturer in America, Furniss alludes to Wilde's ambitions as a playwright. In the early 1880s, Wilde tried to attract the attention of great, or at least glamorous, actresses in order to get his work staged. Oscar was now cast as a theatrical 'luvvie', his dubious antics observed by the 'man of the hour' Sir Garnet Wolseley, the handsome gentleman gazing directly at the viewer on the right of the cartoon. As in Frith's painting, the 'manly' Wolseley acts as a rebuff. Admiral Beauchamp Seymour, with his arms crossed and assuming the role allocated

to the Archbishop of York in Frith's painting, is looking disapprovingly at Wilde. Both men had played pivotal roles in the 1882 Anglo-Egyptian War. Rewarded with peerages, these national heroes are surrounded by statesmen: Prime Minister Gladstone; Lord Randolph Churchill; Spencer Cavendish, the Duke of Devonshire; Lord Salisbury and Sir Stafford Northcote, Conservative leaders in the Lords and Commons respectively. Yet the 'manly' men appear to have lost out to the womanising Wilde, who is capturing the young ladies' attention. This cavalcade of celebrity-all-sorts reflects the actual confusion of the social order at a Royal Academy Private View, where the guest had no idea of who would materialise next out of the sea of faces: a discarded royal mistress or an evangelical Prime Minister; a great literary writer or a sensation novelist; an admiral or an actor-manager. There is something almost Trollopian in this allegory of 'the way we live now'.

The relationship between the *Private Views* of Frith and Furniss remains enigmatic. There is no record of Furniss seeing Frith's painting in his studio before its inclusion in the Royal Academy summer show. However, the subject of Frith's next great panorama had been an open secret for more than a year. In December 1881, Edmund Yates reported in 'What the World Says':

Mr Frith, RA, has found an excellent subject for his special talent – 'The Private View of the Royal Academy Exhibition'. In this the artist proposes to represent the various well-known persons who are ordinarily to be found at these gatherings. Mr Browning and Mr Oscar Wilde have recently given sittings to Mr Frith.<sup>50</sup>

While the latter claim seems unlikely, some of those depicted, including Gladstone, did sit for Frith, while others sent their photograph.<sup>51</sup> Sala, who stands out in the painting by virtue of his trademark white waistcoat, sent him a photograph on 8 December 1881 with a letter explaining his outward appearance of conformity:

I will send you a photo, which Mrs. Sala declares to be the best [...] that has been taken of me. Don't forget the white waistcoat. I have worn one every day for five-and-twenty years [...] I am old and poor, but I don't regret the outlay on my laundry. You can't very well murder when you have a white waistcoat on. By donning that snowy garment you have, in a manner, given hostages to respectability.<sup>52</sup>

The *Newcastle Courant* was also aware of Frith's next cause célèbre: 'A private view day is certainly a great event, for it brings together great people of all kinds. So great an event is it, indeed, that it has formed the subject, we believe, this year [1882] of one of Mr. Frith's pictures.'<sup>53</sup> But how do we account for the number of celebrities who appear in both paintings? Can it really be coincidence?

Frith worked on his picture during most of 1881 and nearly the whole of 1882. In 2008 Christie's sold an oil sketch for the painting that was signed and dated 1882 (Fig. 76). The sale catalogue noted:

many of the figures are no more than mannequins who have yet to be given the features of people in the public eye. We cannot, for example, recognise Millais, Trollope, du Maurier, Agnew, Thompson, Benedict or Baroness Burdett-Coutts. Gladstone is merely a balding nonentity, unidentifiable as the prime minister, and Frith himself is only a shadowy presence. Others who feature in the finished work – Irving, Ellen Terry, Huxley, Eaton, Mr Burdett-Coutts<sup>54</sup> – are absent altogether. All must have been late additions [...] Too often figures that appear only in the finished work look what in fact they were, afterthoughts that have not been wholly assimilated and retain an element of awkwardness and strain.<sup>55</sup>

Did Furniss's cartoon suggest to Frith some of these 'late additions'? One figure who was clearly not a late addition was Wilde, who stands in the same prominent position in the oil sketch that he occupies in the finished painting.



Fig. 76  
Compositional sketch for 'The Private View, 1881 (The Private View at the Royal Academy, 1881)' 1882, oil on canvas, 60 x 114 cm, Mercer Art Gallery, Harrogate Borough Council (Cat. 00)

### The Private View at the Royal Academy

Catalogued simply as *The Private View, 1881*, Frith's painting was duly exhibited at the Summer Exhibition opening on 7 May 1883. Frith achieved his goal, with the picture protected from crowds of admirers by a rail.<sup>56</sup> However, this was his last popular success: failing to move with the times, he refused to recognise or accommodate new movements in art.<sup>57</sup> Given his popular appeal, Frith could afford to be relaxed about hostile criticism, of which there was a good deal. 'Vulgar' was a word often used to describe the great panoramas and the epithet was bestowed on *The Private View* by the *Saturday Review*: 'it has many of the qualities which attract a mob in a picture gallery. It is all on the surface – just like a straggling crowd – very spick and span. Full of portraits of all sorts of celebrities, great and very little, and it is perfectly vulgar.'<sup>58</sup> Other reviews were just as critical, with even the normally friendly *Times* critic commenting:

There is no disguising the painful truth that the picture is a failure, instinct with all the worst faults of *The Derby Day* and *The Railway Station*. The portraits are recognisable, for the names are painted on the frame, but that is all that can be said for them; and the slightness of the work, the thinness of the painting, the utter superficiality of the whole, carry the picture outside the range of criticism.<sup>59</sup>

Frith's earlier scenes of modern life had been praised for bringing together rich and poor, gentry and mountebanks – just as railway stations and racecourses did in real life. *The Derby Day* had been hailed as 'the picture of the age'.<sup>60</sup> *The Private View* was deemed no more than 'a painting of the celebrities of London gathered together in the rooms of the Academy'.<sup>61</sup> Unfazed by the criticism, Frith simply observed: 'Pictures composed of groups of well-known people are always very popular at the Academy, and "The Private View" was no exception to that rule'.<sup>62</sup> Mr Punch concurred:

After the Private View at the Royal Academy Last Friday

First Lady: oh, it was delightful! So amusing!

Second Lady: Such a crush! The heat something too awful; but everybody there.

Third Lady: I was in the Academy from eleven to six. We lunched there. Mr X pointed out all the celebrities to us.

First Lady: Yes. It was most interesting; and what wonderful costumes.

Second Lady: Weren't they! I saw Miss Ellen Terry and Mr Gladstone and Mr Hare, and Sir Frederick [sic] Leighton. But I couldn't see Mr Irving. I was told he was there.<sup>63</sup>

Third Lady: I just caught a glimpse of him as he was leaving.

Second Lady: No! did you? I wish I had. I've never seen him off the stage. Jenny pointed out Mr Toole to us.<sup>64</sup>

Fourth Lady: Yes, dear; but I found out afterwards that I had made a mistake. It wasn't Toole it was Sir Vernon Harcourt; but they're both so much alike.

Second Lady: And then the Artists, you know. Mr Forls Hood was with us most of the time, and he pointed them all out to us. There was Mr Calderon, you know, who always paints *Chateaux*

*d'Espagne*, looking anything but a Spaniard with his long curly flaxen hair and youthful face of true Saxon type.<sup>65</sup>

Third Lady: Yes and Mr Millais! Why, he looks quite a small boy.

Fourth Lady: But, Mr Storey, who was the architect of Story's [sic] Gate! He might be, as Mr Hood said, a Life-Guardsman.<sup>66</sup>

First Lady: They were all there. We were badly off for lunch, but made up for it with cake and lemonade.

Second Lady: Ah! There's nothing in the whole Season I like so much as a Private View Day at the Royal Academy.

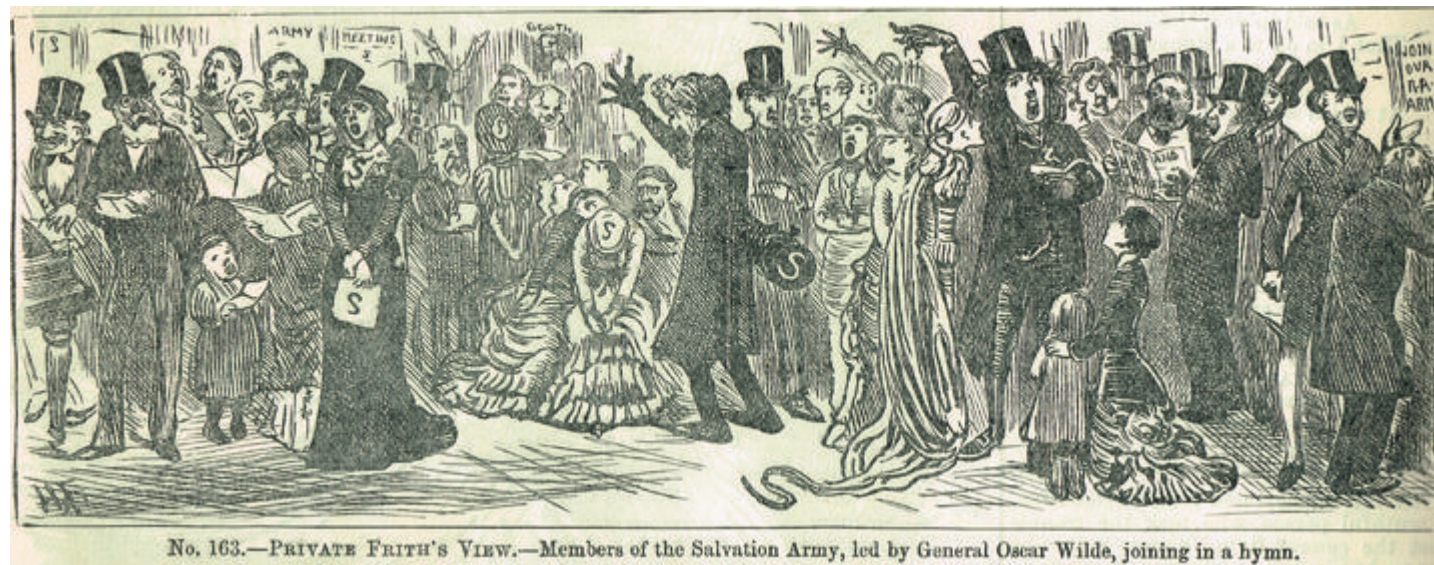
Enter Gentleman.

Gentleman: Royal Academy! So, you've been to the Show. What did you think of the Pictures?

All (surprised): The Pictures! Oh, we hadn't time to see any Pictures.<sup>67</sup>

Gladstone, Terry, Irving, Calderon, Millais, and Leighton all appear in Frith's *Private View*, an uncanny case of Life imitating Art.

Fig. 77  
After Harry Furniss *Private Frith's View* published in *Punch*, 12 May 1883, wood engraving



Furniss could not resist having another go at Frith. On 12 May 1883 *Punch* carried a ludicrous pastiche of Frith's *The Private View* as *Private Frith's View*, depicting Frith's characters as members of a Salvation Army choir led by General Oscar Wilde (Fig. 77). The accompanying text helpfully interprets Frith's painting:

A number of celebrities have joined the Salvation Army, and, having hired a room in the Academy for a Sunday Camp Meeting, have brought their hymn books, and the majority of them are joining heart and soul in a hymn, which is being led by the aesthetic Mr Oscar Wilde, while Mr Sala, having lost his place in the book, is giving echoes in the background [...] Mr Frith has most considerately placed the names of the celebrities represented underneath [...] it will be a most valuable picture [...] when all photographs of the persons here represented shall have faded away, and their likenesses everywhere been destroyed – excepting those in *Mr Punch's* unique collection, which will ever exist to answer doubts, decide bets, restore certainty and correctly teach history'.<sup>68</sup>

Frith's *The Private View* certainly allows us to gain a better understanding of the complex nature of the Victorian art scene. However, his critique of the Aesthetic craze is compromised, blunted by the infiltration of Aesthetic values into society at large. Wilde's dubious status as a fashionable dandy was about to be ameliorated by his engagement to Constance Lloyd on 23 November 1883. Ironically, Frith's *Private View* gave Aestheticism a gloss of respectability rather than hastening its demise.

Wilde would later take his revenge, describing Frith as a painter who has 'done so much to elevate painting to the dignity of photography',<sup>69</sup> and he included the following exchange in *The Critic as Artist*:

ERNEST It seems that a lady once gravely asked the remorseful Academician, as you call him, if his

celebrated picture of 'A Spring Day at Whiteley's', or 'Waiting for the Last Omnibus', or some subject of that kind, was all painted by hand.

GILBERT And was it?<sup>70</sup>

The 'remorseful Academician' is clearly meant to be Frith, and the titles are spoofs of his populist subjects.<sup>71</sup> Any remorse Frith might have felt about singling out Wilde as a representative of the Aesthetic craze came later, when the scandal surrounding Wilde's arrest and prosecution made even the slightest association with him problematic. Frith wrote to the owner of his painting, Alfred Pope, a Dorset brewer, offering to paint Wilde out of the picture:

April 20 1895

Ashenurst

7 Sydenham Rise

SE

My dear Mr. Pope

I will do whatever you wish as regards Wilde – it is most unfortunate for the picture but what could be so inconceivably unexpected! The man was then posing as an esthete and critic of everything and therefore suitable as a model for such a profession.

Would it be well to wait the issue of the trial? Then if you wish it I will paint the head and replace it by another without any expense to you beyond the carriage of the picture to and fro –

Mrs Frith who you will be sorry to hear has not been well for some time sends her love to Mrs Pope, confesses her guilt as a bad correspondent and promises amendment.

With kindest regards to yours and you,

I am

ever sincerely yours,

W. P. Frith<sup>72</sup>

In spite of 'the issue of the trial', Mr Pope did not take up Frith's offer.