

The Cambridge Drawing Society

Nulla dies sine linea



The Cambridge Drawing Society has a long history, dating from 1882. It was founded by Lady Sandys, wife of the Public Orator*, and held its meetings in the drawing rooms of Victorian Cambridge (perhaps that's where the name came from!). Meetings eventually moved to Mary C Greene's studio off St Andrew's Street, and early exhibitions were held in the Rate Room at the old Guildhall (the first public exhibition was held in 1906). The constitution was drawn up at the time of the first exhibition, by Mrs Seward, wife of the Master of Downing*, and has needed little alteration since then. The aims of the Society are described as "in general, to encourage the Arts of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture in Cambridge and District, and particularly to promote Exhibitions of Members' work". From its earliest days, though, the Society has resisted being just a University spin-off, and has always been open to both Town and Gown: even proudly proclaiming in a 1969 pamphlet that a "busman and a University Professor of Divinity" were members "at one and the same time"! The Society motto is taken from Apelles (who is supposed to have portrayed Alexander the Great): "Draw a line every day". Apelles used to hide behind his pictures to eavesdrop on criticism - that's where our hanging screens come in useful to this very day!

The society has had many distinguished names on its membership list – Gwen Raverat, Cecil Beaton and Ronald Searle to name but three of them. Cecil Beaton, the famous photographer and movie designer, was a member as an undergraduate in the 20's. One likes to imagine him, with his pictures under his arm, distastefully crossing the market square, which he describes in his autobiography as "horrid" with the "noise of bicycle bells and the smell of pipes in everybody's face" (no change there, then!) He goes on to say: "I wish I could find the really best people at Cambridge, if there are any." One hopes the Drawing Society met his needs! Gwen Raverat is well-known for her wood engravings and for her delightful book about her childhood in Cambridge, *Period Piece*. Ronald Searle was of course the cartoonist creator of St Trinian's, and illustrator of the Molesworth books.

The Society continues to hold its main selected art exhibition at the Cambridge Guildhall - a key event in the artistic life of the city! Usually 300 or so recent works are on display, submitted by artists from within a thirty mile radius of Great St Mary's. New candidates for membership are required to submit four works to the annual exhibition selection committee. A second exhibition is usually held later in the year, and in recent years this has taken place in the Leys School, Cambridge.

The Society has now has a website that can be visited on <http://www.cambridgedrawingsociety.org>

Richard Baker
updated May 2009

* Yes, ladies in early documents of the Society are identified by their husbands' occupation and status - shocking I know!