“Every wise woman buildeth her house”: the (Royal) Female School of Art at Queen Square from 1860

In the first six months of 1860 Louisa Gann, with the help of many people associated with the Female School of Art and with the schools at South Kensington, assembled a Board of Management, set up a company and acquired new premises for the Female School of Art in Queen Square. It is thanks to this, and to the subsequent persistence and success of Louisa and the people around her in enabling the school to continue to operate, free of debt, that this property today funds the Foundation’s grant-giving programme.

Image: Female School of Art, 1860 (Victoria and Albert Museum)

The first decade of the newly-independent Female School’s life, 1860-1870, was an endless round of fundraising and marketing. Precarious finances and the debt on the building in Queen Square, combined with a national economic recession which resulted in cuts to the salaries of many of the teachers in the government-funded schools of design, including that of the Headmistress, Louisa Gann, meant that it was imperative to raise both capital donations and fee income from classes which would attract wealthier students. To achieve these aims, the school promoted its exclusively female teaching environment, increased the number and scope of classes beyond the ‘junior’ curriculum of the national schools of design, and cultivated links with royalty, with prominent members of the art world, and with campaigners for women’s education and work. Partly to solve existing financial problems, and partly to expand and improve the school’s teaching facilities to optimise future financial viability, a spectacular fund-raising event was organised in 1864. Henry Cole, Director of the Department of Science and Art and South Kensington took a leading role in organising this event at the Royal Horticultural Gardens at Cromwell Road, which was opened and attended by royalty and attracted several thousand of the middle class and aristocratic public.

“Every wise woman buildeth her house” was the slogan printed on certificates given to those who contributed to the success of this event, and its message of self-reliance remained a watchword for the school’s objectives under Louisa Gann’s headship. The school went from strength to strength over the decades to the close of the century, with the grant of a Royal Charter in 1887 and further

extensions and improvements to the buildings in Queen Square in the 1890s. Funding was secured for a number of scholarships to assist economically-disadvantaged students. From 1879 housing intended primarily for the Queen Square students coming from elsewhere in Britain and Europe was available in Brunswick Square, provided by Louisa Twining, with the assistance of Angela Burdett-Coutts. Some students, studied for only a few months, before moving on to other courses of study, either in London or abroad, others completed the full Schools of Design certificates at Queen Square then South Kensington while the great majority completed only as much of the course as they needed to pursue more regular – and more humdrum – work. Interviewed in 1894 for the periodical *The Woman at Home*, Gann claimed that "the great majority of our pupils are studying art as a profession; every one who reaches a certain standard with us is almost certain to obtain a fair position". Louisa Gann and her staff developed networks of contacts, for instance in the newly-emerging girls public day schools, with the Society for the Promotion of Employment for Women, and with the Victoria Press in order to give students both experience and opportunity for teaching and other work. Supporting these initiatives, special classes were run in commercially-used techniques such as wood-engraving, monochrome illustration for newspapers and chromolithography.

Image: Illustrated London News

Inevitably, we know more of those alumni who pursued successful careers as exhibiting artists and illustrators, some of them completing their studies in the Royal Academy Schools. Such alumni include Helen Allingham, Susan Ruth Canton, Ida Rose Lovering, Alice Elfrida Manly, Henrietta Rae, Florence Reason and Louisa Starr. Looking back over thirty-five years as Headmistress, however, Louisa Gann clearly remembered many more young women who had successfully pursued less prominent artistic careers, but nevertheless had been given the skills to find work.

In the long run, however, Henry Cole's scepticism about the ability of the Female School of Art to be self-supporting was shown to be well-founded. The Royal Female School of Art had difficulty in competing, on the one hand with the bigger and more conveniently-located schools of design in London, and on the other hand with the emerging opportunities for training in art, painting and sculpture, in a freer creative atmosphere, offered by institutions such as the Slade, the university colleges, the Royal Academy and the Female School at South Kensington. By 1907 it had become

unsustainable as an independent teaching institution and in 1909 it ceased to operate and was transferred to the control of London County Council, initially via the Central School of Art and Design (now part of the University of the Arts London), with which it was merged from 1914.