

PATRONS OF THE ARTS

Patronage is not a new concept and neither are independent schools, but put them together and the impact can be electrifying, says **Emma Love**

At a time when there seems to be constant cuts in funding, the role that independent schools play in supporting the arts is even more vital. Of course, teaching is always at the core of what's on offer but schools are also well placed to act as patrons, whether by financially helping emerging artists in the next stage of their career, providing a platform for well-established heavyweights to exhibit work in a different context within the wider community, or simply inspiring young people to think artistically and outside of the box.

For several schools, an annual arts festival where pupils pair up with local organisations to produce work, which is then performed or exhibited outside school grounds, is a key way of doing this. Take the Oxford Festival of the Arts, founded by then head of Magdalen College School, Dr Timothy Hands, a decade ago, which the school still sponsors. Last year it attracted more than 1000 visitors to over 100 events at 20 venues across the city. 'The festival is usually the culmination of our outreach projects that run throughout the year,' says current headmistress Helen Pike, referencing a cricket-themed storytelling project with the local South East Asian community as one of the events planned for the forthcoming festival. 'It originally began as a celebration of the school's artistic potential but the partnership element has really grown. We're providing something distinctive with and for the city of Oxford that benefits everyone.'

Similarly, head of Norwich College, Steffan Griffiths set up the Young Norfolk Arts festival five years ago as a multi-art platform for young people. 'I came from Magdalen so I knew that such things were possible,' he recalls. 'I work with a host of organisations, from the Norfolk Country Youth Orchestra to Sistema, which transforms lives through music. We've built a coalition of the willing if you like, raising the profile and giving exposure to projects that were already happening through a very inclusive festival.' Last year, events ranged from a screening of films at Norwich Cinema City organised by pupils from Norfolk's secondary schools, in association with BBC Young Film Makers, to an exhibition of paintings and drawings by Year 10 pupils from three schools (including Norwich) at Norwich Cathedral, based on a workshop with local artist Alec Cumming. Griffiths believes that giving children the opportunity to work on projects like these, with peers from different backgrounds, is a great way to harness creativity and lateral thinking. 'It's an enriching process. Any collaborations directly benefit our pupils: there's no sense in which we think we're giving more than we're getting. It's a two-way street.'



Nurturing the next generation of artists at St Mary's Calne

his idea of mutual exchange can also be witnessed at the Bola Arts Centre, which is owned by Cheltenham Ladies' College. The building's primary function is to host school performances, exhibitions and events, but the PAC acts as a creative hub for the city's arts companies too, with rehearsal spaces, a video editing suite, a dance studio and foyer gallery space. It's a regular venue for the four Cheltenham festivals (music, jazz, literature and science) and the Cheltenham Youth Theatre, and in recent months it has hosted a bestselling exhibition of work by artist Gill Holloway (a former head of art at the college) and a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at Bristol Old Vic's theatre school offering free tickets for the public.

Nearby, St Edward's School, Oxford, is the principal sponsor of groundbreaking theatre centre The North Wall. Built on-site, on what was once the indoor pool, it has a space that goes way beyond the school.

The *Guardian* theatre critic Lyn Gardner has commented: 'The North Wall is a crucial part of theatre's wider ecology, providing a platform for cutting-edge theatre that inspires both audiences and emerging artists. Without it, Oxford would be poorer and so would the whole of British theatre.'

Over the last decade the venue has gained a national reputation for championing new writing and rising stars (The North Wall has recently employed its first writer in residence), and producing plays by emerging talent. 'Broadly, our mission is about helping young artists and we are well positioned to show work that is thought provoking and really pushes boundaries,' says

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former artistic director Lucy Maycock. She cites ArtsLab, The North Wall's free programme of residential arts placements for young artists aged 16 to 25 as an example of how the school supports the theatre industry.

'We have two or three associate companies with whom we have developed a relationship, such as Theatre Ad Infinitum, to whom we offer space, accommodation and food. They are overjoyed because there is so little funding and we act as an incubator, helping them to develop their work.' The key, says Maycock, is to always start with the outward-looking question: 'How can we be useful?' Sometimes the theatre or visual arts programming serendipitously ties in with the school curriculum but 'everything we do, I see as educational'. This includes the programme of art exhibitions (there are plans to expand the gallery space), a highlight of which this year is 'Ken Russell's *Teddy Girls' and Boys*', exhibiting 50 photographs of London's youth culture taken by the British film director and being shown together for the first time.

In fact, many schools have long subscribed to the notion that art (and architecture) improves the minds of the young: the chapel at Marlborough College was the first building for which works of art were specifically commissioned for this purpose and at Radley College, the Sewell Centre Gallery follows the ethos of its founder William Sitwell who believed that art nourishes the spirit. The gallery, which shows six contemporary exhibitions each year, is used as an educational resource, not just for art but for all departments. 'Last year we had a big optical art show

St Edward's School production of Hamlet at the North Wall Arts Centre



ABOVE: Lisa Wright's oil on canvas exhibited as part of The Royal West of England Academy Exhibition at The Atkinson Gallery
BELOW: Millfield's on-site gallery exhibited the sculpture and drawings of Susie MacMarry at the end of last term

featuring work by Bridget Riley,' recounts curator Amanda Jewell. 'The science department brought the boys in to talk about optical illusions and the music department gave a lecture about popular music in the 1950s, at the time of Op art. Many of the works we show are borrowed from private collections so it's about making significant pieces of art accessible to the pupils but also to the public.'

Millfield School also has its own gallery on site – the Atkinson Gallery, which over the years has shown work by art world stars such as sculptor Marc Quinn and photojournalist Don McCullin, while St Mary's Calne and Bryanston have both recently held noteworthy exhibitions in London last year.

'Bryanston Today', which took place at the Mall Galleries, was a selection of work by current and former pupils, including Howard Hodgkin and Lucien Freud. Not only did it showcase well-known artworks in an unusual context and promote the artistic capability of Bryanston, it was also an opportunity for budding artists to make new connections and be inspired. 'For students to be showing alongside a painter like Howard Hodgkin is



Student art from Heathfield School

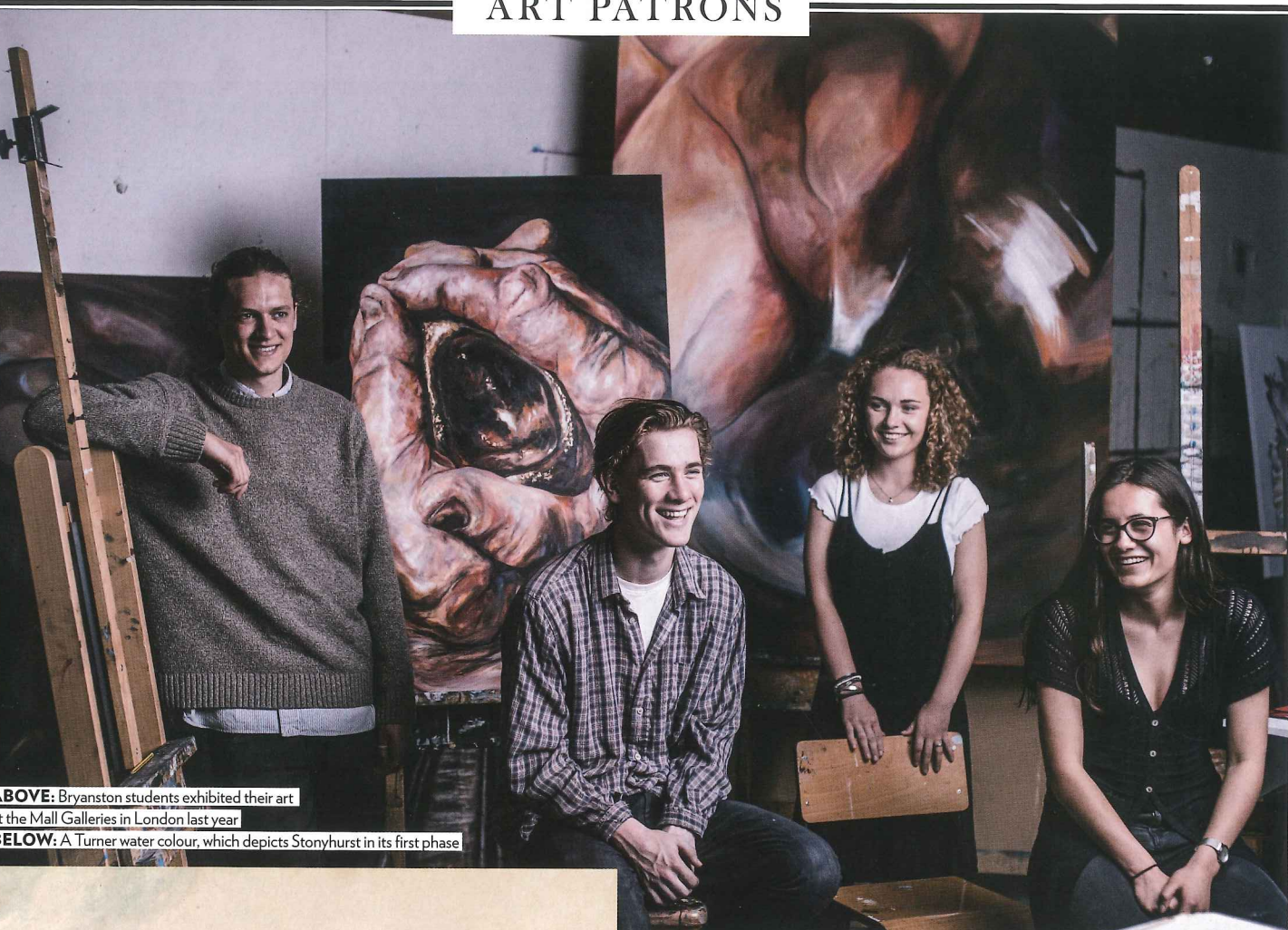
such a unique opportunity,' says head of art Mike Owens. And in a neat link that demonstrates how the school continues to be involved with artists long after they've left, Bryanston bought a painting by former pupil Poppy Valentine Horden, which was shown at the Saatchi Gallery.

When it comes to schools acquiring work however, Stonyhurst has to be the expert. The school has been collecting artefacts since the Renaissance and now has the biggest museum collection of any independent school (including old masters and medieval manuscripts). For curator, Jan Graffius, loaning these works to national and international art institutions increases their value as a learning tool. 'The works are part of British history and every time we lend them out we draw in a new audience,' she says. 'These objects tell stories about English Catholicism and they are really relevant today. You only have to look at the world to see where history is being forgotten and people are being persecuted because of religious intolerance.'

Artists themselves can draw in new audiences and fire up pupils' enthusiasm for the industry, especially if they are taking part in an artist-in-resident scheme. Schools usually provide accommodation, art studio facilities



PHOTOS: THE ATKINSON GALLERY; BEN BLACKALL



ABOVE: Bryanston students exhibited their art at the Mall Galleries in London last year

BELOW: A Turner water colour, which depicts Stonyhurst in its first phase



and a living wage in return for a fixed amount of teaching hours each week. With such a reciprocal arrangement, it's no wonder that placements are snapped up. 'Last year we had 25 applicants from various disciplines,' recalls Erica Williams, head of art at Downside. 'It was my first experience of interviewing someone for a role like this and I assumed that everyone applying would be coming out of art school but there were artists of all ages, each with slightly different reasons for wanting to be in this environment.'

The school decided on figurative painter Tim Patrick who wanted to 'continue making work but with a more altruistic outlook', with the aim of strengthening Downside's fine art output. Patrick's average week at the school ranges from running a drawing drop-in for GCSE students to giving portfolio and interview advice for those about to sit A-levels. 'The pupils are really keen to discover what's next and are about to enter a world that I've just come from so I have something

immediately fresh to offer,' he enthuses.

For painter Jake Bee, currently in his third year as artist in residence at Fettes College, it was an interest in teaching that initially led him to apply for the post. 'I think it's mutually beneficial,' he comments. 'The pupils can see the ups and downs of life as a professional artist and, for me, it's great to have access to a space and all the facilities and be paid. Personally, I find it a great balance between being involved with the pupils and still having time to focus on my work.'

It's not only painters who are picked for this kind of role either. At Heathfield, the school's partnership with the London College of Fashion is enhanced by having a fashion designer in residence (this is currently menswear designer Nicci James), who organises the high-profile end-of-year fashion show and works alongside students in textile lessons. At Giggleswick, the focus is on ceramics and pottery; ceramicist in residence Matthew Wilcock, winner of the 2015 BBC *Great British Pottery Throwdown*, is in his third year at the school.

Other ways in which schools interact with the art world include themed trips abroad and to UK galleries, visits from professionals, entering students work into national competitions, such as the BP Portrait Award, and dedicated art weeks. Last year at Badminton, pupils worked alongside two practicing artists with a connection to Bristol; Rob Wheeler, who taught graffiti techniques, and textile designer Harriet Popham.

All these activities that fall under the patronage umbrella not only encourage pupils to further their education at arts colleges like the Slade School of Fine Art or the Chelsea Arts School, but benefit professional artists at various stages of their career - and the public. As Pike concludes on the subject, 'Every way you look at this it's a win.' ■