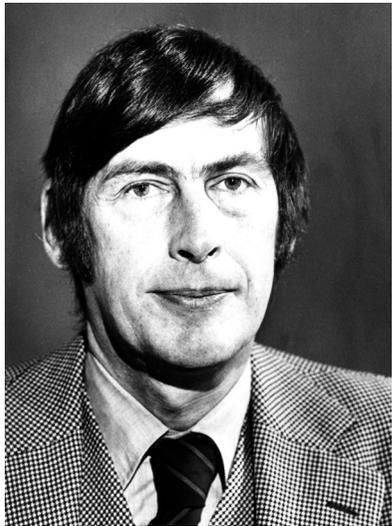


Dennis Farr, CBE

Energetic director of the Courtauld Institute Galleries and propagandist for 20th-century British art and trustee of National Heritage for many years

Dennis Larry Ashwell Farr, museum director and art historian: born Luton, Bedfordshire 3 April 1929; Assistant Witt Librarian, Courtauld Institute of Art 1952-54, Director, Courtauld Institute Galleries 1980-93; Assistant Keeper, Tate Gallery 1954-64; Curator, Paul Mellon Collection, Washington DC 1965-66; Senior Lecturer in Fine Art, and Deputy Keeper, University Art Collections, Glasgow University 1967-69; Director, City Museums and Art Gallery, Birmingham 1969-80; President, Museums Association 1979-80; Chairman, Association of Art Historians 1983-86; General Editor, Clarendon Studies in the History of Art 1985-2001; CBE 1991; married 1959 Diana Pullein-Thompson (one son, one daughter); died Guildford, Surrey 6 December 2006.



UPP/TopFoto

Dennis Farr was one of the relatively few museum curators whose career spanned directorships in the regions and in the capital. From 1980 to 1993, he was Director of the Courtauld Institute Galleries in London, following 11 years as Director of the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. He was also an outstanding historian of, and propagandist for, 20th-century British art and several of his books have remained standard works.

Educated at Luton Grammar School, where he was encouraged in

his ambition to study the history of art by an enthusiastic art teacher, he went to the Courtauld Institute of Art, London University, in 1947. At the time, Anthony Blunt had just become director and the student body consisted predominantly of ex-service men and women. At Blunt's suggestion, Farr wrote his MA dissertation on William Etty, the early 19th-century painter of nudes, which was subsequently published with a full catalogue (*William Etty*, 1958).

In 1954 he was appointed Assistant Keeper at the Tate Gallery, just when the National Gallery and Tate Gallery Act gave full independent status to the Tate for the first time. Farr described his early years there in an illuminating reminiscence in a recent number of the *Burlington Magazine* containing numerous amusing anecdotes, including a description of the then director, John Rothenstein, punching the well-known, irascible collector Douglas Cooper on the nose.

He worked on several exhibitions, notably a Duncan Grant retrospective, and he was on the committee of the legendary "Romantic Movement" exhibition celebrating the 10th anniversary of the Council of Europe in 1959.

But the long-term fruit of his period at the Tate was the catalogue *Modern British Paintings, Drawings and Sculpture* (1964), which he wrote with Mary Chamot and Martin Butlin, and a general book, *British Sculpture Since 1945* (1965).

Relatively brief interludes as curator of the Paul Mellon Collection in Washington and then as Senior Lecturer in Fine Art at Glasgow University led to the appointment which turned out to be central to his career, the directorship of the Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery. The art gallery is outstanding among the regional collections in England and under Farr's direction it enjoyed a golden period, marked by major acquisitions, even though it suffered from financial cuts in the later 1970s. His calm demeanour and human kindness and the encouragement he gave to his staff were widely recognised and appreciated. His high standing in Birmingham is attested in a variety of ways, not least in his appointment as JP and the award of an honorary doctorate by the university.

In 1980 he was appointed Director of the Courtauld Institute Galleries where his first task was the integration and display of the recent munificent bequest of Count Antoine Seilern, the Princes Gate collection. This was mainly of Flemish and Italian paintings and drawings, and it added a new dimension to Samuel Courtauld's original collection of French Impressionists and Post-Impressionists.

A few years later, he planned and supervised the collection's move from its modest home in Woburn Square to its present grand surroundings in the fine rooms at Somerset House. We

worked together at this time and he was always a model colleague. The new galleries were opened to the public in 1990 and he was appointed CBE the following year.

Dennis Farr's rather laid-back manner belied a great deal of energy and commitment. As well as the administrative tasks of his directorships, he engaged in research, particularly, though by no means exclusively, on 20th-century British art, and produced numerous publications. Most notable is his volume in the *Oxford History of English Art* series, *English Art 1870-1940* (1978) and his monumental book on the sculptor *Lynn Chadwick (Lynn Chadwick: sculptor, 1990)*, written with Eva Chadwick) which has run to four editions.

Nor did he shirk the demands of the public arena of his profession. Indeed, he has remained unique in having

been both President of the Museums Association and Chairman of the Association of Art Historians. On the academic side, he was editor of the *Clarendon Studies in the History of Art*.

Retirement from the Courtauld in 1994 gave him more time for his favourite hobby, riding, in pursuit of which he and his wife, Diana Pullein-Thompson, well-known author of children's books, moved to Haslemere in Surrey. Yet he continued to be in demand as a guest curator of exhibitions and he took on a Francis Bacon retrospective at the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven in 1999.

The career of Dennis Farr provides an eloquent example of an able manager who was also a gifted curator and a productive scholar - a combination which some would now wrongly claim to be impracticable.

by Michel Kauffmann

First published *The Independent* 14 December 2006 and reproduced here with their permission.
<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/dennis-farr-428324.html>



Photo above: Visitors today at the Courtauld Institute studying *The Seilern Triptych: The Entombment of Christ*, circa 1425, attrib. Robert Campin (1375/1379-1444), which is part of the Count Antoine Seilern, the Princes Gate Collection. Image: Courtesy The Courtauld Gallery.