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**James Stourton. *Kenneth Clark: Life, Art and Civilisation*.
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Jeffrey Meyers, Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, vjmeyers@sbcglobal.net

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Renaissance Man

Kenneth Clark (1903–85) embodied the Renaissance concept of *sprezzatura*, defined in Castiglione's *The Courtier* as apparently effortless achievement. The handsome and brilliant, charming and charismatic Clark was an admirable man of many talents who attracted powerful patrons: art historians, government ministers, even royalty. A gifted writer and administrator, an artist in temperament and in words, he was good at raising money for worthy causes and glided gracefully from triumph to triumph. The intelligent and perceptive James Stourton, utilizing his considerable expertise as the former chairman of Sotheby's UK, propels his excellent narrative in a clear and lively style, and pays serious attention to Clark's impressive books.

After Oxford University, Clark studied with the powerful art connoisseur and proponent of "tactile values," Bernard Berenson, in his picture-crammed Villa I Tatti outside Florence. K (as he was called) learned a lot from BB's conceited and insincere monologues, and from his ability to juggle a wife and mistress in the same household. But he perforce ignored BB's mercenary relations with the devious art dealer Joseph Duveen, for whom he attributed dubious works to major artists in exchange for bountiful fees.

At Oxford Clark had met the university graduate Jane Martin, "a friendly, unpretentious girl, and attractive in a vivacious way," and married her in 1927 (46). Jane both worshipped and tormented her husband, devoting her life and social talents to him, but indulging in temper tantrums and alcoholic binges. In the late 1930s Jane noticed a sudden change in Clark's attitude, perhaps a lack of sexual interest, that heralded the first of his many love affairs. Sex was not Clark's prime motivation—he rejected one frisky woman as "too lecherous"—but "enjoyed writing to his girlfriends and basking in their admiration" (243). His mistresses "were divided between grand society ladies, with whom his liaisons were flirtatious, and artistic women with whom he had affairs" (243). The latter included the actress Irene Worth and the wives of complaisant artist friends: Myfanwy Piper and his *maîtresse en titre* Janet Stone. The shy engraver Reynolds Stone, "wrapped up in his obsessions, was pleased for her that she had found such a brilliant admirer" (301). Clark felt protected from emotional commitment when his mistresses were safely married.

Friends were fascinated by Clark's character. Indulging in contrived modesty and ironic self-deprecation, he exclaimed that his "whole life has been a harmless confidence trick" (2). At Oxford he gave the impression of being "incredibly learned, fastidious, almost cold" (36). The novelist Anthony Powell remembered him as "intensely ambitious, quite ruthless, ready for a brilliant career" (36). Graham Sutherland thought "he was elegant, a Renaissance prince. But I was also frightened of him because he

didn't suffer fools gladly" (52). He impressed the diarist James Lees-Milne, who wrote, "I have always regarded him as the greatest man of my generation.... [He] Was a proud, aloof man with a gracious manner that did not put one at ease. But whenever he gave praise one felt that God Almighty had himself conferred a benediction" (401).

Clark always maintained a salutary balance between administrative duties and dutiful writing—sometimes on the cushioned seat of his parked Bentley. He thought a good art historian should have a sound knowledge of documents, sympathetic imagination when responding to works of art and commitment to telling the truth. Rejecting Berenson's notion of connoisseurship, Clark studied the function of a work of art: why and in what circumstances was it painted, what does it represent and mean?

Clark's first appointment, in 1931, was Keeper of Fine Art at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, where he increased the gallery space and made important purchases of Italian and English pictures. In 1934, at the astonishing age of thirty, he became director of the National Gallery in London. King George V and Queen Mary wanted him to be Surveyor of the King's Pictures—the royal collection had 7,000 paintings, the National Gallery owned a mere 2,000—but Clark felt he couldn't take on two demanding jobs. Determined to secure his services, the king and queen, on an unprecedented visit to the National Gallery, made an offer he couldn't refuse.

Reckoned to be a brilliant director, Clark was the first to buy Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings for the Gallery. When World War II broke out he foresaw the danger and safely stored all the art in underground caves in north Wales. In wartime London, when there was no music, art, theater or cinema, he led the cultural resistance to Hitler. He organized concerts in the Gallery by the pianist Myra Hess and other leading musicians and, though the orchestra wisely ignored him, even conducted Leopold Mozart's *Toy Symphony*.

With the paintings safely stored, Clark became the head of the Film Division of the propagandistic Ministry of Information. The Treasury gave him the formidable sum of £770,000 for the difficult task of keeping up morale during the military defeats in Europe. Clark also ran the War Artists Advisory Committee, which led to an acrimonious clash with the rebarbative Wyndham Lewis. The artist was paid £300 in advance for a painting of *A Canadian War Factory*, which he completed but never delivered. Lewis felt that Clark personified all the smooth operators who creamed off the money at the expense of genuine artists like himself. Referring to Clark as Keeper of the King's Pictures, the impoverished Lewis declared: "How about a 'Keeper of the People's Pictures'? I think it's absurd because I don't have a cotton-mill I can't 'keep' something" (Meyers, *The Enemy*, 273).

After the war Clark continued his public triumphs. He was instrumental in the creation of the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden. Coached by Irene Worth when he became chairman of the newly established Independent Television Authority, he gave a pioneering series of talks that answered the question *Is Art Necessary?* His performance was successful and he took pleasure in his new role as film star. The poet Stephen Spender told him that the “lucidity and certainty with which you speak gives one a sense of the greatness of the art” (227).

Clark’s most accomplished work, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (1956), portrayed the human body as the central subject for art since classical antiquity. Justly proud of this book, he described it as “full of ideas and information, simplifying its complex subject without deformation, and in places almost eloquent” (257). In *Piero della Francesca* (1969) he observed that the rediscovery of the monumental work of his beloved painter “is part of the new classicism of which Cézanne and Seurat were the living manifestations” (230). Like most art colleagues, he admired the books of the Poussin scholar Anthony Blunt. When Blunt was revealed as the “Fourth Man” of the Cambridge spies, Clark exclaimed, “I am devastated—but I am not, in fact, surprised” (392).

I first saw the television series *Civilisation* (1969) when it appeared nearly fifty years ago and it has held up well since then. Taking all art for his province and mastering all the complex material, Clark presented the history of civilization in an intimate and engaging fashion. He claimed not to have done any special research for the massive project, which began in the Dark Ages, after the fall of the Roman Empire. He thought abstract art was a blind alley and ended the series with the onset of war in 1914. His program provided welcome cultural relief during the tense Cold War, the hot war in Vietnam and the student revolutions. Despite the shockingly poor condition of his teeth (impossible for a television presenter today), the brilliant populiser inspired an ecstatic response and mass adulation. The book sold 1.5 million copies.

In 1953 Clark had bought Saltwood Castle and its contents, near Hythe in Kent, for £28,000. The ancient fortress devoured his cash and he was forced to sell many of his paintings to maintain it. He had eight indoor staff, and three men to cater to Jane’s interest in gardens, entertained lavishly and lived well beyond his income. He also kept his favorite Mars bars locked in a safe. During his lifetime Clark built a separate house on the grounds and gave the castle to his older son. Alan Clark, Margaret Thatcher’s cabinet minister, was a notorious seducer and wildly indiscreet diarist. When I visited the crenellated towers of Saltwood in 1979, the witty and urbane Alan, who’d replaced most of the art with antique racing cars, proudly guided me around.

Jane had a severe stroke in 1973. When she died two years later the hopeful string of mistresses queued up to marry the man who'd inexorably progressed to a knighthood, Companion of Honour, Life Peerage (he also served well in the House of Lords) and finally achieved the ultimate prize: the Order of Merit, limited to the twenty-four most distinguished intellectuals in the kingdom.

In 1977 the sly seducer surprised his family, friends and lovers by marrying Nolwen Rice, a twice-married French-American widow, whom he'd met briefly in France. Nineteen years younger than Clark, she came equipped with an alluring seventeenth-century château in Normandy. She held her own in fierce power struggles with all her emotional and financial rivals, and as Clark's health failed eventually took control of his life. He left a fabulous estate of £5,315,000, as well as an art collection, which sold at Sotheby's in 1984 for £9 million, on the strength of Turner's *Seascape: Folkestone* that fetched £7,370,000.

Stourton concludes: Clark "was uniquely balanced between the worlds of scholarship, creativity and power.... His influence on the formation of so many institutions that offer the public greater access to art, theatre, opera and design is unparalleled—the only comparison can be with Maynard Keynes" (403).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

