

## 8<sup>th</sup> Anthony Powell Conference: Venice, October 2014 or What became of (Under) Wearing?

By Stephen Walker

Of the many possible topics which the 54 attendees at the 8<sup>th</sup> Anthony Powell Conference might have imagined they would be discussing, David Beckham's underpants was not one of them. But that is what they did in the final session at the Cini Foundation on San Giorgio on Saturday 11 October 2014.

It was an unexpected end to a triumphant occasion. Whether the discussion was prompted by Lisa Colletta's explanation of the difference between being nude and being naked or the Scandinavian inspired feminist reinterpretation of *Temporary Kings* or a lust for levity after a day and a half of intense Powellian archaeology was not clear.

What was clear was the success of the whole event. From the mingling at Florian's on the Thursday night through the five lectures, one Prosecco reception and a conference dinner plus a bonus trip to Vicenza, the expertise and efficiency of the speakers and organisers were radiantly obvious.

Elwin Taylor explained in his opening remarks that while failure is always an orphan, success has many parents. The paternity suits will rumble on and DNA testing may be necessary to decide whose signatures appear on the birth certificate. Elwin and his wife Susan will definitely appear. They organised the whole event and took immense pains to make sure that it was a success. Between them they made six reconnaissance trips to Venice. They took care of the smallest detail including a sophisticated and immensely helpful colour coding reminder system for menu



Photo Nick Birms

*Delegates assemble in the Sala Borges*

choices at the Do Forni restaurant on Friday night.

As they generously acknowledge they could not have done it without valuable contributions, advice and hard work from other people. Keith Marshall looked after the London end. Jeff Manley provided a backup talk and organised the trip to the Villa Valmarana in Vicenza referred to in *TK* (p 43). John Roe, apart from chairing the conference in his customary suave masterly way, also used his considerable local contacts to arrange a visit to the RAI headquarters at the Palazzo Labia with the help of Adriana Arban and Anna Crovato.

Elwin and Susan persuaded other members of their family including Malcolm Price and Susannah Taylor to help with the Delegates Book and the Registration formalities. Food is always important at conferences and with the invaluable help of Cannaregio residents Chris and Anna Wayman, Susan was able to make

excellent arrangements with the Do Forni restaurant and Rosa Salva, caterers since 1879, for the breakfasts, refreshments and reception. Finally the Society's thanks must go to the Cini foundation for their generous support and to the Master of Campus, Massimo Busetto, whose calm, friendly, multi-lingual helpfulness ensured a stress free stay.

Apart from good food, good accommodation and good company there were also good talks. Jonathan Black got the conference off to a flying start with an entertaining and insightful exploration of *AP and the rackets world of the British inter-war avant garde*. He demonstrated that AP was a more prescient and engaged observer of the art world than one might have thought. Nicholas Birms followed with a typically erudite and enthusiastic explanation of AP's relationship with Americans. He revealed that half of AP's readership was American and that he was an assiduous and prompt correspondent with those admirers who wrote to him. This included Nick's mother. He also pointed out that American reviewers and critics gave AP a kinder reception than English ones. Why this might be is no doubt a subject for another talk.

After lunch John Roe provided privileged access to the world of *TK* by taking us to the Palazzo Labia to see the Tiepolo wall and ceiling frescoes on which AP based the viewing of the Tiepolo painting of *Candaules and Gyges* in the Bragadin palazzo by the Widmerpools, Gwinnett, Glober and Brightman at the 1958 writers' conference. This set off Pamela's betrayal of Widmerpool leading to both their deaths.

On Saturday morning the attendees, still digesting the culinary delights of linguine with lobster sauce, Grant Marnier soufflé,



Photo John Goult

*Food is always important at conferences*

tiramisu, baked shin of veal, Mont Blanc and beef fillet in Barolo wine sauce were called upon to digest the cerebral delights of Dr Peter Kislinger fluently and swiftly taking us through the application of narratology to *Dance* via perspectivism, *mise-en-abyme*, *parti pris* and pragmatism. Without pausing for breath or coffee we plunged on with Prof. Lisa Colletta asking the question: is Venice in literature an image of death or vitality and joy? She pointed out via Thomas Mann and Henry James that although film has reduced the influence of literary culture, Venice, as the most written about city in literature, lives on. Marinetti may have called for the canals to be filled in with the rubble of past pallazzi but now the Venetians spend money on dredging to keep them open for tourists and celebrities.

Which brings us back to David Beckham's underpants. What would AP have made of this? Given his description of Pamela looking up at Tiepolo's ceiling as we all did on the Friday afternoon

*White trousers, thin as gauze,  
stretched skin-tight across elegantly  
compact small haunches,  
challengingly exhibited yet neatly  
formed.*

The answer is: quite a lot.

Is that a call for a follow up conference I hear? ■