

A portrait of George Gordon Byron, 6th Baron Byron, in Ottoman-style clothing. He is wearing a red and blue turban with a gold and red patterned sash. He has a mustache and is looking slightly to the left. He is holding a sword in his right hand. The background is dark and atmospheric.

Conversations and Actions Education Resource Whitechapel Gallery

Government Art Collection
Simon Schama: Travelling Light
16 December 2011–26 February 2012

Introduction

The third in the Government Art Collection displays, *Travelling Light* has been selected by **Simon Schama** and explores themes of travel and cultural exchange. Within this overarching theme, the seeking of new experiences and uncharted territory by artists is represented alongside instances of a nostalgia for 'home', and the challenge of attempting to capture the experience of being a traveller abroad.

A range of artists are represented in the display – from the 'imported talent' utilised by royal patrons in the 18th Century, British artists who have travelled abroad to find inspiration, to non-British artists working in the UK who reference past histories that may shape who they are as artists. Outside of this, Schama encourages the viewer to be aware of 'mysterious connections' among all of the work selected.

This resource is written by artist **Rebecca Greathead** in collaboration with two sixth form students – **Maisie Sloos** and **Sophie Whatlin**. It starts with some suggestions for questions to ask at the start of your visit, introducing key ideas and concepts in the exhibition. The resource then suggests a series of actions focusing on specific works, giving you ideas for activities to share with others in your group, whatever their age.

Pick up an informative and insightful exhibition guide to help you navigate your way through the display with an essay by Schama about his experience of selecting the work, and factual information about the artists and artwork in the exhibition.



Peter Liversidge *We Take More Care of You* Spray paint and acrylic on perspex, 2003 © Peter Liversidge.

Conversation Questions to ask

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Do you know who Simon Schama is, who selected the work for the exhibition?

You may recognise Schama's name as he presented the BBC documentary series *A History of Britain*, first transmitted in the year 2000. He decided to call the exhibition *Travelling Light*.

What themes of travel do you notice in the exhibition?

What do you think the first work in the exhibition is all about and why is it located at the entrance?

Time here becomes space / Space here becomes time is a white neon work by Welsh artist **Cerith Wyn Evans**. By placing it at the entrance to the exhibition, the curators are making the connection between travel and light immediately; the idea of space and time being interchangeable may also guide the viewer when they look at other works in the exhibition.

And what about Italian artist Guzzardi's portrait of Horatio Nelson from 1799 – do you know why his portrait relates to travel? What can you tell about him from his portrait?

Nelson was a naval officer and travelled to fight battles. This portrait shows him after the Battle of the Nile with a wound over his right eye.

Why do you think he looks tired and thin in this portrait and how does his portrait compare to that of the poet Byron nearby?

The portrait of George Gordon Noel Byron is comparatively proud and dramatic. Byron would have done a lot of physical travelling throughout England and Europe. The costume he wears may also have helped transport him to different places in another way – with his mind.

What is the relationship between Nelson's portraits and the artwork on the plinth in front of it?

Nelson's Ship in a Bottle (2009) shows a miniature version of the naval officer's ship with alternative types of sails made from Dutch Wax - a printed cloth derived from Indonesian batik design once known for its 'traditional African' style, but now symbolic of post-colonial independence. It is by the British artist Yinka Shonibare who uses this printed cloth throughout his work. A version of this work is currently on Trafalgar Square's Fourth Plinth until February 2012.

Can you find a series of photographs by Cornelia Parker? What do you think they are about?

Up Down Charm Strange Portfolio (1998) are photographs of feathers that have been on great journeys - time travellers of a sort, which the artist has made into historical artefacts. They originated from a myriad of sources including Rebecca Steven's jacket (the first woman to climb Mount Everest), the attic of the Benjamin Franklin Museum, a Tower of London raven and an albatross in the British Antarctic.

What is the artist trying to do in the video piece on the same wall, and how does it relate to the overall theme of the display?

In *A Letter to an Unknown Person No. 3*, artist **Rachel Lowe** is trying to capture her car journey through drawings but never has enough time to finish one before starting another. It's an impossible task, and this is what Lowe is interested in - our attempts to capture a moment in time and the impossibility of ever doing so. It mixes up time and space like the white neon piece at the entrance.

What kind of travel do you think Grayson Perry is trying to represent in *Map of an Englishman*?

Perry represents his mind as a map, showing that you can travel in your own mind – anywhere you want, including imagined places such as 'self-belief' (on a separate island). What would a map of your mind look like?

Actions In the Gallery

Modes of Transport



Edward Lear *View of Beirut*
c.1861, Oil on canvas,
© Crown copyright: UK
Government Art Collection

The works in this exhibition all relate to some kind of travel; some reference the act of physically going somewhere, for example, the maps or the paintings of places visited by the artist. Others suggest travel through time using the memory or the imagination or even travel inside the artists mind.

As a group discuss which works you could choose to put in the following categories. Some works you might feel belong in all of them. (See the extra information on each work in the booklet accompanying the exhibition).

Adventure

Discovery

Time Travel

Mind Travel

Borders

Escape

Journey in Words



Richard Long *Dartmoor Time* 1996, Medium Printed text on paper.

Look at the text piece by **Richard Long** high on the right hand wall. He describes a walk he took on Dartmoor. During the walk he has thought about the past and the future.

In pairs, think of a journey you have taken recently, it could be travelling to the gallery. Use short sentences or even single words to describe it to your partner. Try to describe what you saw and thought of as well as where you went.

Imagined Places



Roger Hilton *Pequod* 1967, Oil on canvas.

Look at the painting also on the right hand wall by **Roger Hilton** entitled *Pequod*. The *Pequod* is the whaling ship of the deranged captain Ahab, who is seeking revenge on the giant whale Moby Dick in **Herman Melville's** book.

Melville's descriptions of the whale, the ship and its crew conjure up rich and vivid mental images, yet this painting by Roger Hilton is very simple. It is not a description of a boat but seems to be more about a lost individual or a lone voyage, and was painted around the time Hilton was recovering from a serious illness. We may not recognise the boat but we might be familiar with the feelings this painting evokes.

Compare this work with the tiny British Airways plane by **Peter Liversidge** – *We Take More Care of You*. Do they have anything in common? Would you like to travel on this plane? Where would you travel to if so?

Painting and writing can help take us on a voyage to somewhere we have never been.

Can you depict somewhere you have never been? Try and come up with a mental picture of somewhere you have never been or one of the following, and describe it to your partner:

An alien spaceship

The moon

A city beneath the sea

A treasure cave

A desert

Mindscapes



Grayson Perry *Map of an Englishman* 2004, Etching on four plates © Grayson Perry

In **Grayson Perry's** etching *Map of an Englishman*, he has tried to map his own mind dividing it into three imaginary islands.

Try making a map of your mind: you might want to include words or images relating to emotions, desires, anxieties, family, friends, enemies, memories, hopes or dreams.

Actions Beyond the Gallery

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You could use just pencil or ink, add watercolours or even make a collage using images cut from magazines alongside your words.

