

Conversations and Actions Whitechapel Gallery

Government Art Collection:
Commissions: Now and Then
19 June–9 September 2012

whitechapelgallery.org

Introduction

The Government Art Collection (GAC) is a large collection of British art displayed in Government buildings all over the world. Commissions: Now and Then is the fifth and last in a series of themed exhibitions held at the Whitechapel Gallery using works chosen from the Collection. The fifth in the GAC displays is centered on the idea of commissions, which coincides with the newly commissioned *Tree of Life* by **Rachel Whiteread** on the façade of the Whitechapel Gallery (unveiled June 2012), and the adjacent Children's Art Commission by **Eva Rothschild** in Galleries 5 and 6 called *Boys and Sculpture*.

Written by artist **Rebecca Greathead** with the Whitechapel Gallery Education Department, this resource starts with some key questions to prompt conversation either in the Gallery or before your visit, introducing themes and ideas from the exhibition and artworks. Following this, there is a suggested series of questions and actions to prompt discussion and activity in the Gallery or beyond, focusing on specific artworks and grouped around three main themes.



Donald Urquhart *An Alphabet of LA* © Donald Urquhart

Questions to discuss

What is a commission?

Instead of simply buying an already completed artwork, sometimes GAC curators ask an artist to make a work for a specific site or a particular event. The artist then spends time researching and thinking about how to make an appropriate work, discussing their ideas with the GAC before making it.

How do the GAC curators choose which artists to commission?

GAC curators may choose an artist who has made commissioned work previously and are particularly interested in producing work in this way. Often, the commissioned artist is expected to collaborate with architects or building staff, and if so the curators look for an artist who is experienced at working with others. Curators at the GAC try to ensure they have at least one example of works of art by important British artists in the Collection. Some artists become so successful that their work becomes highly sought after and is difficult to acquire; so commissioning a work may be the only way to add their work to the Collection.

What types of places are works commissioned for?

In a more traditional patronage model (pre 1970s), the GAC used to make specific requests to artists to make a painting, photograph or print to hang on the wall of an office or stateroom, or a sculpture for the garden or forecourt of a Government building. However, in recent times the GAC are more likely to give the artist freedom to decide what they make as long as it's appropriate for the intended location or site. The GAC's emphasis now is on incorporating works of art to key locations, not just offices - the areas where most VIPs and visiting public are likely to see the work.

Do the artists have to follow any rules?

The GAC only has a certain amount of money to spend on commissioned work, so the artist has to make or design a work that fits within an agreed budget. The work has to be relevant to its situation, as well as suitable and safe for a public space.

As the artworks have a role in representing Britain in buildings all over the world, the GAC does not want its works to offend visitors to the building. The artist might need to take the culture of the country in which the work will be situated into account, for instance.

- Listen to the piece of music played by the pianola – can you recognise any of the tunes? Did it make people in the room smile?
- What words would you use to describe the music?
- Look at the two wall pieces behind the pianola – can you see other references to music?

Does the artist try and make work to please everyone?

The artist and the GAC know that it is impossible to create a work of art that pleases everyone. Instead, the aim of a new commission might to spark conversations or debates, to raise awareness about something, or perhaps to evoke a certain emotion in the viewer. For example, **Donald Urquhart** created a work entitled *An Alphabet of LA* for display in HM Consul-General's Residence in Los Angeles (to the right of the entrance in the GAC exhibition). It could be seen as rather cheeky as it lists characters and landmarks associated with Hollywood in alphabetical order. Obviously there is more to LA than well known personalities or landmarks, and the artist is perhaps suggesting how superficial they are.

London 2012 Festival

On entering the Gallery you will notice a piano with all sorts of strange attachments; it is actually a pianola – a self-playing piano. This is a sculpture by **Mel Brimfield** and was commissioned by the GAC this year (2012).

Conversation: Music

Observe what happens in the structure at the back of the pianola after the big red button is pressed – you can see a hand lift as if to start a race.

Mel Brimfield is interested in elements of performance including stand-up comedy, dance, theatre and political activism. This particular work manages to be a performance piece without any performers!

Basing her ideas on Roger Bannister – a British athlete who became famous as the first person to run mile in under 4 minutes – and his performance in the 1952 Helsinki Olympics, Brimfield has used music to evoke the participants from different countries and the excitement of the race. Although titled 4'33" after a famous piece by composer John Cage consisting of four and a half minutes of silence, this artwork, when activated by the red button, is loud and boisterous. After an initial and rather comical fanfare the race begins – the pianola plays what appears to be a jumbled mixture of tunes. We can make out different national anthems representing the runners jostling for position or taking the lead as well as familiar themes from British television sports programmes.

The pianola will only work again after a 15 minute rest so come back to this activity if you need to.

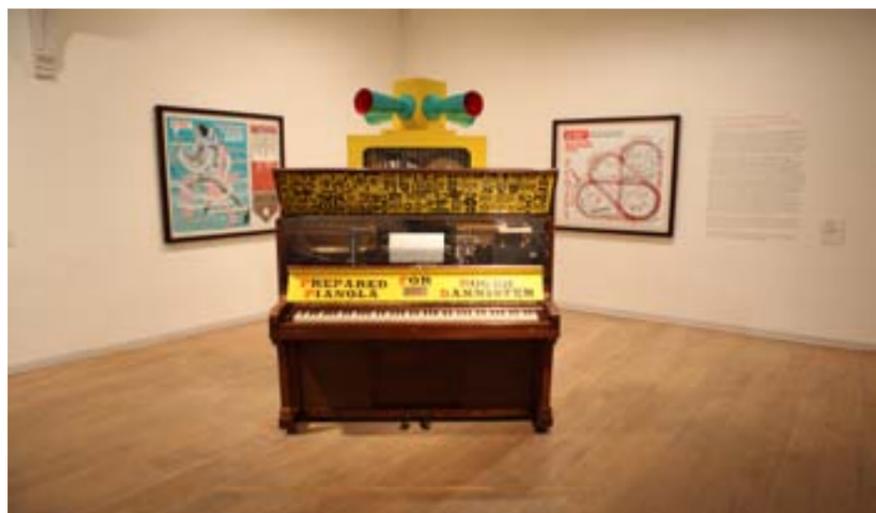
Conversation: Graphics

- Look at the imagery and graphics both on the pianola and the wall pieces. Do they look contemporary or from the past?
- Does the lettering remind you of anything? Where might you have seen something similar?
- Can you see other artworks in the Gallery that look similar in style to this piece? (Eduardo Paolozzi – Selasa)
- Is this the sort of artwork you would expect to see made in connection with the Olympics? Why?

Action: In Gallery

In groups of five choose a different way for each person to make a rhythmic sound, inspired by Brimfield's pianola. For example: clapping, snapping fingers, slapping thighs or tapping feet.

Time yourselves repeating your rhythms all together for one minute – try to begin and end exactly at the same time. What did you observe about this exercise? Was it difficult?



Queen's Coronation

On the right hand wall of the Gallery are two works depicting the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953. The one on the far right is painted by **L. S. Lowry**, famous for his 'matchstick' figures. On the far left is a painting by **Edward Bawden** of the same theme.



L S Lowry *The Procession passing the Queen Victoria Memorial, Coronation*

©Crown copyright: UK Government Art

Edward Bawden *Troops in the Mall*

©Crown copyright: UK Government Art

Conversation & Action: In Gallery

Split your group into two and ask each to look at one of these two paintings. Write down responses using the following questions, then swap places and do the same thing.

Can you tell what the weather is like in the painting? How?

Where was the painter standing; what sort of viewpoint has he chosen?

Can you see a difference between the way ordinary people watching the parade are painted and those who are part of the event?

Do you think the artist is more interested in the parade or the people watching?

Has the artist depicted elements other than people (buildings, railings etc.) and how much of the picture space do they take up?

How do you think the artist feels about the event he is representing?

In which ways do the two images contrast with each other?

Lowry arrived quite late for the parade and didn't have time to make any sketches during the event, which he had to return to make the next day. He always viewed himself as an ordinary person and although offered many honours during his lifetime, including an OBE and a knighthood, he turned them all down. This perhaps made him an unlikely choice of artist to paint a work for the Coronation.

In Bawden's work called *Troops in the Mall* the soldiers are very clearly depicted and their bright regimented lines stand in bold contrast to the rather slumped grey figures in the foreground - one of whom is the Government official who coordinated the entire Coronation ceremony. No wonder he's slumped!

Across the room on the left of the entrance is a tiny image by Andrew Grassie, within which you can make out *Troops in the Mall* on one of the walls. Called *The Pillared Room* at 10 Downing Street you may at first think it is a photograph, although it is actually a meticulously worked painting.

Paintings for Rio de Janeiro

Look at the large paintings along the back wall of the Gallery. These five works were painted by the artist John Piper and show street scenes based on architecture he admired in Brighton, Bath and Cheltenham. He has chosen examples of Regency buildings (an elegant style of architecture based on elements from Classical Greece) to create what almost seems like a stage set. They were commissioned in 1949 to be presented in wall panels at the then new British Embassy in Rio de Janeiro.

Conversation: Composition

The paintings are not real street scenes but combinations of different views of buildings in different cities.

- Can you tell where the light is coming from? Is it day or night?
- If you continued walking up one of these streets what might you expect to see?
- If there were people in these paintings what might they look like? What might they be wearing?
- The paintings may remind you of computer game architecture or perhaps Diagon Alley from the Harry Potter films. Why is this?

Action: In Gallery

With paper turned portrait way up – choose two of the paintings and make a simple line drawing of each. Focus on the rhythm of the straight lines and curves and notice how Piper has used perspective.

- Does making a drawing help you to see the image in a different way?

Conversation: Colour

Now look at the colours of the paintings:

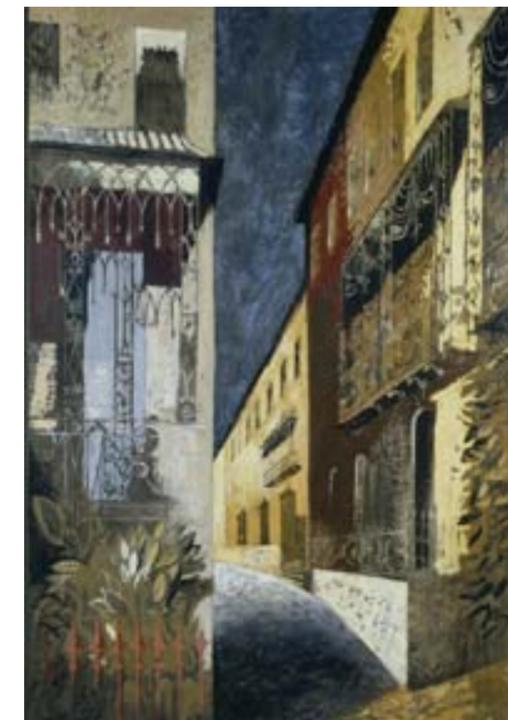
- What do you notice about the sky?
- How has the artist used red in each of the paintings?
- Are the colours naturalistic?
- Why do you think the artist might have used colour in this way?



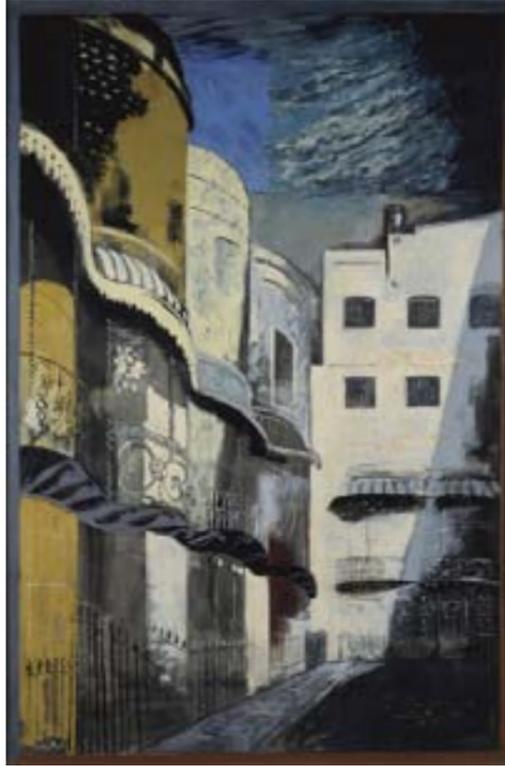
John Piper Cheltenham *Montpelier Walk*
1949 Oil on canvas
© Estate of John Piper / courtesy of the UK Government Art Collection



John Piper Bath *Composite of Bath Street and Corner of Camden Crescent* 1949 Oil on canvas
© Estate of John Piper / courtesy of the UK Government Art Collection



John Piper Cheltenham *Composite of Houses in Priory Parade and Elsewhere* 1949 Oil on canvas
© Estate of John Piper / courtesy of the UK Government Art Collection



John Piper Brighton Regency Square 1949 Oil on canvas © Estate of John Piper / courtesy of the UK Government Art Collection



John Piper Bath Grosvenor Crescent 1949 Oil on canvas © Estate of John Piper / courtesy of the UK Government Art Collection

Your Commission

Action: Beyond the Gallery

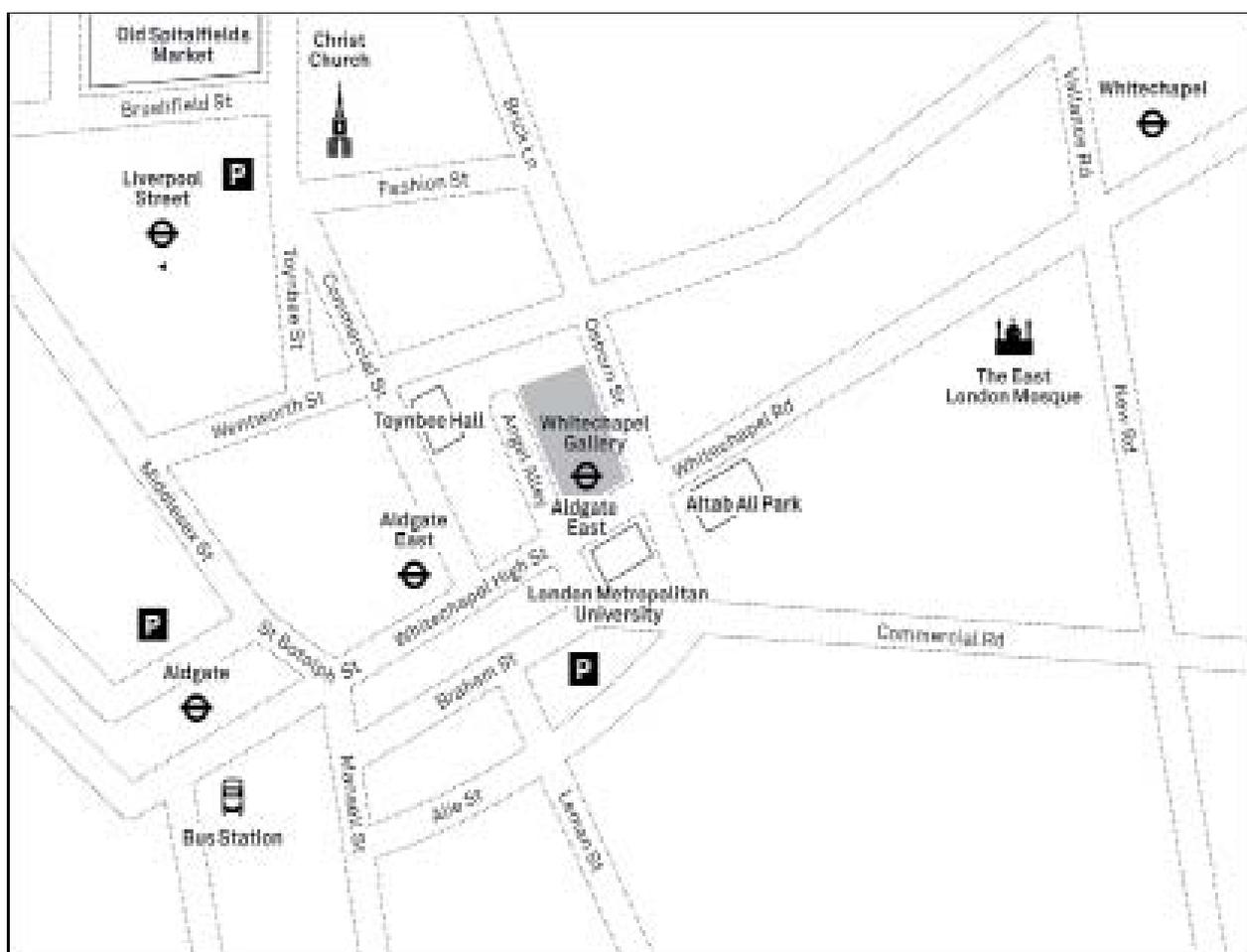
Many artists have been commissioned to create work in response to the 2012 Olympics. Some will be in the Olympic park or around the stadium and some are for streets on the Olympic route.

When commissioning artists to make an expensive public work it is common to have a competition. It may be open to anyone or only for artists who are invited to enter. Artists submit proposals that may consist of drawings, photographs, written explanations or models demonstrating their ideas.

- Make a proposal. Hold a competition
- Choose a site (it could be in your school) and design an artwork specifically for it to celebrate the Olympics. You might focus on a specific sport or even a particular sports person.
- Create images explaining your design, perhaps show it from different angles or make diagrams to show how it could be constructed or how it works.
- Your artwork could be moving, involve sound, music or light. Think about if you want people to touch or even climb on it, in which case it will need to be safe.
- Discuss as a group which proposals you like and how successful you think they will be in/ on the chosen site.



Eva Rothschild Boys and Sculpture ©Children's Art Commission 2012



Find out More

A catalogue accompanying the Government Art Collection at the Whitechapel Gallery is available from the bookshop. For more information please go to our website: whitechapelgallery.org

To book your free group visit and use our Education Space (available Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday during term time) please call Education on 020 7522 7888 or email education@whitechapelgallery.org.

More information on School, Family and Young Peoples' Programmes linked to the exhibition see whitechapelgallery.org/education.

Pick up a 'Schizm' Children's Navigation Manuel devised by The London Open artist Emma Holmes from the Information Desk.

If you have enjoyed this Conversations & Actions or have any other feedback please do let us know. For more Conversations and Actions visit whitechapelgallery.org/education