

Conversations and Actions Whitechapel Gallery

Government Art Collection
Selected by Downing Street Staff: 12 from No10
28 March–17 June 2012

Introduction

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The fourth in the Whitechapel Gallery's Government Art Collection displays has been selected by the non-political staff of 10 Downing Street, the official residence of the British Prime Minister. Written by artist **Rebecca Greathead**, this resource starts with some key questions to prompt conversation both in the Gallery and before your visit, introducing themes and ideas from the exhibition and artworks. Following this, there is a suggested series of actions for all age groups to try either in the Gallery or beyond, focusing on specific artworks and grouped around four main themes in the exhibition. The Government Art Collection (GAC) is a large collection of British art displayed in Government buildings all over the world. This is the fourth in a series of five themed exhibitions held at the Whitechapel Gallery using works chosen from the Collection.

Who chooses the artworks for 10 Downing Street?

There is group of staff from No10 that works with the GAC Director and Deputy Director to decide on what is shown at No10. Proposals for displays of works of art are made by the Collection and then presented to the art group. As one of the best known British Government buildings, 10 Downing Street displays many works of art from the Government Art Collection. Curators working for the Collection try to select works which they hope will provoke interest or even debate, and ensure there is a mixture of contemporary, modern and historical works. The works are changed from time to time, in particular when there is a change of government. When a new Prime Minister arrives in office they work with the Curators to choose works from the Collection.

Are there many staff at No10. What do they do?

No10 is connected to another building next door (No. 11), and as well as being the Prime Minister's home, it is used for Government meetings, to host speeches, events and offer hospitality to thousands of visitors every year. Staff at No10 assist ministers, provide security, look after visitors, co-ordinate visits, prepare and inspect rooms and clean the building.

Why ask No10 Staff to choose artworks?

Some of the Downing Street Staff have worked at No10 a long time and have seen lots of different ministers and works of art come and go. The exhibition was an opportunity for them to share their thoughts about the works that had made an impact on them over the years, and to find out more about them. Not many people get to see famous works of art every day at work!

Who decided what was included and how to hang the artworks?

Each of the 12 volunteers initially chose three works. They then worked together alongside curators from the Government Art Collection and the Whitechapel Gallery over a series of sessions to narrow this down, choosing which images might create the best effect when hung in the Gallery. Everyone wanted their choices to be included so there was some heated discussion!

A documentary film made over the course of the curatorial sessions is on view in the space. It shows participants describing their experience and talking about some of the artworks they chose. The chairs and the pillar nearby represent the type of décor found in No10. The names and professions of those who participated in the curating process can be found on the labels beside the works, along with quotes giving insights to why the works were chosen. Pick up an exhibition guide with more information on the individual works, and an introductory text on the process of curating the exhibition.

THE GOVERNMENT ART COLLECTION NEEDS YOU!



Horatio Herbert Kitchener, 1st Earl Kitchener of Khartoum by Sir William Nicholson, 1902. Lithograph. 64C19277

Help put together an exhibition

Got what it takes to be a curator?

Learn more about art

Get involved

no previous experience required

In 2011 the Government Art Collection (GAC) will present the first exhibition of works of art from the Collection in a public gallery in its 112 year history. The GAC would like one section to be curated in discussion with a group of No10 staff.

Is this for you? YES!!

This is open to all permanent non-political staff employed at No10... and the GAC is keen to have all staff groups represented for example catering staff, cleaners, gardeners, mail room staff & members of the Metropolitan Police!

How much time will it take?

There will be no more than 6 one-hour meetings over the next 6-8 months.

When does this start?

Adrian George, GAC Curator, will give two presentations about the project on

Friday 24th September

in the Pillared Room at No10. The first meeting will be at 9.30am and the second at 12.30pm. Refreshments will be available. We hope that those who are interested will sign up to be part of the project. Participation is, of course, voluntary!

Questions to discuss

What is the purpose of putting British art in Government buildings?

Remember, the British Government has representatives all over the world.

Do you think anyone notices these artworks?

For example, not everyone likes the works they see - people have different opinions.

Have you ever been in a Government building? What do you think one might be like inside

Sometimes people forget that the works of art in the building where they work are valuable.

Do you think the artworks look different displayed in a gallery? How?

In the film some of the staff volunteers mention how different the works they have chosen look in the Gallery.

Do you think the staff feel proud of the works they have selected?

Watching the film and looking at the quotes below the artworks will help you decide.

War Heroes

Look at the following works:

Yousuf Karsh, *Sir Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill* (1874-1965)
Arthur George Walker, *Florence Nightingale* (1820-1910)



Conversation

- Who are the two famous people depicted?
- Do you know anything about them?
- How do you think they look? What does their portrait say about their personality?
Think about what they are wearing and how they hold themselves

Florence Nightingale became famous for her care of injured soldiers during the Crimean War (1853–1856). This is a miniature version of a statue in Waterloo Place, London. The figure of Florence Nightingale is delicate and kindly, as opposed to that of Churchill who fills the frame with his stern presence. He did not want to put out his famous cigar for the portrait.

Now look at the following landscape (at entrance to the exhibition)

Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson, *Battlefields of Britain* (1942)

- What does this work have in common with the others?
- Do you think the clouds are the subject matter, or the ground below?
- Is this what you might expect from a war painting?

Before painting *Battlefields of Britain*, Nevinson took 10 flights in order to make preparatory sketches. He wanted to present the view from a WW2 fighter pilot's cockpit. Wartime Britain looks quite blackened in the glimpse you get through the clouds. The view above is serene and suggests a heavenly realm.

Ordinary Lives

Look at the following works:

John Bratby, *Window, Dartmouth Row, Blackheath* (c.1954-1956)

Seamus Nicolson, *Jason* (2000)

Seamus Nicolson, *Wajid* (2000)

John Bratby is often called a 'Kitchen Sink' painter, because he focussed on some of the more banal things of everyday life. **Seamus Nicolson's** photographs, although having the appearance of a snapshot, are carefully staged portraits. The types of product and packaging help us tell when the images were made. The painting and two photographs were made nearly 50 years apart.

Conversation & Action In the Gallery

- Can you see any similarities between these works?
- Where is the light coming from in each of the works?

Using three pieces of rectangular paper:

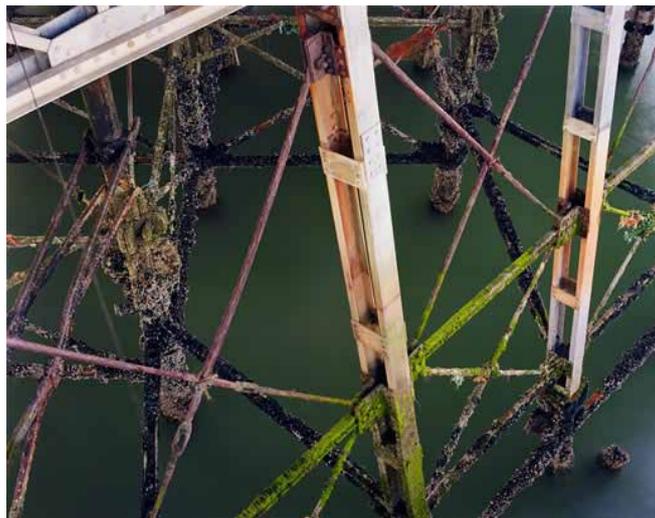
- Make sure you use the 'landscape' view of the paper, the same shape as the painting and photographs.
- Make a 5 minute drawing of each image.
- Represent only the strongest lines you can see.

Ideally, you end up with some very bold vertical lines going from top to bottom in each drawing, dividing the page.

Look back at the images you worked from...

- What effect do the vertical lines have in these works?
- What objects or aspects of the images create the vertical lines in the work?
- Can you see any other similarities between the work after drawing them?

Now look at the photograph positioned in between these works by **Nick Waplington**, *Random Growth without Loss of Stability* (2006)



Discuss the similarities and the differences between this work and the others...

- Can you see strong lines in this image? Try drawing them...
- Can you suggest why this image has been chosen to hang between the others?



Seamus Nicolson, *Jason* (2000)



Seamus Nicolson, *Wajid* (2000)

Out of the Ordinary

Look at the painting by **Richard Eurich**, *Coast Scene with Rainbow* (1952-53)



Richard Eurich, *Coast Scene with Rainbow*, 1952-1953.
© Courtesy of the artist's estate/Bridgeman Art Library/UK Government Art Collection

This painting concerns some of the painter's memories about his childhood holidays in Yorkshire. Maybe he has rolled together a young boy's thrill of the stormy sea with pleasant memories of swimming and exploring. It contains all the ingredients of a children's adventure story.

Conversation & Action In the Gallery

Divide your group into 3 and ask each to think about one of the following questions:

1. What do you notice about the weather in this painting? Can you describe it?
2. Look at the figures. What are they doing? Are they aware of each other?
3. Do you think this is an optimistic painting, or do you feel that something bad is about to happen? Explain why.

Invite each group to feedback their ideas to the rest. You might want to have a vote about the last question!

Now take your group to the series of screens in the corner showing a work by **John Wood & Paul Harrison**, *Twenty Six (Drawing and Falling Things)* (2000-2001)

You might be reminded of cartoons looking at the antics of these figures. The big difference is the sense of control of the performers and lack of emotion. Wearing all black against a white background they become like moving drawings.

Still in groups, think about these questions:

1. Where is the action taking place in each image? Describe the environment.
2. What are the figures doing? Think about the way they are standing or moving, and try to describe it.
3. Do you think they are hurting themselves or having fun? Why? Would you want to try some of the same actions yourself?

London Landscape

Look at the two large paintings on the back wall, both very striking images but in different ways:

Mike Silva, *Pathway through Park* (2000)

John Virtue, *Landscape No. 664* (2003)



Conversation

Look more closely at how each of the works is painted. Try to describe and compare the techniques...

Diane, one of the selectors, describes how John Virtue's work stopped her in her tracks as she was rushing by. The artist does not only use a paintbrush to apply the paint, but all sorts of methods including rollers, spray guns and even his fingers and toes. This is a view of St Paul's Cathedral from a series made along the River Thames.

Mike Silva uses photographic images as a basis for his work, and it looks, from a distance, like a photograph. When you get close however, you can see large shapely patches of colour.

- How has each of the artists used colour?
- Can you describe the atmosphere of each of these paintings?

Action Beyond the Gallery

In Silva's recent work he has taken small images from the internet and reworked them into large oil paintings.

Using either the internet or pictures you already have available

- Find a recognisable image of London. An image of at least A4 will be easier to work with. It doesn't matter if it is grainy or poor quality.
- Cover the image with tracing paper or normal white paper and place it on a window or lightbox.
- Mark in only the very darkest tones of the image with a light pencil line, until you can just about recognise the original picture.
- Work directly onto this paper, or transfer the image to a larger sheet using a grid method or a photocopier.
- Work with ink, pencil, coloured pencil or paints to fill in the areas you have marked. Use only one or two colours. Decide how you want your marks to look (vigorous and expressive like John Virtue's painting, or using abstract pools of colour like Mike Silva.)

