

THE ART NEWSPAPER 

Out with the thematic at Tate, in with the chronological

Director says of revised British art display: "It follows real time rather than art-historical time"

By Penelope Curtis. Comment, Issue 246, May 2013
Published online: 01 May 2013

A new Tate Britain will be unveiled during 2013: the Millbank Project by Caruso St John Architects (which will be fully completed in November) will transform the oldest part of the building. This project is being accompanied by a complete rethink of our permanent and temporary displays of the national collection of British art. This month, we will unveil the chronological presentation within its new layout, which includes the comprehensively restored galleries of the south-east quadrant. One of the joys of the Millbank gallery, designed by Sidney R.J. Smith and opened in 1897, is that it is small enough to walk around in its entirety. The long runs of interconnecting galleries provided the cue for the creation of stronger promenades around the perimeter.



Penelope Curtis, Photo: Gabriel Szabo/Guzelian

The result is a walk, or chronological circuit, that takes the would-be traveller on a "journey through time". Our criterion has been to create a sense of flow and to encourage the pleasure of looking at art as it changes, from the 16th century to the present.

The new displays mark a two-speed approach to the galleries, so that some will change little and less often, providing a semi-permanent introduction to the whole range of the collection—while others will change completely and regularly. Hopefully, this will be a means to achieve greater permanence, continuity and beauty, while creating a framework for change.

The life of a museum depends on this combination of familiarity and discovery. Also, by introducing a chronological circuit, some of the hitherto almost canonical groupings will make way for a more neutral presentation that is open to a wider variety of interpretations.

Some have asked why we have decided to hang the British collection chronologically. There is, of course, nothing new in this methodology. Yet thematic hanging is now almost as conventional, and notably so in the past two or three decades. In that time Tate Britain has largely followed a middle way, in that its more or less thematic displays have been arranged chronologically. Despite giving the illusion of permanence, museums change, and nowadays ever more regularly. Museums change—often in a recognisably cyclical manner—and some of what we are doing at Tate Britain in 2013 reflects aspects of earlier times.



A key strength for Tate Britain is that the richness of the collection means that the lens (focused on Britain) is not overly narrow. Chronology has been used as a more neutral method of selection, and by using it as a kind of search tool we have produced what we hope will be a combination of the works that viewers would expect to see, alongside those that they would not.

Such juxtapositions and mixing of genres and styles, of early and late works can be revealing in various ways. This kind of chronological hang is more unusual, as it is properly chronological, in the sense that it follows real time rather than art historical time. Our key aim here was to use chronology as the tool with which curators would make their selection, and then to set it to one side once we were in the gallery, as and when the aesthetic of the hang demanded it.

Another objective has been to use the architecture with the art to create a memorable experience. It means offering an introduction that can become a familiar experience and using the remaining galleries in a way that is more personal, experimental and, most importantly, changing. If the chronological circuit will provide the museum's outer frame, the filling is the changing programme of focus displays, for example, on the British School of portraiture, or trans-historical displays that juxtapose old and new: paintings by E.A. Hornel alongside Wolfgang Tillmans's photographs and landscape paintings by John Crome besides Richard Long's work.

I think of the viewer as a kind of time traveller, who will alternate between the ambulant and the still, the long view and the close focus, looking and learning. Most of all I would like to think that this more holistic approach will encourage visitors to get to feel the continuities and to see the relationship of old and new as something to celebrate.