

# A comparison of displays at the national gallery and tate modern



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

## Introduction:

James McNeill Whistler is credited not only with his famous mantra, 'art for art's sake' (Ten O'clock Lecture, 1885), but also for stating that 'an artist is not paid for his labor but for his vision' (BrainyQuote/ThinkExist, 2012). It is this matter of communicative vision versus skilled labor that is the crucial difference in the curating of the 18th to early 20th century display at the National Gallery and the Transformed Visions display at Tate Modern.

Vision is here defined as the concept or thinking around the message communicated by the art while the definition of labor is a combination of meticulous work and technique.

Both displays show a variety of work painted, sculpted and conceived by artists moving away from the realistic painting school – and by realistic I mean painted to approximate our physical, observable world or to be “physically truthful” if you will – and moving towards an art of emotional truth. As both displays contain mainly relatively new art and artwork that is conceptual – albeit to a very varying degree – the essay will instead focus on the curating of the displays and the interpretation of what is important about a specific artwork and by extension about art itself.

According to Cecilia Anderson (2007, p, 72) 'the curatorial challenge is to situate what at first may? seem like vastly different ideas and create coherence.' The focus of the argument is therefore on how order and information provided creates this coherence.

Despite the fundamentally similar impetus for the creation of the artworks displayed, the two galleries diverge in their displays' interpretation of the importance of vision and labor on the following three points:

The focus created by title of and initial information about the display

The type of information provided in the wall-text

The layout – i. e. the division and content of separate rooms – in the display

### A Comparison of Displays

The first contrast between the two galleries is the difference in the initial contact between the observer and the display. While Tate Modern has given its display the title *Transformed Visions*, the National Gallery simply display their collection under the heading 1700 to 1900 or 18th to early 20th century.

' *Transformed Visions*' clearly indicates an emphasis on the driving forces behind the artworks themselves, and it is quickly derived that the art displayed within will be of a conceptual nature to a large extent. This impression is further confirmed by the information given about the purpose of the display;

' After the Second World War, artists forged a new kind of expressive abstraction. This wing looks at the ongoing presence of the human figure within such works, as well as wider responses to violence and war, and the tendency towards contemplative immersion exemplified by Mark Rothko's *Seagram Murals*.' (Tate Modern, 2012)

The expression ‘ongoing presence of the human figure’ suggests a transformative quality to this figure, making the human conceptual rather than an absolute physical form. In some cases, like in Giacometti’s ‘Man Pointing’ (see bibliography for illustrations of this and all further mentioned artwork) or Francis Bacon’s ‘Seated Figure’, the human form is abstracted and twisted in some way, yet still clearly approximating a human form – much in the same way as less realistic paintings like Degas’ ‘Combing the Hair’ or Daumier’s ‘Don Quixote and Sancho Panza’ exhibited towards the end of the National Gallery display.

In other works like ‘Head I’ by Philip Guston the human figure is highly abstracted – being merely a silhouette of a possible head, much in the same way a ball could be mistaken for one in thick fog – and yet others abandon the physical figure altogether. Jackson Pollock’s ‘Yellow Islands’ is not a portrait of flesh, but of the psyche. As the wall-text explains: ‘By dripping and pouring paint, [Pollock] was able to work in a free and intuitive way, his thoughts and feelings finding direct expression in the rhythmic patterns he created.’ Thus in a way, Pollock’s painting is a self-portrait of his own mind, a new kind of human figure.

In contrast to this focus on the mind behind the matter, the National Gallery’s naming of – and information about – their display places its works of art in a temporal and historical framework rather than an artistic thought. Most obvious is of course the name of the display; the visitor is instantly made aware of when the art he/she will see was created, yet not what it is about, unlike the Tate display which suggests a post-war period, yet does not limit itself to that only.

<https://assignbuster.com/a-comparison-of-displays-at-the-national-gallery-and-tate-modern/>

Furthermore, the information provided about the display, as a whole, positions it historically:

‘ it became more common for artists to paint smaller works that were exhibited and sold through art dealers and public exhibitions.

In the 19th century, art movements [...] emerged, as did the idea of the independent artist who rebelled against the official art establishment.’

(National Gallery, 2012)

Thus the display information draws focus to a history of art within the confines of merchants, movements and commissions rather than ideas, ideals and thoughts within the movements mentioned.

Similarly, the second point of difference – the information provided in the wall-text – is also a matter of focus. As the National Gallery display covers quite a lot of time the information they provide about the works centers on biographical, historical and technical facts.

Tate Modern, on the other hand, provides wall-text with some technical points, but brimming with information about the conception of the work, the ideas acted upon and the message the artist wanted to convey.

Take for example the wall-text provided for Degas’ ‘ After the Bath, Woman Drying Herself’ at the National Gallery:

This densely worked pastel is executed on several pieces of paper mounted on cardboard. [...] This work is one of a series of similar subjects dating from this period, when bathers and dancers were the artist’s principal themes.

<https://assignbuster.com/a-comparison-of-displays-at-the-national-gallery-and-tate-modern/>

Here Degas has exploited the flexibility of the pastel medium, creating sumptuous textures and blurred contours which emphasise the movement of the figure.’ (National Gallery, 2012)

Then compare it to the information provided by Tate Modern about ‘ Seated Figure’ by Francis Bacon:

‘ Bacon’s portraits are explorations of the human condition as much as they are character studies [...] They also represent a complex exploration of pictorial space: the figure is simultaneously posed among some elegant items of furniture and confined within a box-like frame. This device, which was one of Bacon’s trademarks, underlines the sense of isolation as well as generating a claustrophobic psychological intensity.’ (Tate Modern, 2012)

While the text in the National Gallery display talks of the ‘ pieces of paper mounted on cardboard’, the ‘ flexibility of the pastel medium’ and Degas’ use of bathers and dancers as themes, the text from Tate Modern comments on the artist’s general work as ‘ character studies’, the box underlining a ‘ sense of isolation as well as generating a claustrophobic psychological intensity.’ The first is about artistic fact, the second about interpretation of emotional artistic intent.

Though these are merely two examples, the displays as a whole follow these lines in their wall-texts throughout. This prioritizing of information around the art further underlines the difference in approach taken by the two galleries; the National Gallery’s display – pning over two centuries – focuses on the evolution of techniques and surrounding circumstances while Tate Modern’s

display, with its snippet of a time frame, investigates the ideas of that time more closely. Both provide relevant information to their aim.

Finally, there is the matter of the division and content within the displays themselves. The National Gallery's display is divided into 13 rooms, each with an art historic theme like ' France 1700-1800' (room 33), ' Canaletto and Guardi' (room 38), ' Degas and Art Around 1900' (room 46) or ' The Academy' (room 41). Thus the National Gallery enforces the perception of art in a fixed, historical timeline through which the visitor can trace the evolution of themes, techniques, establishments or artistic development within a nation. This layout of the display makes the National Gallery an institution for the study of art history, but perhaps it is less suitable than the Tate Modern for the study of message-loaded art.

The layout of Transformed Visions is all about the artistic impetus behind the work. The rooms are equipped not according to time period or artists, but according to the ideas the artists have in common. It is a different take on how to show the evolution of art. The display begins with alternative conceptions of what it means to display the human figure as the human itself. Germaine Richier's ' Shepherd of the Landes' depicts a French shepherd who has become one with his stilts ' achieving an insect-like adaptability' (Tate Modern, 2012) and the caption on the wall comments on this as ' striking a chord with the bleak image of humanity prevalent in Europe after the Second World War' (Tate Modern, 2012).

Moving from this concept of alternative images of the human figure itself, the display moves through ' This Exquisite Forest' - a web-based art project

encouraging public contribution i. e. an abstracted virtual imprint of human life and connection, and finally leaves the visitor with the idea that the human figure does not have to be a figure at all. Mark Ruwedel and Ursula Schulz-Dornburg's photographs towards the end of the display present the idea that things like bomb craters and train stations are ultimately imprints of humans because they are human-made, and in the very last room of the display finding nothing but Iranian flags stained by pollution cements the idea of extensions of humanity as humanity itself.

While the National Gallery's display moves chronologically through the time of art, Transformed Visions includes works from outside the era of its theme (post-war, see Room 5 of the display for example) in order to showcase the influences on the artist. In this way both the National Gallery and Tate Modern trace the historical placement of the art in the display - the National Gallery through linear history, allowing the art to show for itself who has been influenced by what, and the Tate Modern creates an alternative history traced through impact and idea.

It can in fact be said that both the 18th to early 20th century display and Transformed Visions concern themselves with history as the primary and optimal way of displaying art. The difference is in how the displays consider history to move. While Tate Modern takes a conceptual approach to art history - the concept being that a linear history can be traced through ideas rather than events and physical happening - the National Gallery's display centers on a traditional, physical history.



However, the question is not, after all, a question about mind or matter. Rather, it is a question about the mind in the matter. One display sends a message from Whistler - indeed the National Gallery's choice in display layout and information conveys an inclination towards Whistler's idea - 'art for art's sake' (Ten O'clock Lecture, 1885) - whilst the other is all about art as a mouth piece for political, philosophical and aesthetic issues.

The 18th to early 20th century display at the National Gallery is designed to give minimal interpretation of the artworks. Instead the display is designed for the observation of the development of artistic ideas - artistic here meaning ideas about the making of the art and the art itself - to appreciate the craftsmanship that went into making it and to enjoy the impression left by well-made art.

Transformed Visions is to the contrary all about art engaging in a political conversation with its surroundings. The focus is not necessarily on the craftsmanship that goes into making the piece but rather on what the piece means. While Hirschhorn's 'Candelabra with Heads' may not require a lot of artistic craftsmanship - it is after all just mannequin heads gaffa-taped onto obscure lumps and a pole - it certainly requires artistic vision.

Therefore, as stated in the introduction, the main contrast between the two displays is the matter of artistic labor and technique versus artistic vision and message. Both displays show a variety of work conceived by artists moving away from the realistic painting school - though of course the National Gallery's display due to time p does begin in a more classicist

strand of art - and moving towards a more emotionally and intellectually expressive form of art.

## Conclusion

According to Joseph Ishikawa (1961, p. 238) ' it is of prime importance for the museum man to know what he is peddling, to what he is converting people, why he is parting people from their money to support a particular program.' In other words; in order to create a good display a curator must understand not only what the individual painting is saying but the display as a whole, and therefore deciding what information to provide visitors with varying knowledge with, becomes a crucial element of the display itself and therefore the focus of this essay. Despite the fundamentally similar impetus for the creation of the artworks exhibited, the two displays diverge in their choice of focus on aspects of the art.

The National Gallery's 18th to early 20th century display, is chronological and historical with a focus of information about the style of the artwork, the biographical details around the subjects and the artist and detailed information about the artistic movements and developments in techniques and thinking around art that all went into creating the work discussed.

The Tate Modern Transformed Visions display presents a different chronology - a chronology of thought. The focus of the display is post-war thinking on humanity but where the idea fits, the time of creation of a work of art is insignificant and works like Joseph Mallord William Turner's ' Yacht Approaching the Coast' - painted over a century before most of the works in

the rest of the display - are still featured because of their influence, importance or other relation to the more contemporary artworks in question.

The display in the National Gallery, taking up a full wing of an established institution, placed in a historical building with grand arches and great historical standing effectively canonizes the artworks on display - the art itself is the message.

The Tate Modern display in the barren rooms of a modern building with modern ideas is a look into the recent past that casts a reflection into the future - an idea that the political or philosophical message of the art might override the appreciation of aesthetically pleasing forms.

Ultimately, both displays concern themselves with the past of art and how it reflects on the present world of art and the direction it might be heading in the future. Art is not, after all, mind over matter, a choice of idea or aesthetic, but rather a combination of all four into different modes of expressions emphasising different concepts at different times and in different ways.

## REFERENCE LIST

Reading:

Anderson, C., 2007. Madrid Abierto: Curatorship, Public Art and the City, Building Materials [e-journal] 17, Available through: JSTOR [url: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29792339>] [Accessed 21 November 2012)

Brainy Quote, 2012, James Whistler Quotes [online] Available at:

<https://assignbuster.com/a-comparison-of-displays-at-the-national-gallery-and-tate-modern/>

<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/j/jameswhist382345.html>

[Accessed on 17 November 2012]

Ishikawa, J., 1961, Curatorship Training and Museology, *Art Journal* [e-journal] 20 (4) Available through: JSTOR [url: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/774392>] [Accessed 21 November 2012]

James McNeill Whistler, 1885, Ten O'clock Lecture, Public lecture, Prince's Hall [online] Available at:

<http://www.whistler.arts.gla.ac.uk/miscellany/tenoclock/> [Accessed on 18 November 2012]

National Gallery, 2012, 18th to early 20th century: Collection Overview [online]

[http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/collection-overview/collection-overview/\\*/viewPage/5](http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/collection-overview/collection-overview/*/viewPage/5)

[Accessed on 16 November 2012]

Tate Modern, 2012, Tate Collection Displays: Transformed Visions [online] Available at:

<http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/display/transformed-visions>

[Accessed on 16 November 2012]

Tate Modern, 2012, Museum Map [online] Available at: <http://www.tate.org.uk/download/file/fid/20671> [Accessed on 18 November 2012]

<https://assignbuster.com/a-comparison-of-displays-at-the-national-gallery-and-tate-modern/>

Think Exist, 2012, James Whistler Quotes [online] Available at:

<http://thinkexist.com/quotation/an-artist-is-not-paid-for-his-labor-but-for-his/1273394.html>

[Accessed on 17 November 2012]

Works without available illustration:

Hirschhorn, T., 2006, Candelabra with Heads (London: Tate Modern Collection Displays)

Ruwedel, M., 1999, printed 2008, Crater #1 (London: Tate Modern Collection Displays)

Schulz-Dornburg, U., 2003, From Medina to Jordan Border, Saudi Arabia (London: Tate Modern Collection Displays)