

## **Back to the Future: Collecting and Display at the Tate Modern**

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The Tate Gallery was founded in the 1890s when a group of British paintings, released by the National Gallery on the grounds of overcrowding, were brought together with a donation of a large collection of modern British art, in a building funded by the donor of this collection: Henry Tate, a Liverpool grocer and philanthropist who had made his fortune from the invention of the sugar cube. In 1917, the Gallery also took on the role of the national collection of modern foreign painting. Lacking either a rich endowment or committed state funds for acquisitions – for much of its history - the collection has grown in haphazard fashion dependent largely on the generosity of artists, collectors and dealers for gifts and bequests.

Until the turn of the century, Tate's collection was devoted to painting and sculpture supplemented by prints and drawings and supported by an archive of British Art. Other museums in London held sway in terms of decorative arts, design and (to a limited extent) photography. Unsurprisingly, its International collection was almost exclusively confined to Western European and North American art, and was overwhelming the work of male artists. While the British holdings of art from 1400 can be thought of as a broad survey of British Art with areas of rich density and others of fascinating anecdotal interest, the International collection – of art from 1900 – is far more episodic, offering fascinating insights into Britain's fluctuating engagement in foreign cultural affairs, the timidity of its Trustees in the face of the 'modern', the prejudices – and, occasionally, the enlightened taste - of its collectors, and the conservatism of its public.

By the beginning of the 1990s, there were three Tate galleries: in London, St Ives and Liverpool. The proposal to create a second gallery in London dedicated to Modern and Contemporary International art was driven by the need to find a way of more adequately displaying the permanent collection and to reflect the scale and ambition of contemporary artists' practices.

At the end of the 1990s, Iwona Blazwick and I, as the Art Programme Curators for the forthcoming Tate Modern began to frame the programme and collection displays for the new building. We were keen to find a way of displaying the collection that would acknowledge art history's departure from a single master narrative, that would embrace multiple perspectives and multiple voices, offer insights into the many different time frames the work of art can occupy, that would allow us to situate the work of art contextually within visual culture and that would deploy all media on an equal footing. We were strongly guided by conversations with key art historians, colleagues in learning and outreach teams, and by one or two artists. We were less influenced by the ways in which other museums installed their collections than by an ambition to introduce aspects of (temporary) exhibition practice to the business of curating a permanent collection. I think we also learned a lot from the way artists were beginning to reframe and critique institutional practice.

The result was a display organised around ideas of genre rather than art historical 'isms': each genre was presented in a display that spanned a century of expanded territory. The four display suites (ranged across two entire floors, and following the logic of Tate Modern's architecture) were configured to include a number of different types of display: pairings of two distinct voices in dialogues across time (Monet/Richard Long was a noted example); and in-focus displays in which we 'returned' a work from the generalised context of the collection to the moment of its making. We made a number of displays that explored recurring motifs and themes over the course of a century; in others we focused on the art of a single year. Aside from an *a priori* desire to create a new kind of museum experience for a new century, we were acutely aware of the architectural parameters of the new building with its strange amalgam of white cube gallery, *enfilade* and 'raw' industrial spaces; the intellectual concepts behind the hang were balanced by a consideration of how artworks could be installed most effectively – even most beautifully – in these galleries. The plan was to work for a limited period of a few years with the genre-framework, subjecting it to selective and rolling adjustment along the way. In this manner, we hoped to show works of art in different contexts over time, and to allow

different artists to appear in an ever-evolving constellation – a permanent collection, permanently changing, experimental, thought provoking and open to debate.

Working on the collection displays for the new Tate Modern exposed the markedly western-centric focus of the International collection and its very narrow medium base, and these deficits were made more apparent in 2006 when the first whole sale reinstallation of the collection took place. Organised around four distinct ‘hubs’, each one of which focused on a significant paradigm shift in modernist practice – such as the radical innovations of abstraction, surrealism, abstract expressionism and minimalism - this new structure allowed these canonical moments to be reviewed and tested from a number of different perspectives. Dialogues with non-Western art and post-colonial debates were notably absent from this display when first installed and the need to respond to these deficits, and to address more complex narratives of artistic development have been significant drivers of collections development since that time.

In 2002, Tate began the slow process of building out from its western European and North American collection to embrace contemporary and modern practices from further afield, first in relation to Latin America and then, from 2007, in relation to other regional centres. We also began to collect new media, including live art and performance, and started to build our holdings of photography, seeing these not as separate histories but as central to the trajectory of fine art and visual culture. Over the last ten years, we have built up our expertise, attracted individuals to funding groups and worked to establish regional networks, collaborations and partnerships through which to reshape the collection and develop a more complex and multifaceted understanding of modern art developments across the globe. We now collect art with the support of a number of regionally-focussed committees (for the Middle-East and North Africa, Africa, Latin America, the Asia Pacific region, South Asia and Russia and Eastern Europe) supported by individual specialist, regional and adjunct curators; for each of these regions we have strategic priorities including emerging, established and historical figures. These choices answer to an overriding strategy that is agreed with our Trustees on an annual basis. Where some gaps

depend on time and circumstance, as well as shifting perspectives: as we expand the collection geographically, or in relation to new media, new gaps emerge, while others seem to disappear. The advent of the Tanks at Tate Modern, while pre-empted and in some way prompted by our active engagement in collecting performance, has created huge ambitions in relation to acquisitions and these are taking us in exciting, new directions. As we expand our range and our remit, we are more aware of the impossibility - and undesirability - of either a single master-narrative or an encyclopaedic collection in a post-colonial 21<sup>st</sup> century. So, we focus in and drill down to expose networks of historical association and encounter at specific moments in time, linking art from different localities and in different media. An additional focus on overlooked women artists also helps to deconstruct and re-write the canon. We can now pair experiences of 'abstraction' from Latin America, Europe and America in the late 1950s and 1960s, explore the ramifications of Bauhaus experimentation on several continents, including Japan, show Arte Povera and US anti-form in conversation with Japanese Mona Ha and explore the Sudanese modernist painter Ibrahim El Salahi in the context of post-war figurative expressionism. Historical intersections are complicated by major acquisitions of key players from the regions and subsequent displays are constructed around these acquisitions. A list of the artists from the Asia Pacific region currently on view gives some idea of the diversity of material included in the current hang. Solo rooms are devoted to the Taiwanese abstract artist Li Yuan-chia, Korean-born pioneer new media artist Nam June Paik and Chinese video artist Cao Fei. There is a display bringing together work by Chen Zhen and Zhang Enli, two Chinese artists 'in dialogue', and a room exploring the networks underpinning post-minimal experiments in Japan, Korea, Europe and America.

Because of its particular relationship with Tate Britain, Tate Modern is relieved of the responsibility to reflect, in any systematic way, a national history but we do acknowledge that our viewpoint is from London. British art is fulsomely represented in the galleries, especially those British artists who most fully engage in conversations that cross the channel, straddle the Atlantic or reach beyond. One

recent display, for example, looked at parallel but distinct explorations of abstraction in Brazilian and British art of the 1950s and 1960s.

As a national gallery of International art in London, we operate within a richly diverse multicultural community. This gives us both a global outlook as well as a local foundation, so that Tate Modern is as much a grass roots community organisation as it is a world tourist attraction. What we are trying to do with the collection – working towards more complex narratives of modernism for example – acknowledges London as both a centre for art, but also as a periphery in relation to other centres, a site within an evolving network of cultural exchange.

In 2016, Tate Modern will transform itself into The New Tate Modern with an expanded suite of collection galleries in a new, interconnected building and space devoted to a major interactive learning initiative entitled 'Tate Exchange'. The collection, including much of the International art acquired over the last decade, will be reinstalled in a way that complements some of the new thinking around multiple and hybrid modernisms, aspects of our past that help us understand the complex present and propel us forwards in our understanding.

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