

“These paper bullets of the brain....”

William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*

Essay on the work of British Artists in the OSTEN Collection, May 2016

OSTEN owes its name to a satirical magazine, founded in Skopje in 1945, referring to an archaic agricultural tool with a sharp point used to keep cattle moving forward: in English we would translate this as a “goad”, today meaning an irritant with a purpose. In the year of his 400th anniversary, Shakespeare’s metaphor still speaks of the power of words and print.

OSTEN’s collection is mainly a graphic collection which embraces satirical cartoons, drawings and the democratic nature of prints in many techniques. This essay seeks to give an overview of British art through some of the works in the OSTEN collection but begins with an historic figure whose effect can still be felt.

In 18th century Britain William Hogarth believed in the moral purpose of art and used satire as a powerful criticism of society, corruption and politics. He was the first significant British printmaker. His paintings were engraved for a wider market and he sometimes produced works solely in that medium which was displayed widely in shop windows, inns and public buildings. He also started his own teaching academy, finally absorbed in to the Royal Academy of Arts (which still teaches and stages major exhibitions). He also fought hard for artists’ rights: many of his works were reproduced by unscrupulous print sellers so he applied to Parliament for greater legal control. The result was the first copyright law to deal with visual works as well as the first to recognise the authorial rights of an individual artist.

It was not until the 1930s that printmaking once again became important and innovative in Britain. The earliest work by a British artist in the OSTEN collection (and appropriately the first to be acquired) is a woodcut by Ben Nicholson of 1934. In this traditional medium he creates a very modern, abstract image of geometric shapes revealing the texture of the woodblock with simplicity and power. Nicholson was close to many European abstract artists who emigrated to Britain in the 1930s and was part of the colony of artists in St. Ives, a small fishing village 400 kilometres from London in the far south west. Many of them also lived near each other in London including the sculptor Henry Moore who is represented here by four works. The outstanding one is a pencil drawing of bones, emphasising Moore’s obsession with the human body. He also loved the geology of the English landscape: it is his knowledge of both stones and bones which give his work its strength and humanity.

Collecting sculptors’ drawings is a particularly interesting and effective route for a collection to follow when three dimensional works are not practical. Lynn Chadwick was another significant sculptor, contemporary to Moore and Nicholson, who started his career as an architectural draughtsman and the OSTEN collection’s lithographs re-interpret his sculptural ideas in graphic form. Unlike Moore, who modelled and carved his sculptures, Chadwick constructed his work giving it a harsher, angular form and it has been described as three-dimensional drawing. This angularity led to a critic describing the “geometry of fear” and it is a phrase that applies to other artists, too, who were seen to reflect postwar angst and nihilism. The outstanding example is the painter Francis Bacon. His very large canvases, often

in the form of a triptych, are always framed in gold and displayed behind highly reflective glass so that the viewer is inevitably drawn into the image and confronted. One of his large triptychs (*Three Studies of the Male Back*, 1970, 198 x 147.5cm, Kunsthaus, Zurich) is shown here in the more intimate form of a lithograph so that we can look closely at the image without our own reflection. The subject of the male body is abstract and distorted but reveals the figure of his lover George Dyer three times, each portrait trapped in a cage.

Moore and Bacon are the two best known British artists of the mid-20th century, masters of the human form, both commenting on the human condition in a profound manner which had a strong impact in the years after WWII. Because of that war, and the strife in Europe before it, Britain welcomed many emigrés artists who have long been a powerful influence on British art: Feliks Topolski 's long career after 1935 was devoted to recording people and events in his adopted country.

Eduardo Paolozzi exemplifies many important categories of British art as the son of emigrés, as a Scottish-born artist, Royal College graduate, designer, printmaker, sculptor, surrealist, Royal Academician (R.A.) and one of the creators of British Pop Art. Pop Art developed in parallel to the United States incubated in Britain by the Independent Group of young architects, artists, theorists, sociologists and photographers. One of that group was Paolozzi, a passionate collector of everyday objects of all sorts who introduced new ideas of collage to Britain and was the first artist to create a work (in 1947) containing the word POP. His graphic work – collages, textile design, screen-prints and more – was highly influential. His *New Semester Reward of the Oppressed* is part of a larger work with an equally crazy title: *General Dynamic F.U.N. (Volume II of Moonstrips Empire News)*. The images are all from Paolozzi's vast reservoir of graphic ephemera and it is a fine example of the way he broke away from accepted fine art print techniques to exploit photo-lithography as well as screen-printing.

The "Father of British Pop Art" was Richard Hamilton (also a member of the Independent Group) but he always said that there were many others who could claim paternity. However, he wrote the first definition of Pop Art in 1957: "*Pop Art is: popular, transient, expendable, low-cost, mass-produced, young, witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous, and Big Business*". Hamilton is widely considered the most important British printmaker of his day not least because of the wide range of techniques he used, especially exploiting digital technology from its earliest inception, later working with a Quantel Paintbox which allowed him to collage on computer and produce inkjet prints. He was also an important writer and theorist, working closely with Marcel Duchamp.

He was a highly influential teacher working in the north of England from 1953 (the year of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation) to 1966 (when England won the football World Cup). These were years when British society changed radically and youth was celebrated. Hamilton was in the forefront of a new approach to teaching, derived from the Bauhaus and European constructivism, working on highly innovative exhibition and installation designs and a reconstruction in text and image of Duchamp's *Large Glass*. One of his most successful students is the painter Stephen Buckley who went on to be an influential teacher himself. Another Hamilton student is Bryan Ferry who founded the band Roxy Music.

Hamilton was also a political artist, especially committed to exposing elements of the civil war in Northern Ireland. *Kent State*, the screen-print in OSTEN's collection, is based on an image he captured while watching BBC TV news. It shows the shooting of student demonstrators by the National Guard, at a demonstration against the Vietnam war, held on the campus of Kent State University, Ohio. The figure in the foreground is that of a wounded student. Hamilton described this as the most onerous print he ever worked on, requiring seven trips from London to Munich to complete. The print was chosen by The Observer newspaper as a special offer for its readers to purchase along with other prints by Elisabeth Frink and Joe Tilson in 1970. William Hogarth would have been proud.

Pop Art also flourished in another important art school, the Royal College of Art, when Peter Blake, David Hockney, Joe Tilson, Allen Jones, Richard Smith and Peter Phillips studied there; all are represented here. Blake went on to design an album cover for The Beatles, Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, while Hamilton created the minimal packaging of their later White Album.

Hockney is one of the finest contemporary graphic artists, working with drawing, etching and as an illustrator. His portrait of Catherina Dorothea Viehmann from the *Six Fairy Tales* series commemorates the woman who first told the fairytales to the Brothers Grimm. His drawing of *Two Boys aged 23 and 24* illustrates a poem by C.P. Cavafy.

The generation of sculptors that came after Henry Moore include, among very many others, Elisabeth Frink, Ivor Abrahams and, later, Tony Cragg. Cragg has spent much of his career teaching in France and Germany (he is currently Professor at the Kunstakademie, Dusseldorf); other important teachers represented here are Stephen Farthing (Professor of Drawing at The University of the Arts, London), Chris Orr (previously Professor of Printmaking at the Royal College) and John Golding who was a very distinguished art historian in the field of Cubism.

Tony Cragg is one of the most important British sculptors of his generation, representing Britain at the Venice Biennale in 1988 although he has lived in Germany since 1977. Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva, a Macedonian-born artist with a similar interest to Cragg in recycled or overlooked materials, represented Macedonia at the 2013 Venice Biennale and then the Vatican at the 2015 Venice Biennale. She also showed with the UK public gallery, Artsway, in 2005, a remarkable trio of international appearances. She studied at Glasgow School of Art in Scotland, the Royal College in London and is now based in England.

Glasgow School of Art was the most important at school outside London from the late 1980s when a generation of artists made links with Europe and beyond, rather than with London, found international success and, significantly, many have stayed on in the city. Three alumni have won the prestigious Turner Prize and nine have been finalists. At the same time, Goldsmiths, University of London, became one of the most influential schools of art in the world from the late 1980s when it produced some of the famous – notorious – YBAs or Young British Artists. They followed a conceptual trajectory heavily influenced by marketing, self-promotion and "Big Business" – indeed, every element in Hamilton's definition of Pop.

The most famous is Damien Hirst whose output of sculptures, installations, paintings, objects and prints is prodigious. He now runs his own museum and restaurant, too. Tracey Emin studied at the Royal

College and her very intimate, revelatory works on film, paper or in textiles have seen her change from an *enfant terrible* to a member of the Royal Academy where she was appointed Professor of Drawing. She, too, represented Britain in Venice.

The YBAs and their contemporaries had many clever strategies for making art more widely popular and encouraging new collectors. One was Sarah Staton's Supastore, a pop-up art shop, for which Anya Gallaccio produced a lithograph. Like Hadzi-Vasileva, Gallaccio also works with organic matter and, like Hirst, with ideas of transience and mortality.

The OSTEN collection covers many aspects of British art and so includes artists of great contrast. John O'Connor was a classical artist whose lyrical etching evokes 17th century composer Henry Purcell through a quintessential English landscape. Hannah Collins, on the other hand, is best known for her huge, unframed and subtle black and white photographs. She is represented here by two warmly textured lithographs of snails and sunflowers, reminiscent of her home in Spain.

Many of the other artists do not fit into neat categories, underlining that, while British art is rightly known through many international and key figures, the wider story is also told more quietly by a range of other individual artists.

GILL HEDLEY
MAY 2016