

London Evening Standard

standard.co.uk

HOME NEWS BUSINESS COMMENT SPORT ENTERTAINMENT LIFE & STYLE HOMES & PROPERTY
READER OFFERS GAMES

Entertainment Film Theatre Showbiz Restaurants Music Comedy Arts Events
Clubbing Pubs & Bars What's on

Symbolist Art in Poland

Tate Britain
Millbank, SW1 4RG

NOT RATED Brian Sewell's rating

★★★★★ Reader rating

[Add your review](#)

Identity crisis at Tate Britain

By Brian Sewell, Evening Standard 21.05.09

[More reviews by Brian Sewell](#)

Tate Britain is in the process of sloughing its skin again — the annual spectacle of re-hang and rearrangement that disorients the visitor who longs for permanence as much as change. I see virtue in both, but the wholesale shift and shunt — though some great paintings survive these activities and are almost always somewhere on view within the building — is deeply unsettling, particularly when considerable painters and whole movements in the history of art are reduced to only an example or two, or altogether disappear for years.

In its role as the National Gallery of Historic British Art, Tate Britain's prime purpose must surely be always to provide a didactic art historical framework of British painting from Tudor times, with Holbein and Eworth (it has neither), to the venerated masters of the present day. It must offer between these termini the dreadful doldrums of the later 17th century and the astonishing varieties of the 18th and 19th centuries, the response of British artists to the Enlightenment and the Grand Tour, to formula and nature in landscape, to the growth of industry and its consequent social problems, to history and Shakespeare, its escape into Romanticism, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Symbolism, myth and quotidian narrative, ending with its Anglo-Saxon attitudes to Impressionism and all the 20th-century developments that in Europe piled Pelion on Ossa.

The present display, though vaguely chronological (if by unlikely chance the visitor first finds the rooms containing the earliest paintings), is haphazard, all my suggested categories jumbled. It is also meagre, largely because the great long gallery that runs north from the old main entrance overlooking the Thames has been stripped to accommodate Richard Long's retrospective survey in 10 days or so.

I experienced it in reverse because the urgent purpose of my visit was to see an exhibition of Symbolist Art in Poland housed in the small octagon in the south-west corner of the building. Polish art in



Doomed: Jacek Malczewski's Eloe with Ellenai inspired by a patriotic history poem in which these lovers were banished from Poland to Siberia, leading to the death of Ellenai



Portrait: Lawrence Alma-Tadema's portrait of the Polish pianist Ignacy Paderewski, internationally regarded as a

Tate Britain? Yes, because the exhibition's slant is towards the influence on it of British art at either side of 1900, a time when British art was influencing artists all over Europe, even young [Picasso](#) in [Barcelona](#). There is also a wholly irrelevant subtext illustrating the British infatuation with the pianist Paderewski, whose nationalist work as a composer reflected the political aspirations of Polish painters.

Symbolism, a perverse and often contradictory movement that swept European literature as well as art in the later 19th century, the one often the inspiration of the other, is poetic and visionary, exotic and sinister, repellent and amusing, enlisting the imagery of dream and fantasy as though induced in a haze of opiates.

To illustrate these characteristics, the Poles have sent us two works on paper and seven oil paintings, three of which hang on the end wall of the neighbouring gallery through which we approach the octagon.

On its other walls hang paintings by Sargent, Brett, Rossetti, Burne-Jones, John Collier, Frank Cowper and other painters of the kind collected by the Chantry Bequest and old Henry Tate himself, of which a small handful loosely hint at Symbolism, half-heartedly setting the scene for the three Polish canvases. These, Josef Mehoffer's *Strange Garden* and a pair of poetic-cum-nationalist anti-Russian subjects by Jacek Malczewski (all hung at heights that do not correspond with their internal viewpoints, making them uncomfortable to see), are flanked by the Tate's own *Hope* by Watts and a *Yeoman of the Guard* by Millais, the visual conjunctions ludicrous, the art historical justifications for them slight. *Strange Garden*, portraying Mehoffer's wife in blue silk and their infant son stark naked clutching broken hollyhocks, a monster dragonfly above them, painted in 1903, may well be "an icon of the Polish fin-de-siècle", but it is surely far less close to the Pre-Raphaelites — as Polish writers have it in the catalogue — than to his Russian contemporary Mikhail Nesterov, Larsson in [Sweden](#), and even the Glasgow Boys Henry and Hornel, and we should instead recognise it as an example of pan-European Zeitgeist.

Polish hero at a time of Russian occupation of his country



Flower bower: Josef Mehoffer's *Strange Garden*, portraying the artist's wife and son, an example of pan-European Symbolism



Spirits eternal: to flesh out the exhibition, the Tate has added its own *Hope* by George Frederick Watts, a picture much admired by Polish critics but with little connection to Polish Symbolism

This wretched scrap of an exhibition is a disappointment. The artists of Poland under Russian subjugation are well worth studying — so too are the artists of [Hungary](#), [Croatia](#) and other nations suppressed by the Austrian Empire (there are distinct parallels with the Poles) — and we should take them as seriously as we do the New English Art Club and the painters of [Camden Town](#), but Tate Britain fails utterly to do the job. We need to see more of Mehoffer; more of the vigorous paintings of Wojtkiewicz, who made a justified but forgotten splash in [Paris](#); more of Jozef Pankiewicz, whose *Nocturne: Swans at Night* is both Whistlerian and has intriguing parallels with the Symbolist paintings of his Croatian contemporary, Vlaho Bukovac; more of the bombast of Malczewski, who was to Krakow what Lovis Corinth was to [Berlin](#). Ten times the number of paintings might have served the purpose well, even five times might have been enough, but seven paintings? To a year of celebrating Polish culture, this is a sad little beginning.

Nevertheless, it serves one unexpected purpose in revealing a great gap between the functions of the two Tate Galleries. Tate Britain is for British art, Tate Modern for art that is modern — an elusive and slippery term — and contemporary, its current reputation weighted heavily toward the latter. Symbolism is neither British nor Modern. Were the superpowers of the combined Tates to be offered a share in a real old-fashioned blockbuster of the kind that used to be funded by the Council of Europe (those were the days), with hundreds, even a thousand exhibits, the subject Pan-European Symbolism, in which of them — Bankside or Millbank — could it logically be shown? Would it, instead, automatically be offered to the Royal Academy to boost that old whore's commercial profits?

Does Tate Britain do better in this, its 20th annual re-hang? A gallery devoted to British interpretations of Constructivism is either an exciting introduction to this severely intellectual international movement, or a provincial and derivative footnote to it. Works by Victor Pasmore and Anthony Hill, neat and intelligent variations and extensions of well-established themes, evoke the desire for possession, but Mary Martin's *Inversions* is a flabby over-extension of a thin idea; their isolation from the mainstreams of the movement does not serve them well, and the contents of this room should be transferred to Tate Modern to be shown with their peers from elsewhere.



Again the point is raised of the divisions between the Tates, just as it is by the most immediately contemporary British art; this is part of an international movement with nothing identifiably British (another slippery term now) about it, and the ghastly Triennials, The Turner Prize and the fatuities of Gormley, Kapoor, Hirst and others of their generation, none of which and whom have even the slightest connection with ancestral British art, should be exclusively the business of Tate Modern.

Tony Swain's Art Now project — landscapes daubed on newspaper — is connected with tradition, and that is all that can be said of it, for not even the New English Art Club and the Royal Academy at their most indulgent would admit such rubbish to their exhibitions. A room devoted to Gilbert and George demonstrates their intellectual and aesthetic shabbiness, their Hunger and Thirst no more than the graffiti of the sexually starved.

In a gallery displaying New Sculpture — that is, British sculpture from c.1880 to c.1920, when, if not exactly Rodin, it was a vigorous combination of academic, classical, romantic and symbolic tendencies — it is as though the visitor has chanced upon a bleak grey store room in which the bronze figures have been randomly dumped in dead light filtering through blinds in the glass roof that obscure the changing moods of day. Consider James Havard Thomas's near life-size and nude Lycidas, so shadowed here that none could see "the opening eyelids of the morn", and the modelling and musculature of the exquisite boy die again in the cruel circumstances in which he now stands. Was sculpture ever so deplorably displayed?

Tate Britain has an exhausted air about it, half empty, the hanging meagre and insensitive. It is as though, driven by external patronage — for the annual changes are funded by BP and will be so until 2012 — in its desperation to be different again, it has lost conviction in itself. Must it take the proffered subsidy? Must it collaborate in the self-serving purposes of BP's patronage, in my view a fine example of the damage done when the patron calls the tune? Could it not refuse BP's cash and dismount from the wretched hamster wheel to which it is condemned? Has Tate Britain learned nothing from 20 years of BP's tyranny?

Symbolist Art in Poland is at Tate Britain (020 7887 8888, www.tate.org.uk) until 21 June. Daily 10am-5.45pm. Admission free

Related articles

- ▶ [William Blake the bleak](#)
- ▶ [Best free London activities](#)
- ▶ [A relaxing weekend in London](#)

More

- ▶ [Guernica review](#)
- ▶ [Past Future Perfect review](#)

Details are correct at the time of publication - please check with venue before booking.

Sorry, but we cannot display user comments at the moment.

[Loot](#) | [Jobsite](#) | [Homes & property](#) | [London jobs](#) | [FindaProperty.com](#) | [Primelocation.com](#) | [Educate London](#) | [Holiday Villas](#)



© 2009 ES London Limited [Terms](#) [Privacy policy](#) [Advertise with us](#) [Advertise in London Lite](#) [Promotion rules](#)