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Main Themes of the exhibition

Creative Tension features paintings, sculpture and ceramics by leading British artists working in the first half of the C20th.

The artworks are taken from the public collections of Bolton Museum and Art Gallery, Gallery Oldham, Touchstones, Rochdale and the Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston.

The Non-Linear Nature of Art History

Art history is often portrayed as a series of 'isms' or art movements, each replacing the other in direct succession. So Impressionism is followed by Post-Impressionism, this leads to Cubism, Surrealism and so on, until artists made the move away from representational art (art with an identifiable subject matter) to pure abstraction (art without any specific subject matter).

In reality the evolution of different ideas about art was not that clear cut. Often critics, not the artists themselves, created these 'isms' but once work or an artist had been categorised the labels tended to stick.

Most artists experiment, adapt and borrow the elements they were particularly interested in from different influences to create their own individual styles of working. In his lifetime, for example, Picasso was classed as a 'Symbolist', a 'Cubist', a 'Surrealist' and an abstract painter.

The diverse range of artwork in Creative Tension demonstrates how, in Britain, artists were using European and other outside influences to shape their own ways of painting.

The 'Avant Garde' versus the 'Traditional'

The term 'avant garde' originated in 1910 from the French for Van Guard – those in the foremost or leading position. It is used to describe anything that overturns conventions or traditions in favour of something new.

Often the 'avant garde' and the traditional are defined in opposition to each other. Many artists who chose to portray representational subjects were and are criticised for refusing to embrace the latest innovations in art.

Many of the works in Creative Tension shows how representational artists were still open to new influences and ideas and used 'modern' techniques in their work. Similarly many artists who were considered to be 'avant garde' or at the cutting edge of the new ideas about art still drew on traditional elements such as draughtsmanship and skilled painting techniques.

The Development of Modern Art

From looking at art dating from the early 1900's to work produced in the late 1940's it is possible to chart how some artists began to move away from representational subjects to an abstract form of art concerned with using colour, shape, line and form to express a mood or atmosphere.

The impact and development of photography had an impact on the way some artists viewed the purpose of art. Artists began to explore new theories and discoveries about visual perception, colour, shape, and form made by mathematicians, scientists and psychologists.

The challenge of finding a new visual language for art to reflect the C20th that was experimental and didn't follow traditional styles was labelled 'Modernism'.

A Time of Great Change

The first 50 years of the C20th was a time of great change and innovation. Virtually every artist featured in the exhibition was affected by the two World Wars and other political events that shaped the era in which they lived. New inventions in technology and philosophy also influenced artists and the meaning behind their work.

The artworks also chronicle changing fashions and trends, not just in clothes but in how people chose to spend their leisure, the depiction of the world of work, and attitudes to urban and rural communities.

The Ethics of Collecting.

All the paintings in the show are from public collections that have been put together over the decades by Museums and Galleries. Who decides what is worth collecting for posterity, and what influences those decisions?

Does the work included in Creative Tension give a representative view of British art? Which artists are missing and why?