

# Nushin Elahi's London Letter

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Every great city has its own river, and wars are fought and lost around them. London has the Thames, and from the time the Romans forded it, it has been pivotal to the city's history. Historian David Starkey has taken the river's royal connections and woven a fascinating tale of how this stretch of water has influenced the city and its people.

**Royal River: Power, Pageantry and the Thames** marks the 75th anniversary of the **National Maritime Museum** in Greenwich, an opening the Queen attended as a girl of 11, and is a fitting tribute at the time of her Diamond Jubilee (until 9 September). For anyone who may be dubious of the exhibition's royal connections though, Starkey has kept it very much the portrait of a river.

It opens with a fabulous huge Canaletto, last seen in this country when it was executed 260 years ago, and portraying the splendour of a pageant on the Thames much more magnificent than that seen at this Jubilee. Looking at the hundreds of boats he painted so meticulously in *The Thames on Lord Mayor's Day* you wonder how he did it without photographic help. The painting has been in Bohemia, and on its own is worth the entry fee. In the years 1746 – 1752 Canaletto completed many other smaller paintings of the river, similar to his Venetian series, and there are scenes here from Greenwich, Westminster and the Ranelagh Gardens, near Chelsea.

He isn't the only artist on display. There are paintings by Peter Lely, Holman Hunt and Winterhalter, among others. Intricate maps show the changing London skyline, there's livery from the guilds, pictures of Nelson's great funeral procession and frost fairs. The stench of the Victorian river and the ingenuity of achievements such as the Embankment and the sewers are deftly captured. With such a huge subject to cover, Starkey has deftly placed interesting objects as markers for the milestones of the Thames.

The annual **Summer Exhibition** at the **Royal Academy** (until 12 August) is always guaranteed to get people talking about how good, bad or indifferent the work is. It is the largest open submission show in the world, now in its 244th year. The show opens with a vivid burst of red, homage to Matisse's *Red Studio*, and that bright intensity is evident throughout. Perhaps it is what sets the tone, as there is an energy and optimism in the show that reflects a more upbeat country than the grim headlines declare.

The small octagonal room pulsates with colour, among them two beautiful large abstracts by John Hoyland, and some rather messy landscapes by Anthony Berg. The largest room, traditionally hung with enormous works by known names, is filled with dozens of small public submissions, allowing for the first time the space to enjoy the incredible hotchpotch of styles and subjects, rather than having them cramped at the end. It reminds one just how individual this thing called taste is. The architecture room, always frustratingly short on the backstories of why and where a model is, spills into another room with landscapes and paintings of

buildings.

In another departure from tradition, much of the sculpture by newcomers is presented on what looks like the bric-a-brac tables in a summer fair, with a similar ratio of treasures to dross!

There is something for everyone here, whether it is the bright yellow rubbish bin you may find at your local bus stop valued at a mere £26 000, or what could be a tiny embroidery of Boetti's interlocking shapes at £500. There's a crown of thorns, a gold-leafed rabbit jaw, a porcelain tape measure, a chair of chicken bones, a map of an imaginary London, a coat stand with gossamer thin hangers and a life-size big cat made of wire hangers. A poster shows Richard Wilson's bus hanging precariously on a seaside building à la *The Italian Job*, one of the Olympic artworks. Anselm Kiefer's *Samson* poses the political conflict in Gaza with his trademark thickly crusted paint and a machine-gun, Stephen Cox has a horsewoman carved in granite, Sean Scully offers large dark blocks of colour and Chris Wilkinson's huge metal spiral bench greets you outside.

There is such diversity in the nearly 1500 works it would be impossible to find a theme, other than perhaps smaller sizes and a sense of fun. It's hard to believe that many entrants are more than Sunday painters, and one could happily fill that yellow bin, but for sheer range and scale the exhibition is hard to beat.

**Henry Moore's** wonderfully tactile sculptures fill the cavernous space of **Gagosian's Britannia Street** gallery in Late Large Forms until 18 August. The eight huge pieces are dated from the Sixties and Seventies and were meant to be seen in a natural setting, where one would glimpse a bit of tree or sky through the spaces the artist created within each piece. Although you miss that flash of blue or green, there is a certain pleasure in seeing the interplay between the sculptures: walking around an apparently solid form to find it split in two, and creating a frame for another work. They show an astounding range of texture and colour in bronze: from a highly polished sheen, through a mottled gold, to dark, almost black with irregular markings to the weathered copper-green patina of one of the most spectacular pieces: *Large Two Forms* 1966. They are abstract, sensuous works, full of surprising angles, some interlocking, others containing separate parts. Some have strange elements, such as the animal-like 'face' in the highly polished reclining figure, or the tortoise-like shell of the *Seated Woman: Thin Neck*. A small side panel at the end shows his tiny maquettes, as well as the bits of flint that inspired at least two of the sculptures.

**The Hayward Gallery** has been transformed into **Wide Open School** for an innovative month's programme of workshops and lectures from 80 leading artists from around the world (until 11 July). It provides a platform for the public to engage with artists in subjects they are passionate about. Marlene Dumas represents South Africa, talking about her use of found images.

Ian Davenport: *Puddle Painting: Pale Lilac, Yellow (After Bonnard)* Acrylic. Photo courtesy John Bodkin  
Henry Moore Installation.

Canaletto London: *The Thames on Lord Mayor's Day, Looking Towards the City and St Paul's Cathedral* ©The Lobkowicz Collections, Czech Republic.

Greenwich Hospital from the north bank of the Thames, Canaletto, 1750 – 52 © National Maritime Museum, London

Summer Exhibition 2012 Installation shots and the work by Ian Davenport, which is hanging in the central hall

View of the Central Hall, Summer Exhibition 2012, Photo courtesy John Bodkin Installation View of Gallery III Summer Exhibition 2012 Photo courtesy John Bodkin

