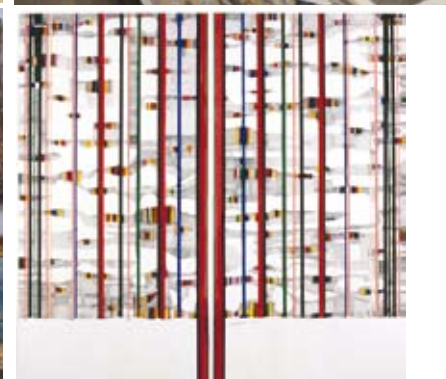


LONDON LETTER

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When you think of Mexico and the revolution of 1910, the image of a swarthy man with a magnificent moustache and a sombrero comes to mind. His name was Zapata, and his image was consciously promoted, along with that of fellow revolutionary 'Pancho' Villa by artists rekindling a sense of national pride and cultural identity. The great art that defines this period was executed in huge bold murals, so the **Royal Academy's** exhibition **Mexico: A Revolution in Art 1910 – 1940** (until 29 Sept) is something of a misnomer.

While Diego Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros, the three greats of the time, are represented in a painting each, this collection of work in the small Sackler gallery offers at best an interesting backdrop to the era. It includes lesser known artists and foreigners who visited the country at the time: people such as the English artist Edward Burra, whose two large watercolours give a flavour of the intoxicating allure of this explosive place, but who had to leave because he was struck down with dysentery.

Photographs portray in graphic terms the street executions, the poverty and the dignity of the people. They all give a glimpse of the enormous diversity of the country's attraction: not only its people and traditions, but the light and the ancient monuments.

Without the murals that distinguish it, though, this show could only ever be a pale imitation of the real thing. There is just enough here to whet your appetite for Mexico's art, but it doesn't really leave you feeling you have experienced much of it.

Tate Britain has had a radical rehang as part of its ongoing change, and recently unveiled a chronological display of its British art which now shows off many gems which were languishing in storage. Presented around the outer perimeter of the Millbank galleries, the new display has proved hugely popular with the public, judging by what could have been a quiet Monday afternoon.

Beginning with Tudor portraits, it not only becomes a social history of Britain but a chronicle of changing costume and habits. It is a fascinating tool for any student of art to see how the country and its manners altered. There are sweep-

ing views of a Belsize manor house with the city glimpsed as smoking chimneys in the distance, people swimming under Westminster Bridge and Canaletto's huge view of the Old Horse Guards from St James – surprisingly unchanged. Britain's nautical power is reflected in great shipping scenes, classical mythology gives rise to grand canvasses, we see Stubbs's horses and Gainsborough's portraits. Joseph Wright of Derby depicts the eruption of Vesuvius in the late 1700s, its destruction echoed later by a quartet of John Martin's Victorian apocalyptic scenes. Constable portrays an idyllic English countryside but the best Turners remain in the adjoining Clore Galleries. Stepping into the Victorian era, a huge gallery allows for double hanging and reveals the shock of the Pre-Raphaelites, but also a Stanley Spencer, Bomberg's Mud Bath and the exquisite beauty of Whistler's Nocturnes.

Not beyond the war, though. Passing through the bookshop, it all seems to fall apart. No doubt that is in part because the rooms now look old-fashioned and cramped with the larger scale of modern work, especially some of the sculpture which crowds out everything else. Epstein's Jacob and the Angel, a large alabaster work from 1940, needs space around it, rather than being squeezed into a tiny crossroads of a room. Henry Moore's reclining nudes fare better, but still are best seen outdoors. From there the work simply reflects the cacophony of the twentieth century. Hockney's *A Bigger Splash* is seen through the red poles of an Anthony Caro sculpture, Bridget Riley's pop art makes a colourful pattern, Hoyland and Hodgkin add another dash of colour. There are two early Lucien Freuds, an ugly, boring Damien Hirst (a desk in a glass case) and stepping into the Chapman Family Collection feels like walking into an African curio shop, until you see the Big Mac signs on these ethnographic figures. Perhaps then it's time to head across the river to the Tate Modern, where there is more breathing space for this stuff. If the **BP Walk Through British Art** is how the company salves its conscience though, one can only applaud its corporate sponsorship.

Two African artists are being shown in tandem at the

Tate Modern until 22 September and although both create a dialogue between their African roots and European culture, they could not differ more. **Ibrahim El-Salahi – A Visionary Modernist** is the substantial retrospective of an elderly artist considered a major influence in the modernist movements in Africa and the Arab world. He hails from the Sudan where he trained and, after a stint in London, took up a cultural post, only to be incarcerated in prison. This is a major body of work from early realistic portraits, through his experimentation in the Sixties using his calligraphic background, his prison notebook to the colourful detail of his tree-series and back to recent monochromatic drawings inspired by Spain's Alhambra.

Meschac Gaba's Museum of Contemporary African Art reflects this middle-aged Benin artist's attempt to find a space for his own art in the context of a European museum. The Tate has recently purchased this 12-room display, which evolved between 1997 and 2002 as it travelled between galleries in Europe. It ranges from a bicycle-powered catalogue in the library, to a games room with tables depicting the Benin flag, a marriage room which documents Gaba's wedding to his Dutch fiancée in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and, for an elite few, dinner prepared in the museum restaurant. While emphasising the importance of collaboration and the viewer's participation, it is ironic that so much of what formed the interaction is now for display purposes only – like the bicycles which could be used to navigate the city at Documenta 11 in Kassel, or the trinkets that could be bought from the shop when it was displayed in Rotterdam. This ephemeral installation has in fact become a caricature of itself, the very thing it was commenting on.

Images: Tate Modern: The Architecture room / Tate Modern: Self-Portrait of Suffering 1961: Ibrahim El-Salahi / Tate Modern: BP rehang of the Tate's galleries, Pre-Raphaelite Room / Tate Modern: Gaba's Marriage room / Tate Modern: The Tree 2003: Ibrahim El-Salahi