

Art Trail
Stories of Change:
Hope, Faith and Love

Ann Sumner

Chair, Methodist Modern Art Collection

Stories of Change: Hope, Faith and Love

Introduction

The Methodist Modern Art Collection is one of the Methodist Church's greatest treasures. This outstanding collection of Christian art has particular strengths in British 20th-century Modern artists including works by Edward Burra, Elisabeth Frink, Patrick Heron, Ceri Richards, Graham Sutherland and William Roberts. The Collection has continued to grow, since its foundation in the 1960s, with innovative acquisitions from the 1990s onwards.

Just as John Wesley, who inspired the Methodist Movement, travelled around the country preaching, so the Methodist Modern Art Collection is not rooted in one place. From the beginning it was conceived as a travelling collection with strong educational links, and has been touring for many years to chapels, churches, cathedrals, museums, galleries and educational establishments, where it has inspired worship, enthused Mission, amazed visitors, and encouraged many supporters and enthusiasts. This unique Collection has recently undergone a programme of conservation and re-framing, to ensure it is preserved for future generations. This is the first time it has been seen by the public in over two years.

Re-launching the Collection during the City of Culture year in Coventry, and opening the Art Trail ***Stories of Change: Hope, Faith and Love*** with works on display in the Cathedral itself, set among outstanding masterpieces of 20th-century religious art, is particularly appropriate, as the Collection was begun in 1962, the year that the Cathedral was consecrated. Four works are hung at the Cathedral, all creating new dynamic dialogues between these paintings and the outstanding interior of the Cathedral with its related artworks. This is followed by a trail across the city, and beyond, enabling the exploration of the Collection in depth within the context of the communities who are hosting the trail, along with their responses to the works, at a time of recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic.

An innovative Art Trail for Coventry – *Stories of Change: Hope, Faith and Love*

The Church of England's post-war response to church artistic commissioning is well known; epitomised by the brilliant architecture and art commissioned by the architect Sir Basil Spence at Coventry Cathedral. The Methodist Church's engagement with post-war British religious art is less well known and, historically, art commissioning has not been at the forefront of non-conformist church activities. The unique story of the formation of the Methodist Modern Art Collection, from its foundation in 1962, is told in this trail, demonstrating how it has grown to include more artists from other parts of the world, to reflect multicultural Britain. Today it also plays a role in post-Covid recovery, offering moments of contemplation and healing.

For nearly 60 years these works have surprised, delighted and enthused many hundreds of thousands of people who have seen and appreciated them in churches, cathedrals and art galleries across the UK. We hope, here in Coventry, visitors will take the opportunity to engage with these works anew and follow the trail from the Cathedral, to Methodist Central Hall and onwards to Earlsdon Methodist Church, Balsall Common Methodist Church and Saint Mary and All Saints Church

at Fillongley (a longstanding and successful example of a Local Ecumenical Partnership between the local Anglican and the Methodist churches). In all of these venues we hope they discover more about these significant paintings and their message of hope, faith and love.

This Art Trail provides information about the works that can be found at each location and how the local community responded to these, as well as explaining how to navigate the trail from the city centre out into the delightful villages nearby. A printed leaflet will be available at each of the venues.

The artists represented in the Collection may have been war artists like Graham Sutherland, or refugees like Ralph Beyer, or brought up during World War 2 on the Home Front like Elisabeth Frink. For those artists who experienced war directly, whether serving or on the Home Front, many found solace in representing Christian themes in the post-war recovery years.

During our time of recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, we can draw parallels with the post-war years of recovery and re-building, for which Coventry is so well known. The impacts of the pandemic are felt in many different ways and the Collection has real potential to provide space for moments of healing and contemplation this autumn.

All the venues will have a naturally 'hushed' atmosphere to allow visitors space to reflect quietly on the works displayed. Some venues may also offer further support and activities, such as the Prayer Stations at Earlsdon Methodist Church. There will also be opportunities to engage with therapeutic arts-based activities responding to the works and informative lectures and talks, shedding new light on, and interpretations of, key paintings.

For further information on these activities please visit: www.methodist.org.uk/cityofculture

Each time the Collection is loaned, the different communities who host it develop new dialogues with the artworks. Prior to borrowing paintings for this Art Trail, local churches around Coventry and Nuneaton encouraged congregations and their leaders to contemplate these works in imaginative ways, often during lockdowns. They had detailed discussions, using them to inspire prayer. This Art Trail now includes their many of their dynamic responses, creating new dialogues for the City of Culture.

Artists in residence at Methodist Central Hall: poet Emilie Lauren Jones, community artist Nikki Bovis-Coulter and digital artist Emily Tyler have all responded to the Collection and their work is also on view at Central Hall. Emilie's poems are included in this Art Trail information.

The Revd Stephen Willey, Minister at Central Hall commented: "It is exciting to see our mission to nurture and celebrate faith, hope and love coming to life in Coventry this year through these artists."

History of the Collection

This unique Collection began in the early 1960s as the inspired initiative of Dr John Morel Gibbs (1912–96). Gibbs was a Methodist layman who came from a wealthy Penarth shipping family in south Wales. His father, Major John Angel Gibbs, died in action in World War 1. John Morel Gibbs was very much raised in the shadow of war and, after taking a law degree at Cambridge, followed by

a PhD in child psychology, became a conscientious objector in World War 2. He went on to become Vice President of the Methodist Church in 1959. By the 1960s Gibbs had concluded that the Methodist Church had failed to engage with contemporary high-quality religious art, which could make a genuine contribution to the life of the Church. He determined to rectify the situation.

Working with the local Methodist minister in Penarth, the Revd Douglas Wollen (1909-1998), who wrote as an art critic for publications including *The Times* and *The Methodist Recorder*, Gibbs acquired some outstanding examples of British 20th-century art. These were all chosen to illustrate aspects of the Gospel narrative, from the Nativity to Pentecost.

Some acquisitions were by established artists, such as William Roberts or Graham Sutherland, others were by relatively unknown artists just at the beginning of their careers. Wollen and Gibbs visited Bond Street galleries when they were in London for Methodist meetings to view potential acquisitions, and sometimes bought directly from artists after studio visits, occasionally commissioning works, or buying at auction. The 1960s were a time of energy and optimism, as well as recovery from World War 2, and the initial purchases echo the social and creative developments of the decade. There is a strong Welsh flavour to a number of early acquisitions, reflecting the fact that the original founders were based in south Wales, with works by Ceri Richards, Euryl Stevens and Michael Edmonds (based in Penarth at the time). From the outset there was a genuine desire to reflect innovative approaches to subjects and to look beyond European traditions. One of the first paintings to be acquired was by Francis Newton Souza, an Indian artist of international fame, living in London at the time.

The first works were purchased in 1962, ahead of a hugely ambitious touring exhibition which ran from July 1963-September 1965 and was entitled ***The Church and the Artist***, with new works joining as they were acquired. It was shown across the country including at major galleries such as Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, the Walker in Liverpool, Manchester City Art Gallery, the Laing in Newcastle, the Graves in Sheffield, and Turner House in Penarth, part of the National Museum of Wales at the time. The tour included one school, Kingswood in Bath, one college, Southlands in London and just one cathedral, in Portsmouth. Overall 107,000 people saw the Collection at 30 venues. The exhibition was received enthusiastically by the public, and local and religious press, but barely picked up by the art press. There were just seven mentions in national newspapers, and while there was brief coverage by the BBC with a programme *Seeing and Believing*, aired in January 1964, overall the reception was muted in contrast to the more controversial response to the opening of Coventry Cathedral.

After the first exhibition tour, the Collection was housed at Kingswood School in Bath, where it was administered by the then Methodist Education Committee. From the early 1970s, it was distributed between a number of Methodist schools, before being reunited again at Southlands Teacher Training College in the late 1970s. Eventually, after a conservation programme, the Collection was relaunched in the 1990s as a touring exhibition once more. Appropriately, the first exhibition was at the Turner House Gallery in Penarth. Exhibitions then continued from 1992, when it was shown at St Giles in Oxford, and in 1993 at The Maltings in Farnham, Surrey and Winchester Cathedral. The Collection began to grow once more with the commission of the Adams watercolour ***Christ's entry into Jerusalem***, in 1991, currently on display at Earlsdon Methodist Church.

There was a general revival of interest in British 20th-century art in the 1990s, when a national poll elected Coventry Cathedral as the nation's favourite 20th-century building, embraced by the public as a symbol of reconciliation and peace. Works such as Patrick Heron's *Crucifix and Candles: Night 1950* were acquired and, in 1997, a new working group was set up by the Methodist Church to manage the Collection, chaired by John Newton Gibbs, son of the original founder. He recognised the potential power of the Collection to support Mission and provided inspired leadership for the next 20 years. This group oversaw further expansion of the Collection in the 2000s, particularly with works by women artists such as Susie Hamilton, Ghislaine Howard and Maggi Hambling, as well as more works by international artists.

The resulting Collection of over 50 works continues to grow and still, on occasion, reflects its Welsh roots. In 2011 a work was commissioned by Clive Hicks-Jenkins, who was born in Newport in 1951. Work is also still donated, for example, *Crucifixion*, a watercolour by Michael Edmonds, was acquired in 2015. During the period 2016-2018, the Collection was seen by nearly 80 thousand visitors.

The Management Committee is committed to curating exhibitions which are relevant and contemporary for our audiences. Exhibitions which address issues such as peace and reconciliation; the current refugee crisis and the affirmation of Dalit people, embracing equality, diversity and inclusion whenever possible. In this trail the artworks also reflect the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and ensure a role in the healing process.

Taking the Art Trail:

We suggest that you park at Memorial Park in Coventry, then walk to the city centre or use the Park and Ride bus to the Cathedral. Coventry train station is close to the city centre.

Start by visiting Coventry Cathedral itself, it is then a short walk to Central Hall. Earlsdon Methodist Church is also within walking distance.

To continue the trail you will need to drive or take the train to Balsall Common (alight at Berkswell Station, and walk west for 500 yards to the church).

Fillongley can be reached either by car, or by bus from Pool Meadow Bus Station in Coventry City Centre – the 735 operated by Coventry Minibuses runs daily.

Church opening times

Fridays and Saturdays 11am-4pm

Sundays 1pm-4pm

Other times by arrangement and for special events.

Cathedral and Central Hall opening hours - please check directly for different opening times, and for special events.

For further information about events see the following website:

www.methodist.org.uk/cityofculture

Further reading

Sarah Middleton *The Methodist Modern Art Collection in Wales*

<https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/2529/mmac-bilingual-booklet-0315.pdf>

Roger Wollen *Catalogue of the Methodist Church Collection of Modern Christian Art*, 1988

Roger Wollen *Seeing the Spiritual – A Guide to the Methodist Modern Art Collection*
with introductory contributions by Richard Cork, Graham Kent and Ann Sumner, 2018