

Methodist Modern Art Collection

Mission and Interpretation Policy

Governing body: The Methodist Modern Art Collection Management Committee, as appointed and delegated authority by the Methodist Council

Date approved by governing body: March 2021 **Date at which policy due for review:** May 2026

MMAC background and purpose

1. Statement of purpose

- 1.1. The Methodist Modern Art Collection (MMAC) contains works of art produced in the last 100 years, which offer perspectives on aspects of Christian faith and life. Some of the artists are people of faith, others are not; some of those who view them are people of faith, some are not.
- 1.2. The Methodist Church values this Collection because through exhibiting the works in local churches, cathedrals and community buildings, as well as museums and art galleries, people are encouraged to explore the meaning of life and to ask questions about faith and about the Methodist Church itself.
- 1.3. The Calling of the Methodist Church is to respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission. Many of the pictures in this Collection show scenes from the Bible and from the life of Jesus and often they explore the contemporary relevance of these historical events. We hope that those who visit an exhibition will be introduced to a living faith, that they will be encouraged to ask questions and to talk to one another, and that they will enjoy the opportunity to see great works of art in their own context.
- 1.4. The Church recognises the quality of this unique Collection in British 20th century religious art and the popularity of this period at the present time with audiences, and that as the Collection has grown, increasingly international artists are

represented which creates broad appeal to wide, diverse audiences globally.

2. Seeing the spiritual: Our vision

- 2.1. The Methodist Modern Art Collection is a resource for the Methodist Church and should be used to underpin our activities. The Management Committee believe that the MMAC has a significant role to play as a tool in reaffirming the calling of the Methodist Church to respond to the Gospel of God's love in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission.
- 2.2. Our aim is for the Collection to be a distinctive, unique and highly effective Connexional tool for mission.
- 2.3. We will promote the potential of the works of art for theological engagement with the visual arts, enthusing those of Christian faith who appreciate art, as well as helping reach those who are unconvinced by Christian faith, and promoting open-minded responses.
- 2.4. We are keen to develop non-Methodist partnerships, as well as working with others across the Connexion.
- 2.5. We are committed to broadening access to the Collection, particularly through exhibitions (both physical and online) at a popular as well as academic level, thus acknowledging the potential for the Collection to transform wider perceptions of the Methodist Church.

3. A brief history of the Methodist Modern Art Collection

- 3.1. The Collection began in the early 1960s as the inspired initiative of a Methodist layman, Dr John Morel Gibbs (1912-1996), from Penarth in South Wales. Vice-President of the 1958 Conference, he was renowned as a psychologist and academic. Working with the local Methodist minister in Penarth, the Revd Douglas Wollen (1909-1998), who worked as an art critic for publications including *The Times* and the *Methodist Recorder*, Gibbs acquired some outstanding examples of British 20th century art, all chosen to illustrate aspects of the Gospel narrative, from the Nativity to Pentecost.
- 3.2. The resulting Collection of just over 50 works was particularly strong in works by contemporary British artists such as Patrick Heron, Ceri Richards, Graham Sutherland and William Roberts. There were also examples of continental artists such as Georges Rouault, and international artists such as F. N. Souza. The first ambitious nationwide touring exhibition of the Collection – entitled *The Church and the Artist* – took place between July 1963 and September 1965.
- 3.3. The Collection was presented to the Methodist Church and was initially managed by the then Methodist Education Committee, with the Methodist Council having ultimate responsibility (as it does today). The Collection has continued to grow, thanks to the generous support of the Gibbs Family Trust and the donation of works by other benefactors (most recently in 2018, of *Behold the Man*, a watercolour by Norman Adams). It now includes examples of work by such international artists as John Muafangejo, Jyoti Sahi and Sadao Watanabe.
- 3.4. The Collection has continued to tour throughout the United Kingdom and Ireland – as a unit, or as smaller themed selections in chapels, churches, cathedrals, museums and galleries, schools, colleges, universities, and even a shopping centre. During the period between 2016 and 2018, it was seen by nearly 80,000 visitors. It has been displayed as part of local art trails and festivals,

and loans have coincided with major national themes, such as a showing in Hull during the city's 2017 Year of Culture, or to mark local events, such as the 200th anniversary of Walcot Methodist Church in Bath in 2016. We want our exhibitions to be relevant and contemporary for our audiences, addressing issues such as peace and reconciliation, the current refugee crisis, the affirmation of Dalit people, reflecting the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and ensuring a role in the healing process, and where possible, embracing equality, diversity and inclusion.

- 3.5. From 2019 to 2021, the Collection underwent a 'rejuvenation pause', enabling a planned conservation programme to be undertaken with the aim of a relaunch in 2021. The Collection will then be presented in optimum condition, with many paintings transformed by surface cleaning and other interventions, and protected by stronger frames suitable to withstand the physical demands on the Collection from frequent touring. Going forward, the Committee aims to care for the Collection to the highest standards, 'preserving it for future generations' (Collections Care and Conservation Policy, 2021) and ensuring that it plays a key role in the missional life of the Methodist Church.

1. Key topics and identifying features

1.1. Key topics:

- The depiction of the life of Christ and the Christian experience/'Seeing the Spiritual'.
- The power of the elements – especially the sea, and the bread and wine.
- Suffering humanity, represented by the crucifixion of Christ, notably through the eyes of war artists.
- Healing and wholeness.
- The history of the Collection – how the Methodist Church came to have this unique outstanding resource which is still growing through acquisitions.

- Relevant and contemporary themes for our audiences, addressing issues such as peace and reconciliation, the refugee crisis, the affirmation of Dalit people, reflecting the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in interpretation, and, where possible, embracing equality, diversity and inclusion.

1.2. **Touring timeframe:** The first tours of the Collection were in the form of an exhibition entitled 'The Church and the Artist' and took place between 1963 and 1965. The Collection has since expanded from 32 to over 50 works and continued to be shown up until the rejuvenation pause between 2019 and 2021. Not all loans are of the whole Collection together at once.

1.3. **Geographic scope:** The collection has travelled widely around England, Scotland and Wales. It has also been shown in Northern Ireland, Dublin, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man.

2. Key identities

2.1. In 2012, there was a change of name – from 'The Methodist Church Collection of Modern Christian Art' to 'The Methodist Modern Art Collection'. This reflects the cultural debate on what constitutes so-called 'Christian art'.

2.2. 'Sacred spaces' – there is versatility in terms of which spaces the Collection inhabits, reflecting the theological dialogue about traditionally 'sacred' vocabulary and venues (biblical narrative, church buildings) and new ways of being Church.

2.3. The international dimension of the artists represented gives scope for encountering depictions of Christ from different parts of the world.

2.4. The predominance of British 20th century artists and the place of the Collection in art history.

2.5. The story of the Gibbs/Wollen Collection and the Methodist Church provenance.

2.6. This is a touring Collection and we encourage those arranging an exhibition to identify the people that they would like to reach in their local

community. This may be broad groups, such as young adults or more specific, such as homeless people, refugees or the partially sighted. Exhibitors will be encouraged to create a title for their exhibition reflecting the themes that they are exploring. Sometimes the exhibition will be linked to a particular event being marked by the community or a cultural celebration such as the City of Culture programme, and when the works are displayed in a number of different locations, the target audiences may be different. For example, works exhibited in a school or college setting will be presented to children and young adults. The Collection has been exhibited in cathedrals, churches, art galleries, museums, schools, commercial premises and a wide variety of other places. Recent examples of venues for the physical display of the works include:

- A pop-up gallery in a shopping centre (Hull).
- An auction house gallery (Tennants, Leyburn).
- Tourist information hubs, libraries, museums and heritage sites such as the Beaney House of Art and Knowledge, Canterbury; Epworth Old Rectory; and Bronte Parsonage Museum.
- Lincoln Cathedral's Chapter House.
- The gallery at Truro School.
- A Methodist Church community cafe serving the homeless (Cromer).
- An ecumenical group of churches with a visitor trail/pilgrimage eg Isle of Man, Leicester.
- Colloquy, a space for theological dialogue at the Methodist Conference, Loughborough University, displaying newly acquired works for the Collection alongside those by other contemporary artists.

2.7. The aim of the Collection's Management Committee is to facilitate the engagement of a large number of people of all ages, ethnicities and

convictions with the works of art. This means that there is no one target audience for the Collection, but the target audience is defined by the locality, context and purpose of each exhibition.

- 2.8. Additionally, there are groups we are able to reach in virtual spaces (through the online MMAC gallery and with digital/electronic learning resources), such as:
- Worship leaders/preachers looking to use the images in their services (eg the online course 'Drawing Closer to God', offered by Wesley House, Cambridge).
 - House group/retreat leaders.
 - Art history students, teachers in schools and lecturers for Art Society talks.
 - Academic research/presentations at conferences.
 - Social media to promote the Collection and its interpretation, to broad audiences, when it is loaned out.

3. Aims for visitor experience

- 3.1. The Methodist Church wants to share these works of art with people in local communities who might not have easy access to art galleries and/or who would not normally be interested in visiting them. We hope that by engaging with the art in a context with which they are familiar, people will be enabled to talk to one another about the content of the works and the feelings that they evoke.
- 3.2. In many cases, people will be introduced to particular scenes from the life of Jesus or, if they are already familiar with these, they will be encouraged to think more deeply about them.
- 3.3. We hope people will enjoy the Collection, be challenged by it and recognise the contemporary significance of faith.
- 3.4. While we hope this will be a challenging learning experience, we also curate the Collection so that it is aesthetically enjoyable and visually satisfying for visitors. The Management Committee does not currently have the capacity to curate exhibitions,

but works with groups to enable them to curate effectively.

- 3.5. Following the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact, we hope to provide opportunities for visitors to find healing and quiet spaces for personal prayer and reflection, as is appropriate when the Collection is displayed.
- 3.6. In order for the Collection to be appreciated as worthwhile and important by the diverse audiences it wishes to reach, the works of art and their frames should always look smart and well-cared for, and the Collection be imaginatively displayed in non-gallery spaces.

4. Interpretative media

- 4.1. **Different ways that the Church presents its Collection to the public:** This is a touring Collection.

Works from the Collection can be displayed in a variety of local contexts and media.

- It is possible to arrange for talks to be given or for the works of art to be incorporated into an act of worship.
- The art can also be displayed as part of a wider festival or other community celebration, and advice can be offered in the selection of the works for such occasions.
- The Collection can be displayed as an Art Trail, engaging audiences across a number of churches or exhibition spaces (eg the Isle of Man in 2018).
- We do expect that an exhibition of works from the Collection will include engagement with local communities and a sharing of aspects of the Christian faith with the community.

Examples of what has been done in the past include:

- Standardised labels for each work with title, date, artist, artist's birth/death dates, medium and date of acquisition.

The labels are produced by the Connexional Team.

- Pull-up banners, and posters of eight of the works, produced by the Connexional Team.
- Full colour annual reports and Friends newsletters which are offered for resource tables.
- Laminated looking guides for each work, with an interpretation and questions, translated into French and German (for almost all the works) for TT visitors to the Isle of Man.
- Lectures in association with exhibitions, or to the Friends Group about, for example, the original collectors or about the war artists.
- Children and young people's responses in art and the 'Wondering Soul' poetry book at Leicester.
- Music and craft, such as the musical composition inspired by 'The Empty Tomb' played at the opening of the Isle of Man exhibition, and the knitted fish community artistic response to 'The Five Thousand' at Leicester.
- Theological seminars, for example at Guildford Cathedral Summer School and Dublin Methodist District.
- Practical art workshops starting with Collection artists, such as at ArtServeFestival.
- Guided personal tours, for example at Leicester Cathedral, and an audio guide produced for Greenbelt.
- The creation of a DVD of the images for study groups ('Creative Spirit', ecumenically produced, now out of stock).
- An online gallery of the images with commentaries, which is part of the Methodist Church website.
- Supporting catalogue, guides and booklets including bi-lingual editions (Welsh/English) for Wrexham.
- Videos and interviews accessible on the MMAC website, for example Manx Radio on the Isle of Man exhibition.
- A mobile phone app linking to an exhibition website called 'Walking on Water', displayed at Haywards Heath.
- An online worship course (commissioned by Wesley House Cambridge) including MMAC works.
- Additional curatorial labels written by Bristol School of Art students to give 'different voices' at a particular exhibition (Victoria Methodist, Bristol).

4.2. Labels

Basic information labels for each work are provided with loans and are essential for use. Further information is available to assist borrowers in writing optional additional labels, which must be in black typeface on a white background. They must be of a minimum size of 18-point text and, if at all possible, should be larger, such as 24-36 point to aid reading for those who are partially sighted.

4.3. Live interpretation will be encouraged, and merchandise available

The Committee provides borrowers with the opportunity to buy copies of *Seeing the Spiritual – A Guide to the Methodist Modern Art Collection* through Methodist Publishing, which has been supported by the Church and is retailed at an affordable price to make it as accessible as possible. Books of postcards and posters of a selection of the works of art are also available, not only for promotional use, but also to focus worship and for events prior to and during exhibitions, and for sale as souvenir merchandise.

Other printed materials may be developed by borrowers in discussion with the Committee to explore key themes and produced with readability in mind for those who are partially sighted (see 4.2).

5. Plans for future developments

- 5.1. Offer designed storyboards (as in Ilkley, on war and reconciliation) with awareness that the borrower may want to create their own, depending on the theme.
- 5.2. Draft some guidelines centred around texts for storyboards, such as having black text on a white background, and avoiding coloured backgrounds, for the visually impaired; the size of text/fonts, length of labels (what people can read and take in) and the vocabulary we use; the MMAC logo; and acknowledging the Gibbs Family Trust on labels of paintings conserved with their funding, etc.
- 5.3. Inclusion and diversity, and the impact on visitors with impairments, autism, dementia, etc.
- 5.4. Consider who writes interpretative material or labels, and the translation into other languages. Whose 'voice' should be used for the text – a variety including school students, people with learning difficulties or disabilities, and theological?
- 5.5. Translation into other languages.
- 5.6. Audio descriptive texts for paintings for the partially sighted.
- 5.7. Large scale printed materials.
- 5.8. Artist residencies.
- 5.9. Poetry residencies.
- 5.10. Dance responses.
- 5.11. Music responses.
- 5.12. Soundscapes.
- 5.13. Continue recording responses to the works and making them available to others as appropriate.

6. Implementation approach - factors which influence how the Collection is presented

Displays, events and activities should not be inconsistent with the Church's mission and policy statements (such as safeguarding). We need to consider whether this is appropriate for us, and what it might mean for us.

We have a commitment to use ongoing evaluation, including asking borrowers to use visitor books to record comments or having a comment board, and contacting them afterwards for feedback (done through focus groups, surveys etc.) for the development of future interpretation policy.

7. Plans for future developments

- Continue to reflect the inclusion and diversity agenda, taking account of the impact on visitors with learning difficulties or physical disabilities, by considering factors such as the height at which works are presented.
- Consider displaying in hospitals (such as through 'Painting in Hospitals – art for health and wellbeing'), young offender institutions, and ethical spaces (for example St Ethelburga's, Bishopsgate).
- Enhance ecumenical working, for example with agencies such as Art+Christianity, and multi-disciplinary ArtServe (who considered offering a Musician in Residence for an exhibition).
- Forge new partnerships with educational institutions.
- Research contemporary trends for the 'visitor experience' in moving through an exhibition, for example accompanying a physical exhibition with a soundscape, or virtual projection technology (such as the recent Van Gogh 'immersive experience', and online 'Sway' exhibitions). Use this research to shape how physical and virtual spaces are best utilised for works curated for the MMAC.

8. Date for review

The Mission and Interpretation policy will be reviewed every three years.

9. References

Material for this policy has been drawn from the following:

- MMAC annual reports, Friends newsletters and exhibition reports.
- Notes/emails in connection with MMAC visioning and away days.
- Various online museum/gallery templates for interpretation policies which were current in 2019, including Bolton Museum and Art Gallery.
- *Cloud of Witnesses: A study of the Methodist Church Collection of Modern Christian Art – its impact on the mission of the Church (2000-2006) with recommendations for future policies.* A 2007 report by Sarah Middleton, commissioned by the then Trustees of the MMAC.
- *The Methodist Modern Art Collection: An exploration of its value in Britain today.* Masters research project by Sarah Middleton, University of Sussex.
- National Museums of Scotland, *Exhibitions for All: A practical guide to designing inclusive exhibitions (2002).*