The Great British Art Debate

26/01/2010

These are among the many questions at the heart of The Great British Art Debate, a four-year programme intended to stimulate debate about the impact of British art on the public's perception of Britishness. A Constable of the Suffolk countryside, a Richard Billingham of the Black Country, a John Martin landscape: how do these and the thousands of works from our national collections impact on the public's perception of Britishness?

The Great British Art Debate opens its first major exhibition as part of the project, Watercolour in Britain: Travelling with Colour, at Norwich Castle Museum & Art Gallery on 30 January, marking the first in a series of four themed exhibitions which will roll out between now and 2012 at Tate Britain, Norwich Castle Museum & Art Gallery, The Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle and Museums Sheffield.

The shows, to be presented differently at each venue through the sharing of works from these rich collections, will be the main exhibitions Watercolour, Relative Values, Restless Times and a monographic show of the work of the British artist, John Martin.

Begun in 2009 with a series of smaller-scale projects in these regions, The Great British Art Debate has stimulated discussion over the past year through a programme of seminars, lectures, fanzines and displays with input from the local communities in the London, Norfolk, Tyne & Wear and Sheffield areas. The debate is now moving into the next phase to give the public unprecedented access to outstanding collections of British art held in these institutions, prompting further discussion about the perception of the national collections of British art and providing a platform for the wider debate about relationship to national identity.

A dedicated website has been created to canvas views and opinions and the public will be invited to take part in an online debate from March 2010. The project will culminate in a major conference at Tate Britain in 2012.

The Great British Art Debate is a partnership project between Tate Britain, Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums, Norfolk Museums & Archaeology Service and Museums Sheffield, supported by The National Lottery through the Heritage Lottery Fund, and by the MLA's Renaissance programme.

Tate Director, Nicholas Serota, said: "It is exciting to be working with our Great British Art Debate partners in this way, generating public discussion and sharing these outstanding collections with audiences across the country. I hope that we will be able to tap into a new generation's views and that their views will help to shape how we collect and display British art in the future."

On the eve of the opening of Watercolour in Britain: Travelling with Colour, Vanessa Trevelyan, Head of Norfolk Museums & Archaeology Services, commented: "It's most appropriate that Watercolour in Britain starts its tour in Norfolk where Cotman helped develop watercolour as the landscape artists' principle medium and we hope that the exhibition will begin to stimulate debate about art and local and national identities."

Nick Dodd, Chief Executive, Museums Sheffield, said: "The remarkable thing about the Great British Art Debate is the voice it will give to visitors across the UK. Only through their opinions and experiences can we begin to explore what British art really means to the British public."

Iain Watson, Assistant Director of Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums, said: "The project is a great way of giving people of all ages and backgrounds the opportunity to engage with world-class collections of British art in new and enjoyable ways. We're looking forward to hosting some fantastic exhibitions at the Laing Art Gallery."

Ivor Crowther, Head of the Heritage Lottery Fund in the North East said: "The Great British Art Debate opens up Britain's wonderful artistic heritage to so many new audiences. It gives everyone the chance to take part and become involved. HLF are passionate about giving as many people as possible access to their heritage – this is a perfect example."

From March, the public will be able to take part online in The Great British Art Debate.

For a press release and full details on Watercolour in Britain: Travelling with Colour, contact Tracy Harding at Norwich Castle Museum & Art Gallery on the details given below.

Notes to editors

Using money raised through the National Lottery, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) sustains and transforms a wide range of heritage for present and future generations to take part in, learn from and enjoy. From museums, parks and historic places to archaeology, natural environment and cultural traditions, we invest in every part of our diverse heritage. HLF has supported 33,900 projects, allocating £4.4billion across the UK with £209 million in the North East alone.

Further information

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