

DAVID BLAYNEY BROWN REFLECTS ON THE ROLE OF ART IN HISTORY

Text by Huzan Tata

Tate Britain's Manton Curator of British Art also talks about his role at the acclaimed museum



The Dogano, San Giorgio, Citella, from the Steps of the Europa 1842 by JMW Turner



Norham Castle, Sunrise 1845 by JMW Turner



Peace - Burial at Sea, exhibited 1842 by JMW Turner

The late 18th century saw the rise of romanticism, one of Europe's greatest artistic movements. A significant painter of the period was J. M. W. Turner, whose landscapes are regarded as the precursor to impressionism. In Mumbai to deliver the 19th annual Vasant J. Sheth memorial lecture titled *J. M. W. Turner: A Marine Master in a Modernising World*, Tate's David Blayney Brown spoke to *Verve* about his role at the acclaimed museum.



David Brown

As Manton Curator, which exhibitions have you particularly enjoyed curating?

“I have been at Tate for 30 years so there have been too many to choose from. The biggest

challenge has been leading a cataloguing project for the drawings, watercolours and sketchbooks in the Turner Bequest (around 36,000 new accessions). This is ongoing and has made great progress, but not as fast as I would have liked. Most of all I have enjoyed working on *Constable to Delacroix: British Art and the French Romantics*; *Late Turner: Painting Set Free*; and *Artist and Empire: Facing Britain's Imperial Past*.”

What is Turner's greatest legacy?

“I don't think it comes down to one thing. I would say he completely changed perceptions of what landscape is and what it can say – it is not about depicting a place, or about rural scenery, but full of meaning and associations so it can speak to different audiences. His technical innovations, his colour and handling changed painting and the way people see it. He introduced a new dynamism into the genre.”

Do you believe artists today should be familiar with movements of the past?

“Artists must do what they want to do – I would never prescribe. Generally I think a sense of continuity and history is a good thing. But artists now use such different media and engage with audiences in such new ways that there is not the sort of steady progress and passing on of traditions, that there once was. On the other hand, there have always been artists who have reacted violently against what went before. That's just as interesting. Art made as though it were in a vacuum might be less so.”

How important is the art of a period in the telling of its history?

“Art always reflects the history of a period for better or worse. Sometimes this happens indirectly, but sometimes the artist actually sets out to define a time, an event, the state of a country or a nation. One should always bear in mind who gets to tell the stories and question how reliable or representative they are.”

What adorns your walls?

“Curators in Britain don't really get paid enough to collect much art! Perhaps it's best we don't, so we don't get into conflicts of interest with our institutions. I have mainly collected British and French drawings of the later 18th and early 19th centuries; usually figures and landscapes. I have a few modern works as well. None are very important but they are interesting to me. I prefer to come across things by surprise and think about where they fit in.”

Are you familiar with Indian art?

“I have been to the Tagore house in Kolkata and spend a lot of time in the Indian rooms at the V&A in London. We borrowed Indian works from the British period as well as recent works by artists such as Jamini Roy for *Artist and Empire*. My own interest is more in the applied arts; textiles, carpets and metalwork – because they are so beautiful.”

Listen to David Blayney Brown deliver the 19th annual Vasant J. Sheth memorial lecture titled J. M. W. Turner: A Marine Master in a Modernising World at the Visitors Centre, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Mumbai at 7pm on January 24, 2017

Tags: Art, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, David Blayney Brown, Featured, J.M.W Turner, Tate Modern, Vasant J. Sheth Memorial Lecture