

Nushin Elahi's LONDON LETTER

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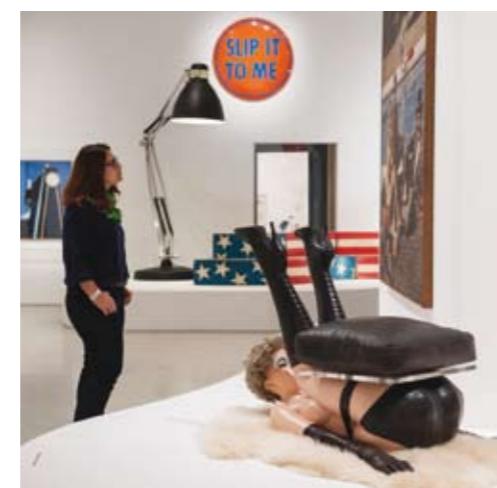
"Make sure you don't miss this one," said a Chinese friend who has spent decades studying art both in the East and the West. She was talking about the **V&A's Masterpieces of Chinese Painting 700 - 1900** (until 19 Jan 2014). "It's like seeing room after roomful of Mona Lisas." What she didn't explain was how different, and at times, difficult, it is to decode what you are seeing. Nothing prepares the Western eye for the unfolding of the scroll, reading images that here stretch up to an incredible 14 metres in length, where a quick glance reveals almost nothing. This incredible treasure-trove demands careful contemplation, but is worth visiting simply to catch a glimpse of another world view, even if the nuances of the changing dynasties are lost on you.

In the final room, where the multiple vanishing points of traditional Chinese painting have been replaced with a linear European perspective, the work seems more accessible, probably because there are magnificent vertical scrolls that make up images of fantastic landscapes in the vivid greens and blues of the Tang Dynasty, or great landscapes in the tradition of the Old Masters, but on a scale that impresses across the room. For most of the rest, you will need to peer into the glass cases and observe the mastery of the brush strokes, the peculiarly Chinese way of drawing mountains, the seals that mark the work.

Beginning with the amazing find of Buddhist work in the caves of Dunhuang, the show covers the 1200 years that follow with loans from across China, as well as many from the Musée Guimet in Paris and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Among the many highlights are two of the longest scrolls – the twisting Nine Dragons that dates from 1244, and the painstaking depiction of life in Prosperous Suzhou (1759) that took a team of court painters three years to complete. Iconoclasm is an interesting subject in the history of British art. We've all wandered through churchyards and seen a statue with its nose or limbs hacked off, and perhaps even wondered at who this person was who sought to disfigure a work of art in this way. There's so much drama and passion in this protest. Unfortunately, none of this translates into the Tate's dry exploration of the theme in **Art Under Attack, Histories of British Iconoclasm**, at Tate Britain until 5 Jan.



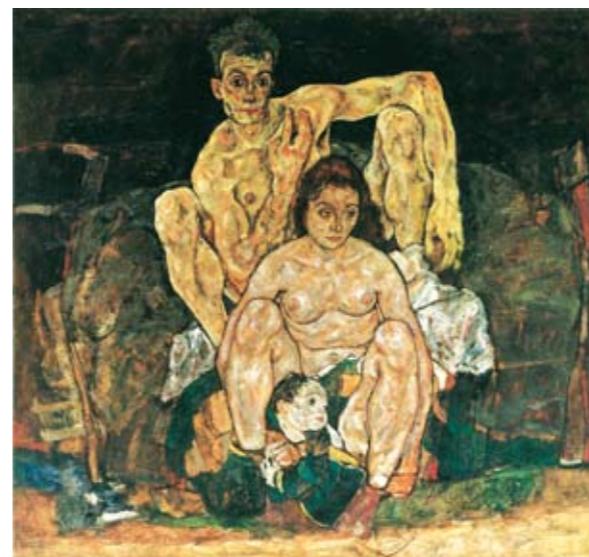
The show is divided into three sections: religion, politics and aesthetics. Religious intolerance and the sweeping reforms of the monasteries in Henry VIII's time is the most common period associated with iconoclasm, but in fact some of the most vicious acts were performed later, particularly during the reign of Edward I. Perhaps the most interesting exhibit is the lacerated statue of Christ that was found in the Mercers' Hall. By its very nature, though, there are usually only fragments left of what was destroyed, resulting in an academic treatise rather than a visual treat. Pop Art epitomises all the glamour and confidence of a prosperous America. The colours are loud and brash, the statements playful and the spirit happy. So much of it is infused into our daily life, that we now don't even notice it as a thing apart



SAART TIMES. December 2013

The **Barbican's Pop Art Design** (until 9 Feb) highlights the period's roots in design, and its enduring legacy. It doesn't come as much of a surprise to hear that Andy Warhol started out as a commercial designer – hence the focus on brands, now iconic symbols of our modern age. Fifty years on, as we look back at pivotal moments in our history, like Kennedy's assassination, Pop Art has an energetic optimism that defines the era. Lichtenstein's comic strip images, Gaetano Pesce's outsized floor lamp or Studio 65's Leonardo sofa, covered in stars and stripes, hark back to a time when technology, consumerism and celebrity culture represented a seductive post-war shift. And even if the postmodern incarnation of the movement has a more jaded tone, seeing the originals is guaranteed to make you smile.

Forget Klimt's lavish gold paintings, and think rather of Freud, neurosis and hysteria. That is what Vienna at the turn of the century reflected. In fact, as



National Gallery director, Dr Nicholas Penny joked at the press opening of **Facing the Modern: The Portrait in Vienna 1900** (until 12 Jan), there have seldom been more "distressed, demented, deluded and deceased people" on show together! Vienna was a city transformed by immigrants after the monarchy had declared equal rights for all citizens in 1867 and portraiture was the means of declaring your identity in this society.

The city became an incredible hothouse of artists finding a new modernist idiom in what had been a rigid social order defined by class, but they reflected all the anxiety of their displaced subjects. That brief flowering of art resulted in work that has a raw and direct power, but is seldom easy viewing: Egon Schiele's imagined family; a nude self-portrait by Richard Gerstl, a promising young artist soon to commit suicide; Oskar Kokoschka's portraits which critics of the time decried as smelling of decay or the atonal composer Arnold Schönberg's blue self-portrait. The faces that stare back at you are not the polite elite, rather the tortured souls about to face a holocaust.

Painting Now: Five Contemporary Artists (until 9 Feb) at **Tate Britain** doesn't inspire one as to the future of painting as an art form. There is no linking cohesion in the choice of these artists – four women and one man – other than that they are all in their early or late forties. Turner Prize winner from 2006 Tomma Abst shows tiny abstract oils, Lucy McKenzie trompe l'oeil pinboards of ephemera, Simon Ling gritty street scenes, Gillian Carnegie black cats on stairs and Catherine Story cubist camera shapes. An odd bunch thrown together for no particular reason, their work doesn't talk to each other, or, for that matter, to the viewer. A fascinating exhibition entitled **Paul Klee: Making Visible** is on at the **Tate Modern** until 9 March. This extensive show follows the artist from his earliest work through his intense career, and is reviewed in the next edition of Art Times and at <http://london-letter.com>



Images:

Nine Dragons (detail) Artist: Chen Rong Date: 1244
The Dead Christ c.1500-20. Courtesy The Mercers' Company
 Installation shot - Pop Art Design, Barbican Art Gallery
Egon Schiele (1890 - 1918) *The Family (Self Portrait)*, 1918
Oskar Kokoschka (1886 - 1980) *Children Playing*, 1909
Simon Ling : *Streetscape*