COURTAULD
INSTITUTE

Imagining Britain: Postgraduate and Early Career Research in British and Irish Art

9 June 2026, 10:00 - 16:30

A decade on from the inaugural provocation of British Art Studies Volume I, published in November 2015, in which art historians responded to the statement, 'There's No Such Thing as British Art' a significant aspect of British art studies has involved reflection on the nature and boundaries of the field itself.

The expansion of the field's geographic and intellectual perspectives has opened new avenues for further research. For instance, scholars have recognised the possibilities afforded to the study of British art when it is brought into dialogue with the arts of regions which have been marginalised in its discussion, including Ireland and former colonial territories. This introspection has instigated a re-examination of British collections, with major rehangs including at Tate Britain, encouraging fresh perspectives on canonical works of art and the emergence of lesser-known artists and histories from the archive. In 2025, the Courtauld Institute of Art announced the opening of the Manton Centre for British Art, a major new initiative in the field, and providing new contexts in which to explore the definition, scope and even relevance of the concept of 'British' art.

Centred around themes of a national taste, the construction of landscapes, visualisations of empire, and the fabrication of a 'national' identity, this symposium provides an interdisciplinary, cross-period forum for fruitful discussions by PhD and early career researchers on the role of visual and material culture in reinforcing, challenging and complicating the notion of 'British.'

This symposium event is organised by Claire Ó Nualláin and Clara Shaw, supported by the CHASE Doctoral Training Partnership and the Manton Centre for British Art.

Image: Thomas Gainsborough, Landscape with sheep and cattle on the bank of a stream, 1780 - 1784, synthetic black chalk with stumping on wove paper, all four corners cut. Robert Clermont Witt, bequest, 1952. Courtauld Gallery, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust)

Programme

9.30 **Registration opens**

10.00–10.10 Opening remarks

10.10–11.20 **Session 1: Cultivating Taste**

Chaired by Jelena Sofronijevic, Gray's School of Art

'Art for the People'? An examination of the response to the 'Modern Painters of To-Day' exhibitions of 1942, curated by Lillian Browse.
Isobel Muir, Tate

Whose Britain? Diasporic Moving-Image, Archives, and Contemporary Histories
Nam Huh, University of Loughborough

The Arts Council Collection: Redefining British Art in the 1980s
Ella Nixon, The Women's Art Collection (Murray Edwards College, University of Cambridge)

11.20–11.35 **Tea/Coffee break**

11.35–12.45 **Session 2: Constructing Spaces**

Chaired by Jack Englehardt, London School of Economics

Performing Britain in John Speed's The theatre of the empire of Great Britaine
Grace Fannon, Courtauld Institute of Art

Visualising Britishness in Industrial Landscapes of Wales
Eleanor Stephenson, National Museum of Wales, Cardiff

Germinating 'Britain' in Ireland?: Centring Ireland in Decimus Burton and Richard Turner's botanic architecture
Méabh Scahill, University of Cambridge

12.45–13.45 **Lunch break** *provided for speakers and organisers only*

13.45–14.55 **Session 3: Conceptualising Empire**

Chaired by Alisha Ma, London School of Economics

The Maternal Image and the Visual Culture of Slavery c.1788–1814
Abigail Spencer, Courtauld Institute of Art

'Whose rich productions we so justly prize': Naturalizing Catarina de Bragança in the Ceiling Paintings at Windsor Castle (1678 – 1688)
Sarah Hutcheson, University of Massachusetts

Elephant and Castle: African Forts and Heraldry in the Shaping of British National Identity
Shaheen Alikhan, University of Virginia

14.55–15.10 **Tea/Coffee break**

15.10–16.20 **Session 4: Creating Identities**

Chaired by Emma Davis, University of Sussex

Free Unions Locked Up: The Paradox of Resistance and the Special Branch Confiscation of a British Surrealist Journal
Christina Childs, Courtauld Institute of Art

Sunset on Stability: Class, Nation, and Masculinity in the Early Work of Derek Boshier
Ed Kettleborough, University of Bristol

Fabric of Britain: Textiles, Affect and the Propaganda of National Identity
Amber Butchart, University of Essex

16.20–16.30 **Closing remarks**

16.30 **Drinks reception**

Abstracts

'Art for the People'? An examination of the response to the 'Modern Painters of To-Day' exhibitions of 1942, curated by Lillian Browse.

Isobel Muir, Tate

While carrying out doctoral research into the career of South African émigré art dealer, Lillian Browse (1906–2005), who worked briefly at the National Gallery in London during the second world war, I became interested in another, apparently undocumented aspect of Browse's curatorial career. While employed as the first female 'exhibition secretary' at the Gallery, making her the first woman to occupy a paid curatorial role there, Lillian Browse also began organising touring exhibitions for another national arts organisation – CEMA (Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts) which was founded in January 1940. One of the exhibitions she worked on was called 'Modern Painters of To-Day' and was designed to travel to regional museums around the British Isles throughout 1942. This paper shall examine the response to the exhibition during its run in Newcastle, and the way in which Browse's exhibition shaped for the people of Britain what modern British art ought to look like.

She was the first to write on late Picabia and on the surrealist phase of English artist Paule Vézelay's painting at the moment of her liaison with André Masson. Wilson engaged with post-1945 surrealism and surréalisme révolutionnaire in her own PhD — long before supervising Alyce Mahon's work and introducing her to the post-surrealist artist Jean-Jacques Lebel.

Whose Britain? Diasporic Moving-Image, Archives, and Contemporary Histories

Nam Huh, University of Loughborough

This paper examines how contemporary moving-image works by diasporic artists in Britain critically interrogate the construction of British history and national identity. Drawing upon Erika Tan's conceptual frameworks regarding colonial archival absences and institutional critique, this paper focuses on Rhea Storr's Here is the Imagination of the Black Radical (2020) and Rehana Zaman's Sharla Shabana Sojourner Selena (2016) as vital case studies. The paper explores how these artists employ experimental moving-image strategies to make visible narratives that have been historically excluded from the British cultural imagination.

Reading these works through Tan's methodology of archival intervention (Apa Jika, The Mis-placed Comma, 2017), the paper examines how Storr combines analogue 16mm montage and layered sound to reconstruct Caribbean-British diasporic memory, countering mainstream historical omissions. Conversely, Zaman utilises female testimony and performative storytelling to document the contemporary realities of racialised and gendered labour, exploring how subjective lived experiences expose structural inequalities within British life.

Together, Storr and Zaman demonstrate how contemporary diasporic moving-image practices operate at the intersection of archival critique and social testimony. The paper argues that these strategies actively intervene in British art historiography, challenge institutional authority, and expand parameters of national belonging.

The Arts Council Collection: Redefining British Art in the 1980s

Ella Nixon, The Women's Art Collection (Murray Edwards College, University of Cambridge)

The collecting priorities of the Arts Council Collection (ACC) shifted significantly during the 1980s. Founded in 1946 as a "museum without walls" dedicated to acquiring British contemporary art, the institution maintained constant criteria in principle, but its application produced a different body of

work. The paper begins by comparing acquisitions from the 1950s and the 1980s to reveal a shift towards less London-centric and more diverse artists. I then analyse and contextualise evolving definitions of "British" art by focusing on the ACC as a case study of how a public institution responded to urgent societal debates.

Against the backdrop of race riots, the women's movement, and growing awareness of economic inequality in Thatcherite Britain, the lexicon of acquisition policy reflected contemporary debates about ethnicity, gender, and media. Accordingly, I map these themes onto debates about British culture during the decade; for example, the impact of Naseem Khan's The Art Britain Ignores (1980) and the wider debates that culminated in The Other Story(1989–90), curated by Rasheed Araeen. On a more focused level, I investigate the influence of individual activist committee members. Definitions of art are interrogated, providing historical context for ongoing controversies about attempts to represent Britain through art.

Performing Britain in John Speed's The theatre of the empire of Great Britaine

Grace Fannon, Courtauld Institute of Art

John Speed's The Theatre of the Empire of Great Britaine is a seminal collection of maps of England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, published in 1611. Using a critical cartographic methodology, this paper analyses Speed's atlas as part of a performance constructing and mythologising, to cite Benedict Anderson, the 'imagined community' of "Great Britaine." Speed compiled his atlas in the early seventeenth century; a pivotal moment in the history of Britain as a nascent, yet insecure, political and national entity, forged from the union of the Scottish and English crowns, and in embryonic imperial ideology. Scrutinising Speed's Theatre as an active agent of knowledge creation recentres the role of visual rhetoric, and specifically cartography, in the construction of collective social imagination and nationhood. The latter half of the paper focuses on the five maps of Ireland closing the atlas, and how Speed both excludes and includes Ireland in this domestic empire as kingdom and/or colony. The manner in which Ireland is depicted and described in Speed's atlas conveys its uneasy identity as both familiar and foreign within this empire of the three Stuart kingdoms, and points to cracks embedded in the foundations of 'Great Britain' as an integrated national community.

Visualising Britishness in Industrial Landscapes of Wales

Eleanor Stephenson, National Museum of Wales, Cardiff

This paper examines how the Morris family of Swansea, South Wales, especially Margaret Morris (1731–1814) and her brother Sir John Morris (1745–1819), used art and architecture to negotiate a form of Britishness that emerged from their industrial and colonial enterprises. This paper is set in the late-eighteenth-century 'Picturesque' craze for Welsh landscapes, when increased domestic travel brought artists, writers, and gentleman tourists to places such as Swansea. From the 1750s, the Morris family had shaped this new industrial landscape by commissioning country houses, workers' towns, and pictorial views, while amassing a fortune and an art collection that helped form the nucleus of Dulwich Picture Gallery in 1817. Archival research at Swansea University, the National Library of Wales, and Dulwich College Archives supports close readings of commissioned views by Philip James de Loutherbourg and Sir Peter Francis Bourgeois. I read these works as social-technical nodes in which extraction, imperialism, and the industrial 'Picturesque' coincide. The Morris siblings used art to make sense of their position within a new class of Welsh industrialists and colonists and to situate themselves in the London-based art world.

Germinating 'Britain' in Ireland? : Centring Ireland in Decimus Burton and Richard Turner's botanic architecture

Méabh Scahill, University of Cambridge

Cast-iron built and defined nineteenth century Britain. The material enabled expansion in infrastructure, and in novel forms of architecture, like the glasshouses of the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew and Joseph Paxton's preeminent Crystal Palace. This paper investigates the collaboration between English Architect Decimus Burton and Irish engineer Richard Turner in the construction of the Great Palm House in Kew Gardens. It examines the earlier Irish commissions of both men, and centres Ireland as a site of 'germination' for their subsequent collaboration. Burton and Turner were both involved in the major landscape and building works that took place in Dublin's Phoenix Park between the years 1832 and 1849. Burton's involvement in the Phoenix Park 'improvement' works remains understudied. Turner's contribution is near absent in literature. This preliminary presentation looks towards future research, querying the roots of their collaboration, thinking about the movement and cross-fertilisation of knowledge between Ireland and England in the creation of a distinctly 'British' botanic architecture.

The Maternal Image and the Visual Culture of Slavery c.1788–1814

Abigail Spencer, Courtauld Institute of Art

Content Warning: This paper includes discussion and depiction of enslaved people and racist tropes

This paper will consider the recurring coincidence of motherhood as the embodiment of female virtue within visual representations of slavery and abolition. In 1994, David Bindman wrote that "civic and national power in England and slave ownership in the West Indies were firmly interconnected throughout the eighteenth century," arguing for the role played by the visual culture of slavery in fashioning British identity. The paper seeks to build on scholarship that considers the ambiguity, limits, and latent anxieties of the entwined rhetorics of slavery and abolition to analyse the significance of maternal imagery to conveying meaning in images depicting abolitionist themes, principally George Morland's pendant paintings Slave Trade (1788) and African Hospitality (1790) and select engravings for John Gabriel Stedman's (1744–1797) Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition (1797). I will argue that images of the maternal body were appropriated by the visual language of British anti-slavery politics to encourage the sympathy of European audiences with enslaved women through contradictory mechanisms informed by eighteenth-century ideas about sympathy, the body, and gender and racial identities.

'Whose rich productions we so justly prize': Naturalizing Catarina de Bragança in the Ceiling Paintings at Windsor Castle (1678 – 1688)

Sarah Hutcheson, University of Massachusetts

This paper explores the depictions of Queen Catarina de Bragança in the ceiling paintings of Windsor Castle. Catarina married Charles II in 1662, a mere two years after the Restoration, and her substantial dowry provided the British Crown with a much-needed injection of cash, as well as crucial footholds in the colonial world (the port of Bombay and free trading rights in Brazil and in Portuguese holdings in Asia). In a series of ceiling paintings in the elaborate new suite of State Apartments at Windsor, painter Antonio Verrio depicted Charles II and Catarina amongst classical gods and other allegorical figures, acting to glorify the royal couple and celebrate the restoration of the monarchy in Britain. Yet Catarina's foreignness, her Catholicism, and her increasingly evident infertility were serious problems for her image. By emphasizing Catarina's imperial contributions, casting her amongst classical virtues, and eliding her problematic body with that of Britannia, the decorative program in the Queen's Apartments at Windsor Castle attempted to naturalize Catarina, all the while complicating the relationship between Britain and the nascent empire.

Elephant and Castle: African Forts and Heraldry in the Shaping of British National Identity

Shaheen Alikhan, University of Virginia

This paper examines how structures nearly 8,000 km away from Britain, and built by other nations, became symbols of British wealth, status, and the monarchy. The forts and castles on the western coast of Africa used as outposts for the mass trafficking of enslaved African individuals were deemed such an integral part of the identity of England that they were referred to as public monuments and therefore had protected status. Documented in both private correspondence and through a wealth of pamphlets meant to build public fervor in an attempt to acquire funding to maintain them, these fortified outposts were used in not only military but psychological strategy.
This provided fuel for a centuries-old legacy of identifying the source of wealth through heraldic symbolism. Through the medium of surveys commissioned for monetary and political gain, architectural elements, and heraldry, we explore questions of art, intent, and the collapse of geographical distance in the search for British national identity.

Free Unions Locked Up: The Paradox of Resistance and the Special Branch Confiscation of a British Surrealist Journal

Christina Childs, Courtauld Institute of Art

In December 1944, Special Branch seized the materials for Free Unions / Unions Libres, a journal produced by a loosely associated group of Surrealist artists and writers in Britain. Later accounts have claimed that the journal was accused of including coded messages to the enemy. This paper will reconsider this narrative; examining how the Surrealists were targeted through their association with the anarchist Freedom Press group who were prosecuted in 1945 for producing 'subversive propaganda' under the Defence Regulations Act. Paradoxically, while suspected of an attack against the British state, many Free Unions contributors were engaged in producing propaganda and coded messages for the war effort, shaping perceptions of Britishness abroad. These émigré members of the internationalist avant-garde entered a fraught alliance with government to support European anti-fascist resistance movements. I will discuss how they navigated this complex position, working for the wartime state while simultaneously seeking to critique its aims and ideology. Although it did not constitute 'enemy code', I will argue that the visual content of Free Unions reflected the covert propaganda and communication techniques of its contributors' wartime occupations. Furthermore, I will question how the journal and its history demonstrate the construction of 'enemies' of British culture and national security.

Sunset on Stability: Class, Nation, and Masculinity in the Early Work of Derek Boshier

Ed Kettleborough, University of Bristol

Following his prominent role in Ken Russell's essay film Pop Goes the Easel (1962), Derek Boshier was quickly established as a leading light of British Pop art. His segment of the film was easily the most political, as we witness the painter in his Lenin-postered bedsit, musing upon Americanisation, the events of the Cold War, and the affluent society. In October 1962, Boshier's debut solo exhibition opened at the Grabowski Gallery in Chelsea, a show in which the artist was paired with a fellow College coursemate, the British Guiana-born Frank Bowling. From the perspective of early critics and subsequent art history, this was a bizarre pairing, one consistently framed in terms of Pop versus Bowling's Baconian expressionism. Yet the title of the exhibition – Image in Revolt – suggests something of a shared political vision. In this paper, then, I argue that a focus upon Pop has obscured the postcolonial dimension of Boshier's art, with the insistent nationalism and orientalism of his iconography – a panoply of Union flags, images of Lord Nelson, WWII aircraft, palm trees and pyramids – begging to be read within the aftermath of Suez.

Boshier was fiercely proud of his working-class heritage, speaking often of his naval hometown of Portsmouth and the influence of his father, who had been involved in a series of major conflicts before settling down to life as a pub landlord. Drawing upon the work of contemporary historians such as Perry Anderson and the recent revisionist accounts of David Edgerton, I understand Boshier's class as bound to a post-war ideology of the British nation, one in which the New Jerusalem attempted to suture the subjective wound opened by the decline of Britain's Empire and waning global influence. This was also a masculinist project, constructed around notions of traditional industrial and factory labour, with gendered household roles mapped onto the wider contours of post-war welfarism. Through this new lens, Boshier's well-trodden concerns with Americanisation are revealed to be dependent upon his subjective entanglement with a historically-specific Britishness, with the consumer revolution representing the insistence of a new American hegemon, one that represented a castrative threat to a certain sense of post-imperial selfhood.

Fabric of Britain: Textiles, Affect and the Propaganda of National Identity

Amber Butchart, University of Essex

Despite fabric being central to our phenomenological and affective experience of the world from cradle to grave, in the Global North, textiles have been characterized as 'women's work', as belonging to the private, domestic, apolitical, feminised sphere. However, recent scholars are beginning to interrogate the home as a political space, and as a site of propaganda - including national identity - considering the designed objects, material culture and affective processes that make this possible (Stratigakos 2015; Alempijević and Potkonjak 2016).

The 'affective turn' with its emphasis on emotion has direct implications for the study of propaganda, and by extension, national identity. Sara Ahmed (2014) employs the word 'impression' to describe the confluence of the physical and intellectual impact that affective emotion can have, noting "This analysis of how we 'feel our way' approaches emotion as a form of cultural politics or world making." This has parallels with contemporary analyses of propaganda as 'reality-construction,' itself a type of 'world making' which can be extended to national identity (Staal 2019). I argue that the emotional responses engendered by the affective haptics of domestic textile interiors ensure they can be active agents of history (Auslander 2009) and can therefore encompass what Staal (2019) would term the micro-performative dimension of propaganda.

This paper will explore the discursive and affective qualities of textiles as propaganda of national identity through two case studies. Firstly, the Trafalgar Chintz (1806), a cotton furnishing fabric block-printed in Lancashire that commemorates Horatio Nelson's victories on the occasion of his death. Nelson, cast as a naval hero, figures prominently in British national mythmaking. His death at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 led to national mourning, and a booming souvenir industry. Secondly, designs for the Festival of Britain (1951) by the Festival Pattern Group, who used patterns provided by Dr Helen Megaw's pioneering work into x-ray crystallography to create products ranging from clothing and carpets to soft furnishings. Together these will illustrate how Britain's cloth economy was historically fundamental to the creation and dissemination of national identity.