Following the trauma of the Second World War and prior to the vibrancy of the ‘Swinging Sixties’, Britain in the 1950s was caught between dark austerity and a renewed sense of optimism. *Art and Optimism in 1950s Britain* looks at how the varying mood of the nation was reflected in the art, design and wider visual culture during this period.
**FESTIVAL ATTITUDES**

Celebrations of national culture like the 1948 London Olympics, the Festival of Britain in 1951 and the coronation of Queen Elizabeth in 1953 all came to mark the 1950s as a period of jubilation. These celebratory events were heavily endorsed if not organised by the government in an effort to raise the national mood following the emotional and economic impact of the war. Britain still faced austere living conditions at the beginning of the 1950s, but the new Labour government was keen to look beyond this. The striking branding of the Festival of Britain demonstrates the attitude of patriotism and optimism that the event promoted. By placing this bright imagery in context, against both the darker artworks of this period and the colourful Pop Art pieces that followed, the Festival style is shown to have been both an influence on later artistic approaches and in conflict with the attitudes reflected in the artwork surrounding it. The gulf between the festive attitudes and the economic austerity of 1950s Britain mirrors the climate of recent years, as events like the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games and the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee stood in sharp contrast to the damaging effects of the economic downturn.

**UNDERLYING TRAUMA**

The scars of the Second World War remained visible across Britain throughout the 1950s. These were both physical and emotional: while bomb damage in towns was still a common sight, the internal trauma people experienced stayed far more hidden. Art became a means by which the psychological turmoil created by the experience of war, or the loss it had left families facing, could be expressed. The head became a frequent subject in artwork, as diverse artists like William Turnbull, Eduardo Paolozzi, David Bomberg and Francis Bacon created fragmented abstract depictions of the head that seem to reflect the shattered mindset of the nation. The head is a particularly persistent theme across William Turnbull’s painting, drawing and sculpture during the 1950s. His bronze sculpture *Head 3* (1955) distorts the form of the head to such a degree that it takes on the appearance of a hand grenade. By merging the physical materials of war – and specifically those to do with explosions – with the psychological space of the head, Turnbull’s sculpture makes a direct association between physical destruction and mental disturbance.

Francis Bacon’s work is renowned for its exploration of psychological darkness and distress, and his painting *Study for Portrait No.6* (1956-57) imposes these themes on an unexpected figure. Although anonymous, the figure in his painting wears a smart suit and as a result appears to represent a thoroughly modern man. Bacon cages the figure and depicts him struggling against this enclosure with his head blurred, as if to suggest that it is the figure of optimism and modern life who may hold significant internal trauma. Bacon also communicated the effects of the war specifically on art in his work *Study for portrait of Van*
Gogh VI (1957): this recreated Van Gogh’s The Painter on the Road to Tarascon (1858), as the original had been destroyed in WW2 bombings. Bacon felt that the work’s haunted figure “seemed just right at the time, like a phantom of the road”. The ghost of war was a persistent theme in art well into the 1950s, as artists continued to adopt dark, heavy palettes and violent abstraction in their work. Shown together these artworks reflect on the austerity and trauma that the nation was experiencing, which was not necessarily being addressed in the optimistic national festivals and bright pop culture of the period.

MIDDLESBROUGH IN THE 1950s

It was during the 1950s that Middlesbrough got its first permanent art gallery to display the town’s expanding collection of works. Middlesbrough Art Gallery took over a former doctor’s surgery purchased by the Council in 1957 and remained open as the gallery until 2003. The premises were located in the town’s emerging cultural hub of Linthorpe where Middlesbrough’s School of Art had also relocated to by the 1950s. Around these artistic spaces a cultural community was forming, and the important Friends group was set up to support Middlesbrough Art Gallery. The Friends donated 14 major works to the collection between 1957 and 1966, including LS Lowry’s The Old Town Hall and St Hildas Church Middlesbrough (1959). The art collections and visual culture growing in Middlesbrough and the North East during the 1950s further reflect the shift from post-war austerity to optimism. Many of the works depicting Middlesbrough in this period by artists like Tom McGuinness and Ken Cozens focus on its image as an industrial town, and industry was, of course, important to the post-war recovery. In contrast to the view of the region as the home of traditional industry, the progressive new town developments at Newton Aycliffe and Peterlee in County Durham led to the North East making the Festival of Britain’s list titled ‘New Towns: What to See and How to Get There’ (1951).

BASIC DESIGN AND THE NORTH EAST

The North East’s participation in progressive art and design continued as the pioneering art education movement known as Basic Design began to be taught by artists Victor Pasmore and Richard Hamilton at Newcastle School of Art (then part of King’s College, Durham University, which later became Newcastle University) from 1953-1966. Basic Design was an innovative approach to art training that was opposed to the restrictive teaching methods of traditional British art schools and instead looked to foster creative environments and experimental practice inspired by modernism. The course was concerned with stripping design back to its basics to give students the freedom to create. The young artistic community that Hamilton and Pasmore collaborated with led to many dynamic exhibitions at
the university’s Hatton Gallery, as can be seen by the posters made to promote them. Victor Pasmore gave a permanent presence to the principles of Basic Design in the North East through the creation of his radically modern **Apollo Pavilion**, built for the new town of Peterlee. Basic Design and the active artistic environment it created in the North East during the 1950s represents a sense of optimism in art that was not nationally prescribed like the official festivals, but was equally forward thinking.

**POP CULTURE AND DOMESTIC DESIGN**

The economic recovery and increased welfare standards taking hold in Britain towards the end of the 1950s led the Prime Minister Harold Macmillan (later in life created Earl of Stockton) to declare in 1957 that the majority of Britons had “never had it so good”. People had more money to spend and, as a result of increasingly innovative manufacturing and mass production, there were also far more products available to buy compared to the rationing of the war and immediately post-war years. This increase in buying placed new emphasis on material goods and product design, as people were keen to buy the latest items with the most stylish look. Nowhere was this truer than in the home, where boldly designed contemporary items like G Plan furniture and Formica kitchen units combined with modern appliances to transform the home environment.

The variety of striking, colourful products that began to fill British homes ran alongside an influx of popular culture, as television and magazines advertising endless products – as well as the latest trends in music, fashion and cinema – infiltrated modern life. British art was directly influenced by the bright burst of popular culture and domestic design in the 1950s, as artists like Richard Hamilton and Eduardo Paolozzi, who had both been associated with The Independent Group, pioneered the Pop Art style. The amount of different media appropriated by Paolozzi’s **BUNK! Series** of collages demonstrates the sense of ‘pulp’ that invaded British life from the 1950s onwards. Peter Blake’s **The Fine Art Bit** (1959) directly addresses the way in which art began to take its inspiration from the design of the world around it: the graphic block colours of the work’s rainbow stripes overwhelm the postcards of traditional fine art that sit above them. The optimistic style of Pop Art persisted into the 1960s and 1970s and became thought of as an American movement, but this exhibition recalls the circumstances of post-war British recovery in which this renowned style developed.
“The Festival is the British showing themselves to themselves - and to the world.”
Herbert Morrison, Labour MP and London County Council Leader in 1951

The Festival of Britain embodied the newfound sense of optimism that Britain was trying to adopt following the trauma of the Second World War. Organised by the government as a nationwide exhibition from 3 May to 30 September 1951, the Festival was originally devised to commemorate the Great Exhibition staged 100 years earlier.
SHOWCASING BRITAIN

Although the Festival was inspired by the Great Exhibition of 1851, it was far more concerned with celebrating the ideas of the future than remembering events of the past. Building on the growing tradition of world’s fairs and international expos, the Festival became a showcase of modern Britain. Developments in British manufacturing and innovation were at the core of the Festival’s message, with exhibitions showcasing advances in science, technology and design demonstrating the exportability of British industry. In conjunction with events like the 1948 London Olympics and Queen Elizabeth’s coronation in 1953, the optimism and forward-thinking of the Festival of Britain was meant to herald a new era in Britain’s history in sharp contrast to the wartime period that preceded it.

The heart of the Festival was the South Bank exhibition site in London, which featured a variety of exhibition pavilions, the new Royal Festival Hall, the Dome of Discovery and the Festival’s distinctive Skylon. The architecture of these new South Bank buildings was a striking example of International Modernism – a bold, minimal architectural style largely unseen in Britain prior to 1951. The pointed cigar-shaped Skylon tower designed by Hidalgo Moya, Philip Powell and Felix Samuely was the most radical of all the buildings.

NEW TOWNS ON SHOW

A major focus of the Festival was urban regeneration following the destruction caused by the Second World War. New town developments were opened to the public across the country, one of which was the Lansbury Estate in Poplar where visitors could see homes as they were being built in an exhibition billed as ‘Live Architecture’. The Lansbury site’s tagline – ‘New homes rise from London’s ruins...’ – emphasised the Festival as a bridge to optimistic recovery following the desolation of wartime Britain. Social housing and town planning were changing, and these new town developments became a popular attraction to Festival visitors, as they showed an entirely new urban landscape and promised a better way of living. The Festival’s map of ‘new towns’ included the County Durham towns of Newton Aycliffe and the progressive development of Peterlee.

THE FESTIVAL IN MIDDLESBROUGH AND THE NORTH EAST

The Festival of Britain was at once an international, national and regional event. Alongside what became an exhibition of the nation at the South Bank site, local communities also showcased themselves through varied events programmes marketed to both residents and tourists visiting their region. Middlesbrough’s programme detailed its aim to “clearly illustrate the Middlesbrough ‘way of life’” through a series of Festival events.
including a production of a play set in the medieval period and tours of “the diverse industries of the town”. Businesses like Hinton’s cafe and Clinkard’s shoe shop on Corporation Road, as well as Binn’s department store (now House of Fraser) on Linthorpe Road were presented as showrooms of design and manufacturing to boost the local economy. A duplicate of the main South Bank exhibition also toured the country on HMS Campania, docking at a selection of ports including Newcastle upon Tyne on the 29 May 1951.

**EMPIRE OR COMMONWEALTH?**

There was an attempt to rebrand Britain’s worldwide colonial legacy, with The Festival and the Commonwealth exhibition, held at The Imperial Institute in London. This exhibition was not widely publicised and seems to have been intended to shed Britain’s colonial past, as imperial attitudes were increasingly acknowledged as outdated and negative in the aftermath of the Second World War. By constructing the idea of ‘The Commonwealth’ to describe Britain’s remaining overseas territories, the Festival was significant in presenting Britain as a modern nation rather than an empire. The Festival seemed to overlook the uncomfortable truths of drawn out and often violent struggles for independence from Britain that had occurred in India and would continue throughout the twentieth century across the Caribbean, South America, Asia and Africa.

**DESIGN AND MERCHANDISE**

Branding the Festival of Britain was an exercise in national optimism: it aimed to overcome the trauma and austerity created by the Second World War and distance Britain from its crumbling empire, instead promoting the country as a land of opportunity. This is reflected in the bright and bold graphic designs created for the Festival posters, pamphlets and many other items of merchandise. Aiming to evoke a Britain of the future, the branding was distinctly Modernist in style. The Festival star logo took elements of patriotism and tradition like the symbol of Britannia and a red, white and blue colour scheme and updated them, creating simple, bold designs combined with modern typography. The Festival of Britain postcard is a reminder of the sense of occasion and national interest that the Festival inspired. Visitors from around the country and across the world travelled to the South Bank site, with around 8.5 million people visiting the main exhibition pavilions in the five months they were open. Souvenirs like postcards, photographs and other Festival memorabilia became popular ways to commemorate a visit. The public clearly appreciated the significance of the Festival and were keen to create a personal visual record of their time there. Sending or keeping a colour enhanced photo-postcard like this one continued the promotion of the Festival as an event of unrivalled optimism, as the brighter-than-life colours fixed it as a vibrant memory.
ART AND THE FESTIVAL

The Festival of Britain blurred the lines between commercial and fine art. It may now be known for its focus on futuristic science and technology, but the Festival was initially conceived along artistic lines. The idea to hold an exhibition to mark the centenary of the Great Exhibition originally came from the Royal Society of Arts in 1943. Art remained a significant element of the Festival, as a wide range of exhibitions were held alongside it to showcase British artists and many created works for the Festival’s South Bank site including Eduardo Paolozzi, Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, Lynn Chadwick and Jacob Epstein. Although the Festival ultimately had more commercial aims in its promotion of British design, it became one of the first platforms for the appreciation of popular art and material culture for their artistic value. Barbara Jones was a key figure in bridging the gap between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art, as she created modern murals and illustrations for the Festival whilst also curating an exhibition of British popular art at the Whitechapel Gallery to run alongside it. Jones described her exhibition, titled Black Eyes and Lemonade, as a collection of “things that people make or are manufactured to their taste”. The objects displayed were a wide-ranging mixture of popular and traditional British art. The exhibition mirrored the playful style of Jones’ murals that were displayed in the Festival Pleasure Gardens in Battersea Park. The Gardens offered a space of total fun and celebration, contributing to the sense of the Festival as ‘a tonic to the nation’. Jones’ light-hearted approach to art and her appreciation of popular culture added to this tone, as well as being an important forerunner to the Pop Art movement that would soon follow.

DOMESTIC DESIGN

Domestic design items presented at the Festival, like the iconic Ernest Race Antelope chair, were also appreciated for their artistic style alongside their commercial appeal. The chair combined a modern design with a new degree of durability through its innovative use of materials like plywood and a steel-rod frame resistant to corrosion – the chair was designed as furniture for the outdoor riverside terraces of the Royal Festival Hall. The emphasis placed on design and artistic quality at the Festival, and the progressive art exhibitions surrounding it, served to cement Britain as a tastemaker and a dynamic, cultural destination. The Festival’s art and design exhibits, as well as the design of the Festival itself and its distinctive promotional artwork, all acted as a reflection of how Britain’s new optimistic attitude was visualised for the mass public.
Lucian Freud (1922-2011) is considered one of the most important artists of his generation. He painted people in a highly detailed, realistic manner that was psychologically penetrating and expressed a feeling of isolation. Freud was the grandson of the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud and was born in Berlin. He emigrated with his family to England in 1933, when the Nazi Party came to power, to escape persecution as a Jew. Spending most of his life living in Paddington, London, Freud started attracting attention as an artist in the 1940s: in the 1950s he began to be an influential figure in British art.
INFLUENCE AND STYLE

Many artists in post-war Europe, such as Freud, were influenced by the philosophical theory of existentialism. Existentialism emphasises the uniqueness and isolation of the individual in a hostile or indifferent world. It presents the person as a free agent responsible for determining their own development through their own free will. This philosophy was particularly influential following the devastation of the Second World War. Feelings of anxiety, trauma and alienation were abundant, and painters used the isolated figure as a means to explore and express these themes.

Freud’s painting, *Girl in a Green Dress* (1954) conveys the sense of isolation characteristic in 1950s painting. The portrait of Lady Caroline Blackwood, Freud’s then wife, is a meticulously painted close-up study of her face. He has painted every detail, from the light freckles on her face and the lines on her top, to the delicate flesh tones of her skin. Freud paints Caroline with a pensive expression on her face in a moment of private contemplation, her eyes staring out beyond the viewer or the artist.

THE SCHOOL OF LONDON

Freud had a wide circle of friends who were fellow artists. The Colony Bar in London’s Soho became a haunt for the post-war artistic set where artists would drink, gamble and discuss their art. After the Second World War, Freud led a group of artists working in a figurative style, who were later named The School of London. The group included, amongst others, Francis Bacon, Frank Auerbach and Robert Colquhoun.

BACON AND FREUD

The renowned artist Francis Bacon was one of Freud’s closest friends. Bacon turned to painting relatively late in life, creating disturbing, emotionally charged images of abstract figures. Freud was introduced to Bacon through the artist Graham Sutherland, in the 1940s and from this point they formed a long-lasting yet competitive friendship. Freud and Bacon drew and painted several portraits of each other throughout the years. Bacon’s triple portrait of Freud from 1969 reached a record-breaking price at auction in New York last year ($142.4m/£89.6m), highlighting the pair as two of the greatest British artists of the twentieth century.

Whilst they both used the isolated figure as a subject in their paintings, their styles were very different. Bacon painted fairly quickly with expressive brushstrokes and used photographs as inspiration for his paintings. Freud, however, worked very slowly, painting in meticulous detail from life models. Both Bacon’s *Study for Portrait No.6* (1956–7) and Freud’s *Girl in a Green Dress* depict figures in an enclosed space to heighten a sense of isolation. Freud achieves this by zooming in to focus completely on the face, excluding the girl’s surroundings. Bacon places his figure inside a box, using
dark oppressive colours and contorting the figure’s face to emphasise a sense of anxiety and entrapment.

Bacon’s *Study for Portrait of Van Gogh VI* (1957) uses a far more colourful and optimistic palette: however, a dark figure still haunts the centre of the image. This painting was one of a series of eight that Bacon made based on Van Gogh’s self-portrait, *The Painter on the Road to Tarascon* (1858), which was destroyed in Second World War bombings, making it unlikely that Bacon ever saw the original: he probably painted from reproductions. This gave Bacon the freedom to interpret the Van Gogh as he wished. The use of reproduced images reflects the trends of Pop Art that were emerging at the same time.

After many years of friendship, Freud and Bacon fell out after a heated argument. However, they greatly admired each other’s post-war era art for the remainder of their lives. Bacon’s influence can be seen in Freud’s later work, which is less meticulous and adopts larger, more expressive brushstrokes.

**JOHN CRAXTON, KEITH VAUGHAN AND ROBERT COLQUHOUN**

In the 1940s Freud and the artist John Craxton shared a studio, provided by their then patron and avid art collector, Peter Watson. Freud became good friends with Craxton and in 1946 visited him in Greece. Craxton is best known for painting portraits and landscapes with solitary figures. He was inspired by Greek ancient history and the Mediterranean light and painted *Greek Children* (1946).

The artist Keith Vaughan, also in Peter Watson’s circle, made paintings that explored the male form. Many of his works involve compositions of figures in abstract environments such as *Climbing Figures* (1946) where two men almost dance across the canvas. *Foreshore and Bather* (1958) is a sombre painting depicting a solitary figure standing in front of a dark backdrop. The painting is made with textured brushstrokes, and the man’s face is blank, giving the painting a melancholic feel.

Freud and his circle of friends often met at the studio of the Scottish painter Robert Colquhoun. Colquhoun’s *Man with Donkey Saddle* (1950) uses the subject of the agonised solitary figure, typical in 1950s British painting. The colourfulness of most of the painting is in contrast to the face of the man, which is painted in a sombre white and blue palette with pursed lips and blank eyes. Colquhoun was influenced by Pablo Picasso, and his cubist style can be seen here, with the face and the hands stylised and fractured into geometric forms.

**FRANK AUERBACH AND HIS STYLE**

Like Freud, Frank Auerbach emigrated from Nazi Germany as a child, arriving in England in 1939. He paints portraits and cityscapes using thick layers of treacly
“In the fifteen years after 1945 avant-garde sculpture developed from an experimental art form with a tiny audience into a widely recognised genre.” Andrew Causey, Sculpture Since 1945
THE DEVELOPMENT OF SCULPTURE

The period after the war was an exciting time for British sculpture. Many people felt that traditional commemorative sculptures depicting heroism, hope and glory were no longer effective as memorials following the devastation of the Second World War and the exposure of the horrors of the holocaust. Figurative, large-scale sculpture was associated with totalitarian regimes, in particular the Soviet Union. In Cold War Europe a more abstract style of sculpture began to dominate. Mainly using metal as a material and rejecting organic materials such as wood or stone, British post-war sculpture was characteristically rough and wounded in appearance, representing the anxieties and morale of the time.

In the 1950s, sculpture gained prestige with international sculpture prizes being set up, as well as playing a prominent role at the Festival of Britain: an associated Open Air International Exhibition of Sculpture took place in Battersea Park. The development of outdoor exhibitions and collections opened up sculpture to a new audience outside the traditional gallery setting.

NEW ASPECTS OF BRITISH SCULPTURE

Britain was particularly strong in the field of sculpture in the aftermath of the Second World War. A new generation of British sculptors had emerged including Eduardo Paolozzi, Lynn Chadwick, William Turnbull and Reg Butler. These artists exhibited together at the celebrated exhibition New Aspects of British Sculpture at the prestigious Venice Biennale in 1952: it was hailed by many as the best exhibition at that Biennale. The critic Herbert Read said that their work evoked a “geometry of fear”, expressing anxieties in a fractured post-war society in the age of the atomic bomb and the Cold War.

So whilst design in the 1950s was positive and looked to the future, sculpture tended to represent horror and uncertainty. William Turnbull’s Head 3 (1955) is a solid mass of bronze with grooves scarred into its surface. Head 3 has been compared to a grenade, a bomb and wounded skin, reflecting memories of suffering and anxieties. The human head was an important theme in Turnbull’s work, “often abstracting it up to the edge of its legibility as a head”. This can be seen in both his sculpture and his paintings, and prints such as Head (1956) and Head (1953), where the form of the head is reduced to a series of marks.

THE INDEPENDENT GROUP

William Turnbull and the Scottish sculptor Eduardo Paolozzi were part of The Independent Group which included artists, architects, designers, critics and theorists. It promoted a radical interdisciplinary approach to visual culture that incorporated art, science, technology and popular culture.
Like Turnbull, Paolozzi was interested in the human form. Mr Cruikshank (1950-59) combines his interests in the anguished human form, machinery and technology. The bronze sculpture was inspired by an article in National Geographic Magazine with illustrations of models used to test radiation on the human skull. Paolozzi cast the head from a crash test dummy. The blank expression of the face is emotionally detached, referencing the dehumanising effect new technology and machinery could have, whilst expressing the difficulties artists faced depicting emotion after the war. Paolozzi cut the sculpture up into sections and then reassembled it. The process of deconstruction and reconstruction became important in Paolozzi’s work and can also be seen in his BUNK! Series where he deconstructed images from magazines and reconstructed them into screen prints.

**WORKING IN METAL**

Due to its durability outdoors, bronze dominated sculpture throughout the 1950s, despite its expense. However, many sculptors’ foundries had either closed down or been used for the war effort and were no longer available. This resulted in many artists seeking new materials and methods for making sculpture. Welding became a more common skill for artists, meaning sculptors could use cheaper materials such as scrap metal during a time of economic austerity. It was also a much quicker method than carving wood and stone or casting bronze.

Reg Butler’s Boy and Girl (1951) was forged and welded with iron. The sculpture of two figures is linear and skeletal, moving away from the solid forms of other sculptors such as Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore. Reg Butler was the winner of an international competition to design a monument titled the Unknown Political Prisoner, in commemoration of “all those men and women who in our times have given their lives or their liberty to the cause of human freedom”. His wiry, abstract sculpture beat the work of many renowned artists such as Paolozzi and Hepworth to win the prize.

Lynn Chadwick was an acclaimed sculptor who won the prestigious International Prize for Sculpture in 1956. Like Butler, Chadwick made linear sculptures, often using the triangle as a key form. Rad Lad (1961) is a bronze sculpture supported by a tripod of legs. The skin of the bronze clings to a linear framework, resembling an emaciated skeletal figure. The Seasons (1956) is a welded iron sculpture of a triangle supported on legs. The sculpture, although abstract, alludes to the human figure with a spiky branch reaching out like an arm. It is characteristic of post-war sculpture and its exploration of texture and roughness – where artists often gouged into the metal they were working with. Drawing was important to Chadwick’s work. He trained as a draughtsman in an architect’s office and the influence this had can be seen in both his sculptures and drawings such as *Three Studies for ‘The Seasons’* (1956). His sculptures could
be viewed as drawings in which metal rods draft lines in space. The linearity and new methods of making used in the sculptures of Lynn Chadwick and Reg Butler “became widely accepted and lit the way for the minimalists”.4

**A NEW ERA**

Anthony Caro’s *Twenty-Four Hours* (1960) signals the end of an era in post-war sculpture and the beginning of Minimalism. Minimalism was a movement in sculpture and painting characterised by the use of simple, massive forms. *Twenty-Four Hours* is made from large pieces of scrap steel welded together and painted with household gloss paint. It was Caro’s first abstract work. Having travelled to America in 1959, he was greatly influenced by the art he saw there. Caro rejected placing his sculpture on a plinth and made them to sit directly on the floor, removing a barrier between the viewer and the sculpture so that it could be viewed from all angles and be interacted with.

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1 [http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turnbull-head-3-t05211/text-summary](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turnbull-head-3-t05211/text-summary)

2 [http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turnbull-head-3-t05211/text-summary](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turnbull-head-3-t05211/text-summary)


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**1950s EVENTS AT MIMA**

**Curator’s Talk**
Thursday 20 and Saturday 29 March, 12 – 1pm
Join mima curator, Alix Collingwood, for a talk about the exhibition.
FREE, booking required

**Fashion in 1950s Britain: Then and Now**
Saturday 29 March, 11am – 12pm
A talk exploring the fashion of the era, its influences and influence.
FREE, booking required

**Make Do and Mend**
Saturday 29 March, 1 – 4pm
An up-cycling workshop – just bring along a piece of clothing you’d like to revamp.
£4, booking required

**Easter Holidays Art Trolley**
8 – 11 and 15 – 18 April, 11am – 12pm
1950s themed art activities for kids.
FREE

**Middlesbrough in the Post-war Period**
Saturday 10 May, 1 – 2pm
A discussion about the local social and economic changes after WW2.
FREE, booking required

For further information and booking details for all these events, see visitmima.com.
Following the devastation of the Second World War, many believed that the time had come to build a better society. The suffering endured during the war led to a belief that the government should provide basic care for its citizens, triggering social change and the birth of the welfare state. This included the establishment of the NHS, education reforms and the introduction of child benefit.
**THE NEW TOWNS ACT**

One of the many problems post-war Britain needed to address was a housing crisis. The New Towns Act in 1946 allowed the government to build new towns in designated areas. This was a time of great economic austerity, but the pioneering design of new towns attempted to turn that austerity into optimism by creating decent housing, raising living standards, providing new jobs and forging social unity. Art and design was to play a key role in this new era of urban regeneration.

Peterlee in County Durham was one of the proposed new towns. Whilst oil refineries were opening at the mouth of the River Tees, many coalmines and railways in the North East of England were closing. Peterlee was built to replace mining villages in the area that were no longer economically viable and to provide an urban centre that would create further employment options. The Peterlee Development Corporation was founded in 1948, and named after Durham Miners’ leader, Peter Lee. New towns like this were intended to be “self-contained communities combining the convenience of town life with the advantages of the country. They would have their own local shops and amenities and art was regarded as a vital aid to ensuring that all classes would benefit equally.”

The pamphlet *New Towns: What to See and How to Get There* (1951) shows highlights from an array of new towns, including Peterlee. The pamphlet was produced for the Festival of Britain to showcase the exciting new developments in social housing. The ‘*New homes rise from London’s ruins...*’ (1951) poster, also from the Festival of Britain, represents the importance placed on new housing in the 1950s. In the poster, a house with a modern interior is being lifted up into bright blue sky away from the war torn ruins of London. The image projects feelings of hope and new beginnings in a time of austerity.

**PETERLEE ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN**

The Peterlee Development Corporation initially employed the Russian modernist architect Berthold Lubetkin to design the new town. Appointing a renowned Modernist architect such as Lubetkin (who had designed an inventive new penguin pool at London Zoo) demonstrates the importance that was placed on innovative design. Lubetkin planned to build a modern town of high-rise towers. However, his plan was rejected because towers of such height could not be built on land that had been mined. If he had remained the architect of Peterlee, the town would have looked very different to how it does today.

After Lubetkin’s resignation in 1950 a new architect, Grenfel Baines, and the artist Victor Pasmore were employed to work on the development of Peterlee. Pasmore’s role was to work alongside the architect to add imagination to a project that could get weighed down with the restrictions of
building regulations. Giving Pasmore, one of the most influential abstract artists in Britain at the time, a vital part in the development of Peterlee demonstrates the central role art played in urban design after the war.

**VICTOR PASMORE**

Pasmore was born in Chelsham, Surrey in 1908 and attended evening classes at the Central School of Art in London. Pasmore initially painted representational landscapes and figures, but later made non-representational paintings and constructions out of contemporary materials such as plywood and Perspex. His *Construction in Black, White and Ochre* (1961-62) is a relief made of different layers of materials that explores the possibilities of different visual planes. The arrangement of new materials such as plywood has similarities with the planes of Modernist architecture.

From 1954 to 1961 Pasmore was head of the painting department at King’s College, Newcastle upon Tyne (then part of Durham University, later becoming Newcastle University), where – along with the artist Richard Hamilton – he created an innovative art course founded upon the principles of Basic Design. Basic Design was an experimental way of teaching art that was based on ideas from the German art movement and school, Bauhaus. The teaching philosophy was particularly strong in the north of England and had a radical impact on art of the 1950s and 1960s. The posters exhibited, such as *Work in Progress* (1950s-1960s), were made to advertise exhibitions of students’ work that showcased the new method of teaching art.

Pasmore had collaborated with architects successfully on previous projects such as a wall mural at the Festival of Britain in 1951. His art had a close relationship with modern architecture and Pasmore was the kind of artist Peterlee needed for a modern, creative vision. Pasmore’s influence can be seen through the integration of buildings into the landscape, a human scale and an elegance of design. The collaboration between artist and architect to develop Peterlee resulted in what is regarded as one of the most successful post-war new towns.

**THE APOLLO PAVILION**

Pasmore designed a centrepiece for the Sunny Blunts estate in Peterlee, the Apollo Pavilion. It is a concrete structure that Pasmore described as “an architecture and sculpture of purely abstract form”. The Apollo Pavilion spans a manmade lake and was one of Britain’s first large-scale public art works. Pasmore wanted to incorporate the Pavilion into the landscape and saw it as being integral to the estate’s design. Work began in 1969; cast on-site out of reinforced concrete, it contained two painted murals and was completed the following year. He named the Apollo Pavilion after the Apollo space mission of 1969, drawing parallels between the optimism and hope for the future expressed by the Pavilion and space exploration. As a focal point
in the cheerfully named Sunny Blunts estate “the pavilion showed the bold optimism of those building the new town of Peterlee”.3 The photographs and a scale model of the Apollo Pavilion show Pasmore’s utopian vision and its manifestation at Peterlee.

The Apollo Pavilion, however, did not remain in its intended condition. By the late 1970s it had started to fall into a state of disrepair. It was not properly maintained and became a site for vandalism. The Pavilion became a point of controversy, attracting much local criticism, and by the late 1980s there were calls for it to be demolished. However, all was not lost for Pasmore’s Pavilion. A steering group campaigned to get the Pavilion restored and in 2009 a Heritage Lottery Fund grant enabled work to begin on the Pavilion and the surrounding site. This included resurfacing some of the concrete, removing graffiti and reinstalling the south staircase to allow access to the Pavilion. In 2011 the Apollo Pavilion was awarded Grade II* listed status and is now in the top five percent of listed buildings in the country along with Middlesbrough’s Transporter bridge.

1  http://www.apollopavilion.info/Pages/NewTowns.aspx
2  http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings/artists/victor-pasmore
3  http://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/daily-news/penrose-lists-pasmores-apollo-pavilion/5204998.article

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“Just what is it that makes today’s homes so different, so appealing?”

The question posed by British artist Richard Hamilton in the title of his well-known 1956 Pop Art collage sums up the shift towards modern domestic design that occurred in Britain during the post-war period. The home environment and the way it was used were changing. These developments were largely the result of the modern materials, technology and outlook that the country had started to embrace by the 1950s.
**SHOWROOM SHOPPING**

Modern domestic design became part of the national agenda in the 1950s. The Council of Industrial Design (CoID) that was set up in 1944 began to promote new British-made furniture, household design and other consumer products in this period to encourage shoppers and rejuvenate British industry following the Second World War. CoID used large-scale exhibitions like ‘Britain Can Make It’ at the Victoria & Albert Museum in 1947 and the Festival of Britain in 1951 to showcase new design ideas to the public. These showroom-style displays were some of the first that allowed visitors to imagine design items in the home environment and the idea was soon replicated in the popular Ideal Home Show and filtered down to new furniture showrooms. Part of the success behind the iconic 1950s furniture brand G Plan can be linked to the way in which customers were able to visualise the items in their home, picking out the pieces they liked, at The G Plan Gallery in London as well as regional showrooms. The range is still popular today, with designer Wayne Hemmingway giving “a contemporary take on G Plan’s mid-century heritage”.

**CONTEMPORARY STYLE**

The High Wycombe-based furniture firm E. Gomme Ltd pioneered what became known as the ‘Contemporary Style’ with its highly popular range of G Plan furniture. The new brand was launched under the slogan ‘The Gomme Plan, a Plan for Living’ in 1952, and a large part of its success was down to the way the company marketed its furniture as part of a modern lifestyle. G Plan was designed with the modern home in mind, offering items of furniture to suit increasingly open plan living and display the latest conveniences. The G Plan ‘Librenza’ unit room divider, made from teak and laminated plywood, was perfectly suited to house a new television set and sit as a feature separating a large, modern living room. A 1958 report on G Plan was keen to emphasise that the furniture was “not only decorative, but eminently practical and suited to the current way of living”.

Unlike the suite furniture that preceded it, G Plan items were interchangeable and could be bought piece by piece, allowing the consumer to buy what they wanted when they wanted or could afford it. This aligned G Plan with the modern consumer mindset, as people looked to create homes uniquely styled to their tastes, breaking away from the prescriptive utility furniture imposed by the government to cope with wood shortages during the immediate post-war period.

G Plan furniture combined modern style with traditional materials, as it used woods like teak and mahogany to create high quality items with a bold appearance using simple shapes and a non-decorative approach. G Plan became the most popular of a group of furniture firms that promoted this ‘Contemporary Style’. Ercol, Stag and individual designers like Robin Day and Ernest Race all contributed to the mass market success of this new style of domestic furnishing.
in Britain. The ‘Contemporary Style’ was originally an elite style sold at high-end department stores like Liberty & Co in London, which opened a modern furniture department in 1950. Liberty sold items such as the boomerang-shaped table with a plywood top and three detachable solid beech legs designed by A.M. Lewis, which was very progressive in its use of futuristic shapes to mirror the innovation of the 1950s period. The simplicity of the ‘Contemporary Style’ was also greatly influenced by Scandinavian design. Items such as the stackable Jason chair, created by Danish designer Carl Jacobs, but manufactured by British firm Kandya, gained long-term popularity from 1950 onwards. The distinctive curved wooden seat and steel legs of the ‘Series 7’ or ‘Butterfly’ stacking chair designed and made in Denmark in 1955 by designer Arne Jacobsen and manufacturer Fritz Hansen is another example of Danish design that was adopted in Britain from the 1950s (although it is perhaps most associated with the 1960s, from the iconic Christine Keeler photograph) and remains relevant today.

**PLASTIC AND THE FORMICA FUTURE**

Alongside the traditional wood construction of the modern designs from G Plan and other contemporary manufacturers, developments in plastic and compound materials like lino created home design items with an even more futuristic feel. The most famous brand based on new materials was the thermosetting plastic laminate of Formica. Largely used for kitchen unit work surfaces, or in pieces like the late 1950s Formica table, the material was durable, heat-resistant, wipe-clean and could be easily manufactured in a wide range of patterns and colours to appeal to modern homeowners. Pastel-coloured Formica kitchens combined with modern conveniences like the Newhome Kitchenette Gas Cooker gave homes a strikingly futuristic style and functionality, as innovative materials and technology continued to make home life easier.

**MODERN INTERIORS**

To complement the simplicity of the popular plastic and G Plan furnishings, bright, bold and thoroughly modern patterned designs began to dominate interiors. Wallpaper, carpets, curtains and upholstery all came to reflect the growing optimism and forward thinking of the nation. This area of design was largely pioneered by women, with the contemporary patterns of Lucienne Day, Shirley Craven and Trinidadian-born Althea McNish, among others, transforming homes across the country.

The Festival of Britain was a key showcase of contemporary interiors, as it launched the careers of textile designers like Lucienne Day and Terence Conran. Day’s patterns had a very creative style, taking inspiration from artists like Joan Miró and Alexander Calder, and her distinctive designs soon became bestsellers for Heal Fabrics. Part of the
appeal behind her patterned fabrics was the way in which they were exhibited at the Festival. Her husband Robin Day was an equally progressive furniture designer and so the pair were able to create fully furnished and decorated interiors with a strong contemporary look. Terence Conran created the same winning formula when he later combined his talent for textile design with a range of furniture and household goods, opening the first in a long-running chain of Habitat shops in 1964.

Printed textile companies including Heal’s, David Whitehead Ltd, Liberty and Hull Traders all adopted the ‘Contemporary Style’. David Whitehead Ltd was particularly keen to utilise modern methods of mass production to make previously high-end contemporary design affordable, as its director John Murray outlined in an article titled ‘The cheap need not be cheap-and-nasty’. To fulfil this aim, the company launched ‘Contemporary Prints’ in 1951 through which it commissioned designers like Jacqueline Groag, Marian Mahler and Terence Conran to create innovative abstract designs that could be produced cheaply using roller printing on spun rayon.

**THIS IS TOMORROW**

The bold optimism and futuristic elements of domestic design, as well as the excess of consumer culture surrounding it, had a direct impact on British art in this period. Artists affiliated with the Independent Group in London blurred the boundaries between art, design and mass culture through a wide range of art projects.

The architects of the group, Alison and Peter Smithson, took the trend of innovative home design in a showroom setting to its extreme, presenting an entire space age House of the Future at the 1956 Daily Mail Ideal Home Show. Artists Eduardo Paolozzi and Nigel Henderson diversified by setting up Hammer Prints Ltd, which sold their artwork as designs on wallpaper and curtains through Hull Traders. The four combined at the landmark ‘This is Tomorrow’ exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery where they created a surreal showroom area titled *Patio and Pavilion*. Richard Hamilton’s domestic collage scene, *Just what is it that makes today’s homes so different, so appealing?* (1956) became the promotional image for the exhibition, which, like Paolozzi’s *BUNK! Series*, is seen as one of the first examples of Pop Art. Pop Art is often thought of as an American art form, but artists like Hamilton, Paolozzi and later Peter Blake meant that Britain was equally at the forefront of this new art style directly inspired by the kitsch domestic design and material culture of the 1950s.

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1 Report on G Plan, Southern Gateway Magazine (March, 1958)
paint, often scraping it all off and starting again in his search for perfection. One of Auerbach’s teachers was the artist David Bomberg. Bomberg’s influence on Auerbach can be seen when comparing his work *Vigilante* (1955) to Auerbach’s paintings, with their thick brushstrokes and muted palette. Auerbach paints what he knows, mainly painting Camden in London near his home and focusing on the same few models for his portraits. He painted Primrose Hill many times and in all different weathers and seasons. *In Primrose Hill: High Summer* (1959), Auerbach contrasts dark shadows with bright summer light in his characteristic thick paint. He has an emotive, textured style of painting where “even his landscapes of Mornington Crescent and Primrose Hill seem like scarred battlefields of pigment”.¹ *The Sitting Room* (1964) is an intimate scene of the inside of Auerbach’s studio. It explores the interior of a room, a theme that was to become prevalent in Pop Art.

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