

First Christmas card was arty, riled Scrooges

An exhibit at Tate Britain shows that modern art can be Christmassy too, if not always merry

BY MARTIN GAYFORD
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Here's a piece of yuletide trivia: the first Christmas card was dreamed up by an art bureaucrat.

It was Sir Henry Cole (1808-1882), first director of the Victoria and Albert Museum, who — daunted at the thought of writing by hand piles of greetings to his friends — came up with the idea in 1843. That first card represented three generations of an early Victorian family, flanked by scenes of charitable acts, celebrating by drinking goblets of wine.

So, when you think about it, Christmas just wouldn't be the same without the art world. Cole's card was designed by a Royal Academician friend, John Callcott Horsley (1817-1903).

These days, half the cards that zing through our letter boxes were designed by old masters: nativities by Fra Angelico, snow scenes by Brueghel. Some more recent artists' cards, on display at Tate Britain to mark the 40th anniversary of the Tate Archive (through Feb. 1), prove that modern art can be Christmassy too, if not always merry.

Grayson Perry, the transvestite and transgressive potter, chose to show a family gathering on his 2004 card. You could see it as an updated version of

the original Victorian card.

The Perrys are eating their holiday meal at McDonald's, wearing paper hats but looking bored and miserable. Grayson himself, for once not wearing female attire, clasps a mobile telephone in one hand while a French fry dangles in the other. Paper cups, crackers and hamburger buns cover the table. It isn't cheery, but it's funny.

CHEERY STRIPES

The earliest card on show at the Tate is by the pioneer UK modernist Duncan Grant, a friend of Virginia Woolf and John Maynard Keynes, and dates from 1913. More Bloomsbury than holly berry, as you might expect, but almost cheery with its jolly stripe pattern (borrowed, like a lot of Grant's ideas from Matisse). In 1955, the



Above: A 1913 Christmas card by the artist Duncan Grant currently on display at Tate Britain. Grant was a member of the famed Bloomsbury group, which included Virginia Woolf and John Maynard Keynes.

Left: A 2004 Christmas card photograph by the potter Grayson Perry currently on display at Tate Britain. A parody of an idealized Victorian family enjoying a holiday meal, the setting is a McDonald's.



A 1955 Christmas card by the artist Ben Nicholson currently on display at Tate Britain. Nicholson is known for his slightly austere abstract paintings.

austere and often abstract painter Ben Nicholson was sending out a chilly image: snowdrops, snowflakes, and some angular post-cubist mugs.

A photograph chosen by Cedric Morris for his card in 1939 was bleak and wintry too. Early in that year the art school run by Morris at Dedham in Essex burned down (the reactionary painter Alfred Munnings, who disapproved of its slightly avant-garde leanings, is supposed to have driven back and forth past the blaze shouting "Hurrah!"). Morris selected a photograph of students drawing in the school's temporary studio, a garage. One of the pupils, back right, was the teenage Lucian Freud.

HOLIDAY SPOILSPORTS

Cheerless Christmas scenes such as this and Grayson Perry's, are actually quite traditional. Seasonal

meanness and misery are largely what you read about in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. It's almost as essential an ingredient in the modern festivity as a mound of cards (not entirely coincidentally, the first edition of the book, like Cole's card, appeared in 1843).

Christmas just wouldn't be Christmas without Scrooges either. Puritanical Victorians latched onto the question of Christmas cards fast. On that original card, one of the grandchildren in the family group is being offered a sip of wine. Predictably, there were complaints about this vision of underage drinking as fostering the moral corruption of children.

The reaction in 2009 would probably be just the same. One thing about Christmas never changes: A lot of people have always hated it, cards and all.



A 1939 Christmas card sent by the painter Cedric Morris currently on display at Tate Britain. The photograph depicts students of the art school run by Morris, the premises of which had recently been destroyed by fire. The young artist Lucian Freud is visible at the back right.

Bank reviews US\$24 million art collection to decide what to sell

Royal Bank of Scotland, the beneficiary of the world's most expensive bailout of a financial institution, is unloading art as part of a restructuring plan

BY FARAH NAYERI
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At the Factory Gates by L.S. Lowry, top left, and Fish Teas by Jack Vettriano, above, are part of the art collection of Royal Bank of Scotland Group Plc.

Royal Bank of Scotland Group Plc, the UK bank majority-owned by the government, said it may sell works from its in-house art collection that is worth as much as \$15 million (US\$24 million).

The lender, which has received \$45.5 billion in state aid in the world's most expensive bank bailout, is reviewing its collection to determine initially whether UK national museums wish to acquire any of the items.

The bank won European Union approval Dec. 14 for a restructuring plan. Under the plan, it has to get rid of 300 branches and insurance divisions over the next four years, spokeswoman Linda Harper said yesterday.

"We'll have less buildings, and less of a need for art that we've acquired," Harper said in a telephone interview. She said the bank was identifying works that national museums and galleries might want, "and if there's a surplus of art, we may look at disposals."

"No decisions have been taken yet, but we will not sell any pieces of art that are of heritage or of historical importance," said Harper. The works will be sold when a good price can be fetched for them on the art market, she said.

The bank says it has some 2,200 works of art worth more than \$1,000, and another 1,500 or so limited-edition prints. The art collection grew in 2000 when RBS acquired National Westminster Bank Plc and incorporated the pieces in that collection.

One of the paintings that had been part of the NatWest collection, a work by Frank Auerbach, was sold two or three years ago, Harper said. According to the *Scotsman* newspaper, it sold for \$780,000; Harper wouldn't confirm the figure.

The oldest work currently in the RBS collection dates from around 1750, and is Johann Zoffany's *Portrait of Andrew Drummond*, founder of Drummonds, the Scottish lender, RBS said. Other pieces include Jack Vettriano's *Fish Teas* and L.S. Lowry's *At the Factory Gates*, according to RBS. The collection is valued between \$10 million and \$15 million.

EXHIBITIONS

Japanese sculptor Hiroto Kitagawa examines the psychology of Japan's urban youth in **Post New Type: Super Terracotta Sculptures**, a solo exhibition of more than 30 works. Having spent 14 years studying and working in Italy, where he was influenced by Italian masters such as Alberto Giacometti and Marino Marini, Kitagawa brings a unique perspective to his subject matter and acts as a filter of the social preoccupations of his homeland. Issues such as socially withdrawn children and bullying work thematically into the drooping and languid sculptures made of acrylic paint on terracotta. Along with these anxious creatures, Kitagawa also examines a "new type" of youth whose penetrating expressions and confident postures suggest an alternative to the frail youth depicted in the popular media. Kitagawa's sculptures are a complex blend of Eastern and Western aesthetic elements combined with a desire to express the essence of the sometimes emotionally distant and other times self-assured youth of contemporary Japan.

■ EsLite Xinyi Bookstore (誠品信義店), 11 Songgao Rd, Taipei City (台北市松高路11號). The gallery is open Tuesdays to Sundays from 11am to 7pm. Tel: (02) 8789-3388 X1588
■ Until Jan. 31

Contemporary artist Yang Mao-lin (楊茂林) combines Buddhist mythology with pop culture icons in **Lost in Wonderland (我的夢幻島)**. The sculptures and paintings on display suggest that people no longer project their yearnings onto spiritual idols. Instead, cartoons and superheroes are the symbols by which people make sense of their lives.

■ Lin & Lin Gallery (大未來林舍畫廊), 13, Ln 252, Dunhua S Rd Sec 1, Taipei City (台北市敦化南路一段252巷13號). For a viewing, call (02) 2721-8488
■ Until Jan. 24

Vanishing Ground is a video and paper sculpture installation by Julie Bartholomew that documents the impact of commercial development and the forces of modernization on communal spaces that are integral to cultural identity. The installation constructed for the show draws on the art of Taiwanese funerary paper sculpture, while the video shows the burning of these ritual objects.

■ Barry Room, Taipei Artist Village (台北國際藝術村百里廳), 7 Beiping E Rd, Taipei City (台北市北平東路7號). Open Tuesdays to Fridays from 10am to 6pm. Tel: (02) 3393-7377
■ Until Jan. 31



Hiroto Kitagawa, *Kyo Kurosaki (2009)*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ESUTE GALLERY

Paintings of blossoms and flowers serve as contemporary painter Lin Yueh-shia's (林月霞) central symbol in **Touching — The Origin Point (觸動·原點)**. The paintings metaphorically explore the growth and decay of contemporary ideas about the environment.

■ Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall (國父紀念館), 505, Renai Rd Sec 4, Taipei City (台北市仁愛路四段505號). Open daily from 9am to 5pm. Tel: (02) 2758-8008
■ Until Sunday

Hsu Yang-hsu (徐永旭) attempts to eradicate MOCA's time and spatial limitations with the outdoor exhibit **Iteration — In Between (再·之間)**. The eight small- and large-scale clay sculptures on display employ an abstract expressionist mentality to explore the public and private spaces of body and mind.

■ Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei (MOCA, Taipei), 39 Changan W Rd, Taipei City (台北市長安西路39號). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 10am to 6pm. Tel: (02) 2552-3720
■ Until Jan. 31

Metropolitan Wonderland (都會美樂地) is a series of technicolor paintings by Yu Way-shin (余威欣). The works depict city scenes such as the interior of a restaurant or coffee shop and are rendered in a surrealist style.

■ Julia Gallery (雅逸藝術中心), 3, Ln 166, Zhongcheng Rd Sec 2, Taipei City (台北市忠誠路二段166巷3號). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 1pm to 9pm. Tel: (02) 2873-9190
■ Until tomorrow