Building Up British Art
Three (Aesthetic) Cheers
Art Springs Into Action

With a trio of fine new museum-galleries newly opened in England, Charles Saumarez Smith finds himself spoilt for choice

One of the great pleasures of the spring months has been going to visit the new museums that have sprung up in different parts of England, thanks to Lottery largesse and the belief on the part of funding agencies that a beacon of culture can act as an agent of regeneration.

First up was Turner Contemporary in Margate. Its ceremonial opening was held on a wonderfully sunny evening in mid-April, so that the troops of art lovers were able to walk from the railway station along the esplanade with the beginnings of a Turner-esque sunset disguising the tat of a rundown seafront while the new building hovered like a mirage in the space between the shops and the 19th-century customs house – a grand factory for contemporary art. By the time I arrived, Tracey Emin had left, but she is as much the guiding spirit of the place as Turner, symbolising the possible transformation of the town from slut to princess.

The building was designed by Sir David Chipperfield, who has in recent months changed from a figure who was in the past slightly cold-shouldered by the architectural establishment – or, at least, he certainly believed himself to be – coming second in the competition for Tate Modern only because in a slightly mad moment over the Christmas holiday he decided to chop off the tower, as he had been advised by Julian Harrap, his conservation architect, that it was unsafe. Now, he suddenly looked the part of the big man in British architecture, with hair that had been allowed to grow long for the occasion. He talked knowledgeably and intelligently about the importance of daylight for the viewing of art and the pleasures of a building that would be battered by the waves. I liked and admired what I was able to see of it. It feels spacious – big and generously proportioned and sensibly undemonstrative, a warehouse for the display of art, shimmering in the distance like a mirage on the seafront.

Next to open was the transformed Holburne Museum in Bath, not a new-build, but a highly intelligent addition to the rear of a late-18th-century hotel that was converted into a museum in the early 20th century by Sir Reginald Blomfield. The idea for this goes back nearly a decade, when the Trustees of the Holburne Museum selected Eric Parry to design an addition to the museum that would provide extra space – more galleries, a new café and an exhibition space. He has designed a building that is brilliantly counterintuitive. Instead of doing what the custodians of Bath's heritage would have liked, which was to design a polite neoclassical building in the style of the existing museum, he has designed a building that

turns these expectations on their head. Its vocabulary belongs not to the city, but to the parkland in which it sits. It is built not of Bath stone, but green, nearly slimy, iridescent ceramic tiles. It is, in classical terms, deliberately upside down, with a base that consists of the open glass of the café, so the structure floats in the garden. I thought it was brilliant, like a new species of plant, green and faintly Japanese, with long hanging fins, an exotic that has been allowed to invade the paradise of classicism.

Inside, it is nearly equally adventurous, architecturally packed, with two floors of galleries sandwiched between the café and the exhibition space and stuffed with objects that are extremely crowded by the standards of modern exhibition display. Everything about it is beautiful, including the ash of the banisters and the very precise, sans-serif typeface of the labels. I was annoyed to have to leave for my train and jumped on to one that was going in the wrong direction, thereby missing the party.

The third of the triumphal openings was The Hepworth in Wakefield. Long ago – so long ago that I had nearly forgotten – I was a member of the jury that appointed David Chipperfield to design the building. He arrived as the last of the architects we interviewed, following on from Kengo Kuma, David Adjaye and Zaha Hadid, and was unexpectedly low-key and casual in his presentation. His design is correspondingly undemonstrative, consisting of a series of interlocking, asymmetric blocks, which depend for their impact not on their external appearance, but on the quality of the spaces, their scale, their fluidity and, most especially, the way the natural daylight flows in from windows buried in the roof.

So, it was a slightly odd sensation looking out of the window of the taxi and seeing the drawings physically realised in built form. Inside, I found it much more solid and serious than I had expected, with big, calm, open spaces and a very complex floor plan, filled with works of art from the middle of last century – an art gallery that might more normally be found in a Swiss canton than beside the banks of the River Calder. Upstairs, there were many Hepworths on display, of course, because it was her home town, but also the evidence of a strong provincial collection, assembled in the early 20th century as a result of municipal ambition and highly intelligent postwar curators. There was one particularly moving display case upstairs devoted to the exhibitions that were held in the immediate postwar period, when Wakefield was in the forefront of the modern movement and the then curator, Helen Kapp, held exhibitions with catalogues designed with Bauhaus graphics. In particular, I couldn't help but notice a review of an exhibition of the work of Alan Davie published in the *Arts Review* in February 1958. It extolled the fact that "Wakefield has had the courage of its convictions… the small city poignantly reveals the lack of enterprise of almost every other provincial centre throughout the country". The same might be said of Wakefield's new museum.

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