

MIDLANDS ART TRAIL: ART AND THE COMMONWEALTH GAMES

SUMMER 2022

WOLVERHAMPTON
ART GALLERY



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

midlands
art —
papers

INTRODUCTION

For our special issue, Maddy Clark has created a trail of art works held at Wolverhampton Art Gallery, themed around the Commonwealth Games. This trail will take you on a journey exploring connections between art, imperialism and its legacies, and sporting cultures.

Please note: not all objects are on display, to avoid disappointment please contact Wolverhampton Art Gallery in advance of your visit (01902 552055).

Acknowledgments

Maddy's research was undertaken as part of a University of Birmingham College of Arts and Law Professional Skills Module. We are grateful to Lesley Griffiths for supporting MAP as a Professional Skills opportunity for students, and to Carol Thompson and Clare Marlow at Wolverhampton Art Gallery for their help researching and preparing the trail. Many thanks also to the artists Eugene Palmer and James Butler for their generosity in allowing us to reproduce their work.

ARTWORKS

THE COMMONWEALTH AND THE BRITISH EMPIRE

A Tiger (1818) Charles Towne | *Snuff Box* (1750-55) Unknown | *Untitled (No. 3 from Korabra)* (1985) Gavin Jantjes | *The Shipwreck* (1859) Francis Danby | *Duppy Shadow* (1994) Eugene Palmer | *Spirit of the Carnival* (1982) Tam Joseph

THE COMMONWEALTH GAMES

Costume Life Drawing (1972) Peter Blake | *Baseball* (1990) Conrad Atkinson | *Billy Wright* (1995) James Butler | *Poster for the 1972 Munich Olympics* (1972) David Hockney

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The Commonwealth and the British Empire

A Tiger (1818)

Charles Towne

Oil painting, 34.3 x 29.3 cm

For a country to qualify as a member of the Commonwealth, it must have once been a colony of the British Empire. As such, the existence of the Commonwealth stands, for some, as a constant reminder of the history of British colonialism.

This painting by Charles Towne can be seen as a symbolic representation of British colonialism. The fact that Towne was able to paint this tiger, native only to certain Asian countries, demonstrates first-hand Britain's colonial involvement in South Asia. The tiger's supposed viciousness symbolised what Europeans viewed as the 'wildness' of the Indian subcontinent – a wildness that needed to be 'tamed' by European domination and influence. This is reflected in the fact that Towne most likely painted this tiger from captivity; until the early 19th Century, tigers and other wild animals were the private property of the Royal family, kept at the Royal Menagerie in the Tower of London. While the Games today set out to represent equality and peace between nations, they – like this painting – are rooted in a history of British colonial domination. It is worth remembering that between 1930 and 1950, the Commonwealth Games were called the British Empire Games.



Snuff box (1750-55) with enamel lid with painting of harbour with ships

Unknown

Mother of pearl, enamel, chased metal, 2.3 x 5 x 7cm

This snuff box, made from copper and mother-of-pearl with a painted enamel lid, symbolises Britain's trading relations with the British Empire and the slave trade in the eighteenth century. Snuff was a form of tobacco popular in elite society. Tobacco was grown on plantations in

British colonies in America and the Caribbean, and was harvested by enslaved Africans before being shipped back to Britain. The image of ships in a harbour on the lid celebrates Britain's naval and trading power.

This snuff box is evidence of Britain's increasing commodity culture in the 18th Century; it shows how Britain's economy was built upon the subjugation of people from the colonies. Today, the Commonwealth aims to improve trade between nations; and whilst this is a direct descendant of colonial exploitation, it does aim to be economically beneficial for all parties, and not just Britain. The Commonwealth aims to uplift the economies of its least-developed countries through research, local projects, and expertise. The Commonwealth Games also have a positive impact on the economies of its participants, particularly boosting the economies of host cities through promoting tourism, increasing employment, and encouraging trade deals and investment.

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Untitled (No. 3 from Korabra) (1985)

Gavin Jantjes

Mixed media, 180 x 200 cm

This artwork, third in the series *Korabra* by Gavin Jantjes, highlights the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade. The word 'Korabra' is a Ghanian word meaning 'to go and come back'. It is also a name for a funeral drum. Using expressive mark-making, Jantjes depicts two figures standing with their heads unnaturally bowed, expressing a broken spirit. The ships in the background indicate the transatlantic crossing, during which many enslaved people died. Behind the two figures stand four dark silhouettes – perhaps representing their ancestors, gazing towards their homeland.

Jantjes is a South African artist who experienced Apartheid and often focuses on it in his work. South African apartheid was the cause of a large rift in the history of the Commonwealth Games; with the Gleneagles Agreement of 1977, the Commonwealth cut off sporting contact with the apartheid state. However, this situation unveiled Britain's own prejudices; in 1986, thirty-two nations boycotted the Commonwealth Games because Thatcher's government refused to uphold the Gleneagles Agreement, maintaining Britain's sporting links with South Africa. This was seen by many Commonwealth countries as evidence that Britain preferred to protect its own economic interests and would turn a blind eye to racial injustices. Moreover, since most of the boycotting nations were from Africa, Asia and the Caribbean, the 1986 Commonwealth Games were a largely white-only event, furthering the image of Britain as a proponent of inequality.

The Shipwreck (1859)

Francis Danby

Oil painting, 77.5 x 107.4 cm

Migration has always been an important part of Britain's relationship with the Commonwealth. This Romantic painting of a shipwreck was completed during an era of large-scale emigration of Britons to North America and Australia, escaping poverty and social inequality in Britain. This reflects the well-documented history of migration from Britain to colonial territories.



Danby's use of symbolism within this painting reflects many contemporary issues surrounding migration. The shipwreck itself demonstrates the perilous journey that many migrants are forced to face. The painting is reminiscent of modern-day news images of migrant boats wrecked off the coast of mainland Europe. Ironically, the ship in this painting is named 'Hope'. This creates a subversive message about migration; that it is a hope of starting a new life elsewhere, yet having that hope dashed. However, the painting includes two symbols of salvation, the rainbow and the shape of the cross (created by the broken mast in the water). Danby's message, therefore, is overall a positive one.

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The Commonwealth Games sees people travelling from all over the world – following the paths of Commonwealth migrants over the past century – to attend an event supposed to inspire hope and connection, and which celebrates the contribution of immigrants. This reflects the way that the Commonwealth itself, like the Commonwealth Games, is about building connections between nations, which, without immigration freedoms, could only be limited.

Duppy Shadow (1994)

Eugene Palmer

Oil painting, 210 x 155 cm

Eugene Palmer was born in Jamaica and moved to England in 1966. As a result, his work has often been inspired by the intersection of these two cultures and his experience as a Black artist in post-war Britain.

Palmer often juxtaposed his portraits of Black subjects with the aesthetics of the Western art-historical canon. In this painting, the pastoral background is reminiscent of English country landscapes by Gainsborough and Constable. The cold, green countryside looks imposing and claustrophobic, leaving the girl in the centre looking uncomfortably out-of-place. This could reflect the difficulties experienced by migrants when trying to settle in England after leaving their home country. 'Duppy' is a word used in various Caribbean islands meaning 'spirit' or 'ghost'. This could suggest that the 'spirit' of her Jamaican roots is making it difficult for the girl to feel at home in Britain. Maybe she is homesick, or is not being welcomed into British society.



Commonwealth migrants of colour have often been treated with racist hostility by the British public, especially since the British Nationality Act of 1948 led to largescale migration of people from Commonwealth nations into Britain. The 2022 Commonwealth Games, however, is attempting to prevent such racism and discrimination through a programme of equality and inclusivity.

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Spirit of the Carnival (1982)

Tam Joseph

Gouache on brown paper, 213 cm x 186 cm

Tam Joseph was born in Dominica, and moved to London at the age of eight. This painting depicts a figure inspired by the West African masquerade known as Egungun, surrounded by police with riot shields. This is a commentary on the increasing police presence at Notting Hill Carnival in the 1970s, highlighting the way that the celebration of African-Caribbean culture, community and freedom was stifled by the authorities. The outstretched hands and the energetic dance of the figure indicates resistance against these controlling forces, reflecting Black cultural and political resilience. However, this piece could also be a wider commentary on how Black culture is so often criminalised by British media, leading to increasing police violence.

The 2022 Commonwealth Games will celebrate Birmingham's multiculturalism through the arts, both 'playful and provocative'. The question of whether provocative cultural expression – or protest – should be permitted at the Commonwealth Games has been a cause for debate, especially following the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. The Commonwealth Games Federation have stated that protests are 'part of' the Commonwealth Games, and as result the 2022 Games have promised to give a platform to athletes who wish to express themselves. Simultaneously, however, Birmingham authorities are ramping up police presence at the Games with a 3,000-officer policing operation. Many are worried that this will lead to increased police violence against Black communities.

Commonwealth Games

Costume Life Drawing (1972)

Peter Blake

Screen-print, 43 x 22.5 cm image on 77.5 x 57.3cm sheet

Peter Blake is considered a pioneer of the British Pop Art Movement, known for his obsession with popular culture. He had a particular interest in wrestling.

One of the presiding images of the Pop Art movement is the highly-sexualised, alienated female figure. Women usually appear only in the form of famous sex symbols or pin-ups, or else they are objectified and compared to household commodities. In contrast, however, this female wrestler is presented as capable, tough and in control. Blake depicts her body to celebrate her physical prowess.

Sporting events like the Commonwealth Games are among the few occasions where women's physical strengths are celebrated at the same level as men. In fact, the Commonwealth Games is a strong advocate for gender equality in sport; in recent years, it has awarded an equal number of medals to women as to men. In the 2022 Commonwealth Games, for the first time, more medals will be awarded to women. The Commonwealth Games also places 'female' sports (such as netball and volleyball), which usually earn little media attention, into the spotlight. As such, the Commonwealth Games, along with images like 'Costume Life Drawing', are helping to lift the common oppositions to women being presented as physically strong in art and the media.

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Baseball (1990)

Conrad Atkinson

Etching, 68.8 x 70 cm

This work is the third from a series of hand-coloured etchings by Conrad Atkinson. In this series, Atkinson explores how the world of an artist and an athlete might be comparable. This merging is demonstrated in the baseball players' uniforms; the words written on them might appear in the vocabulary of an artist – words like 'Imagine', 'Beauty' and 'Desire', as well as 'Economy' and 'Theory'. Atkinson imagines a world in which artists are venerated like sports heroes. At the same time, the ornate frame sketched around the print suggests that Atkinson is commenting on the place of sports imagery in high-art culture. The ornamentation and gold accents on the frame evoke the framing of old masterpieces – yet the use of charcoal and the sketchy style suggest the opposite. Atkinson seems to be winking at the affectations of high-art, challenging the perception of sport and art being mutually exclusive. He is suggesting that a sportsperson's skill is as much worthy of being framed and admired as the work of the Old Masters.

This attitude is shared by the Commonwealth Games, which aims to uplift both sport and arts endeavours. The 2022 Commonwealth Games includes an in-depth cultural program with a city-wide arts festival and multiple Creative City Grants. This demonstrates how the Commonwealth Games considers both sports and the arts equally important in bringing people together and inspiring positive change.



Billy Wright (maquette, 1995)

James Butler

Bronze sculpture, 24 x 36 x 60 cm

This small sculpture, cast in bronze, is actually a maquette for a larger statue of Wolverhampton footballer Billy Wright, now situated outside the Wolverhampton Wanderers Football Club's venue at Molineux Stadium. Considered something of a local hero, Billy Wright played for Wolves. However, his international reputation was earned as long-time captain of the England team, as well as being the first footballer in the world to earn 100 international caps.

Bronze statues like this one often denote national pride, reflecting the way that athletes and sportspeople can become representatives of local pride on the world's stage. This is a large part of the appeal of international sporting events like the Commonwealth Games – it is an opportunity for local heroes to both represent their country and to help to put their home-town on the map. Wolverhampton has been represented in the Commonwealth Games multiple times, having produced a number of internationally-renowned competitors like Hugh Porter, Tessa Sanderson, and Anita Lonsbrough.

This statue's full-sized counterpart's location outside Molineux Stadium also demonstrates the importance of local, grass-roots sports clubs in nurturing potential talent. The 2022 Commonwealth Games recognises this, and is therefore placing a large focus on community engagement and is championing grass-roots level sports endeavours.

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Poster for the 1972 Munich Olympics (1972)

David Hockney

Lithograph, 105 x 68 cm

Visual imagery has always been a very important aspect of the Commonwealth Games. As with any large-scale international gathering, communication beyond language is vital. This is certainly the case in the branding for the Olympic Games, as demonstrated by this lithograph poster created by David Hockney. The theme for the 1972 Munich Olympics (nicknamed the 'Friendly Games') was unity and peace, demonstrated in this poster through the calm colour scheme, and the notable lack of competition in the picture, since just one figure is shown. The pastel colours also contributed to the overall colour-scheme of the 1972 Olympics, branding it instantly recognisable.

Similarly, the 2022 Commonwealth Games have used branding to advocate a particular theme – both a colour theme, with the use of a bright, multicoloured palette centring red, blue and yellow (the colours of Birmingham's city flag), as well as a metaphorical theme – inclusivity. This is demonstrated, for example, in the Games' mascot, Perry, a bull adorned with multicoloured hexagons. The bull is synonymous with Birmingham due to the Bull Ring in the city centre; the rainbow colours represent 'the coming together of the Commonwealth in equal partnership with the diverse communities of Birmingham and the West Midlands'. This demonstrates the power of branding to promote Birmingham as a city of inclusivity.

