

1851

1951

2011



# **Royal College of Art**

Postgraduate Art and Design

Catalogue of the Exhibition 'The Lion and the Unicorn'  
to mark the 160th anniversary of the opening of the Great Exhibition 1851;  
the 60th anniversary of the opening of the Festival of Britain 1951  
and the first Across RCA Interdisciplinary project 2010-2011

# THE RCA'S PAVILION

In her opening speech on 31 May 1948 as president of the RSA, Princess Elizabeth referred with pride to the link between the Great Exhibition of 1851 and the 1951 Festival of Britain. She stated that the object of the 1951 celebrations should be to emphasise the application of the arts to industrial design just as it had been in her great-great-grandfather's Crystal Palace; the Festival should show what a 'wealth of ideas and achievements Great Britain has produced in the realm of art and science'.

The buildings for the South Bank's 'multi-coloured city of domes and pavilions' were commissioned by its Director of Architecture, Hugh Casson. The architects' preliminary sketches began to arrive early in May 1949. These were as exciting as expected, throwing up two main styles to test the courage of the Festival Design Group: designs based on the international Modernist idiom, minimal and hard-edged, and a new decorative and light-hearted 'Festival' style born out of an optimistic reaction to austerity.

The architects Robert Goodden and Dick Russell were delighted with the request for a pavilion, situated to the south of the new Royal Festival Hall, whose working title was 'British Character and Tradition'. This challenge fitted perfectly with their shared design aesthetic in which modern simplicity was tempered by a slightly irreverent sense of humour, both of these grounded in a respect for traditional methods of design and construction. 'The Lion and the Unicorn' only achieved its name late in the design process, and the pavilion, whilst its flamboyance attracted criticism from certain hard-edged modernists, proved to be one of the South Bank's most popular attractions.

Although the design for 'The Lion and the Unicorn' adhered to the Festival brief for demountable buildings, financial restrictions did not allow for it to be reconstructed as an exhibition space, as suggested by Robin Darwin (then Rector of the Royal College of Art), on the triangular 'island site' opposite the Victoria and Albert Museum. At the ignominious close of the South Bank exhibition, the 'Lion and Unicorn' was sold for scrap at auction for the sum of £400.

Goodden and Russell had both been recruited as RCA professors in 1948, in Robin Darwin's post-war revival of the College. They had accepted Hugh Casson's commission on condition that they would be responsible for both exterior and interior of the Pavilion (the architects for the majority of the South Bank buildings were not responsible for their interiors). With the Rector's permission they were allowed to take on the challenge of designing the 'Lion and Unicorn' using the talents of staff and students of the College, and Professor Richard Guyatt was brought in to mastermind the display.

Having no clear brief at first, Goodden and Russell decided that the answer for an adaptable exhibition space would be to build a simple, open structure rather like a barn in its long rectangular form—'an airy shed' 45 feet wide and the same height, by three times that in length. It would have two walls, north-east and south-east, completely glazed to continue the open feeling, and an arched roof in 'lamella' construction in a single span. Because of its height, the 'barn' could accommodate an upper display level, and the idea of a freestanding gallery was introduced inside, extending to a third of the width. A restaurant would lead out of the pavilion, situated in its own garden.

The narrative of the exhibition began with two giant 'corn-dolly' figures, a lion and a unicorn made by Fred Mizen (gardener to Edward Bawden). These stood in front of the legend 'We are the Lion and the Unicorn, twin symbols of the Briton's character. As a Lion I give him solidity and strength. With the Unicorn he lets himself go'. The Unicorn was engaged in releasing the door of a huge rattan cage high in the building, freeing a flock of plaster doves which flew to the far end of the arched lattice-construction ceiling.

The visitor was led upstairs to the gallery, freestanding under its illuminated cane 'canopy', where the 'English Language' display ran the length of the building. Exhibits covered the development of the English language, tracing it from its origins through the Bible, literature and poetry to contemporary speech and idiom. The north end of the gallery provided a viewing platform for Edward Bawden's enormous full-height mural 'Country Life in Britain', constructed like a screen in light and dark panels against the zigzag back wall of the Pavilion.

Edward Bawden's 'Country Life' mural led the visitor downstairs past Eric Aumonier's life-size, muttering plaster figure of Lewis Carroll's White Knight, who introduced the area which was dedicated to the unpredictable Unicorn's contribution to our culture. The writer Laurie Lee's appreciation of the quirks of British character made him the Pavilion's ideal 'Curator of Eccentrics', and his nationwide appeal for 'curious, unusual or ingenious objects of eccentric conception' resulted in a display of bizarre and whimsical inventions. Beyond this was the massive Freedom Wall, carved in Cotswold stone by Barry Hart and carrying words specially composed by Laurie Lee.

The main part of the lower floor was dedicated to 'British Freedom: Worship, Democracy and The Law'. These three imposing and solemn monuments to the Constitution stood opposite Kenneth Rowntree's mural 'The Freedoms'. Rowntree's clear colours and modern graphic style contrasted with an immense wall of pattern, perforated with eye-shaped louvre windows and decorated in Guyatt's chartreuse striped and flocked wallpaper.

On the opposite side of the Pavilion a small display of garden tools, a facsimile of Eric Ravilious's archetypally English 'Garden Implements' design for Wedgwood, resumed the 'Country Life' theme: the nation's appreciation of the countryside, the underlying structure and reason for the British character. A long glass surface displaying artefacts which celebrated the tradition of British craftsmanship and its inextricable roots in nature stretched alongside the glass western wall, culminating oddly in a life-size 'Alice' disappearing through the looking-glass. Landscapes by Gainsborough, Constable, Turner and (the only modern selection) Paul Nash, symbolising the ways in which the culture of the land has affected the ways of the people, brought the exhibition to a finale.

The exit to the Pavilion led outside, past the Festival Bell cast at Whitechapel Bell Foundry, towards the Unicorn Restaurant. This jaunty tented structure with its pink striped awning, surrounded by parasols suspended from flagpoles, endorsed the nautical theme of much of the South Bank. It was set in its own landscaped 'moat garden' designed by Peter Shephard, and furnished with 'Antelope' chairs—an alfresco 'continental' setting in which to enjoy a very British cup of tea.

Cinema served an important function as both communication and pleasure. The experience of being one of a crowd, of being part of a greater unity was recognized by the Ministry of Information who produced a number of wartime documentaries. The Mass Observation movement documented people's cinema-going throughout the post war years. Humphrey Jennings made a Mass Observation film 'Spare Time' in 1939, and worked for the Crown Film Unit.

Today film (analogue and digital), TV, video, DVD, mobile phone, digital recording, YouTube, Facebook are the most widespread forms of dissemination of news and the most widespread medium of exhibition. Cultural analysts referred to this as the 'civilisation of the image'. The effect on literacy of the growth of digital image culture is yet to be calculated, but the digitization of the world's printed texts is nearing completion and many people use screens to access and read texts. The films projected here in digital format are:

*Festival in London* (Crown Film Unit, 1951)

*Brief City, The Observer documentary* (Dir. Richard Harvey and Jacques Brunius) September 1951 with Sir Hugh Casson and Patrick O'Donovan.

*Family Portrait* (Humphrey Jennings 1950)

*Designed in Britain* (Technical advisor Terence Conran, 1959)

#### **Lunchtime Jennings Fest for all:**

Wednesday May 4th 1pm

*Diary For Timothy* (1945) *Dim Little Island* (1948)

Thursday May 5th 1pm

*Spare Time* 1939 (Mass Observation) and *Listen To Britain* 1942 (Humphrey Jennings and EM Forster)

The seating, courtesy of Race Furniture, is the iconic Antelope Chair, designed by Ernest Race for the Festival. A white painted frame made from reclaimed aluminium supports a wooden seat. Resembling a freehand line drawing, the Antelope has the sensibility of engineering and draughtsmanship combined with spontaneity characteristic of the Contemporary Style of the 1950s. The chairs are sponsored for this exhibition by Sanderson to whom we are very grateful for their collaboration.

1851

1951

2011

# EXHIBITION AS MEDIUM

Spanning 160 years in the history of the College, this event invites visitors to reflect on the relation between three points in its history. Today, working in collaboration with the creative industries, designers are as necessary as they were in 1851 for Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace for the Great Exhibition of the Works of the Industry of All Nations, an exhibition created in order to raise the standards of design to meet the challenges of the industrial revolution.

The occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Festival of Britain, and of the Lion and the Unicorn Pavilion within it, is an opportunity to reconsider, and recreate, the process of exhibition. This exhibition, installed in the gallery endowed by Gulbenkian (thereby making the College, in 1962, the first school of art and design to have a gallery space of its own) locates the Festival within the modernist tradition of the Exhibition. May 3rd 2011 is the publication date of the book 'The Lion and the Unicorn' by Henrietta Goodden and we invite you to join us in celebration of its launch. The book is an enduring manifestation of the ephemeral presence of exhibitions, and testifies to their influence and impact.

In 2011 we look to history, not as an archive, but for strength to meet the demands of the present, the challenges of the future. In 1851 it was the objective of the Great Exhibition to raise the standards of design so that it might keep pace with the industrial revolution. In 1951 all the departments of the College were invited to participate in the Festival of Britain. The tradition of interdisciplinary collaboration is alive in the College now. 'AcrossRCA' is an annual event in which artists and designers from all disciplines work together. This exhibition presents some of the work that resulted from the 2010-11 event, showing developments in the definition and practice of design.

This event invites thought on the proposition that exhibition is not only an archive, a functional display of commodities, historical artefacts, goods or a ritual festivity, but that it is also a medium. The medium of exhibition transforms individuals into participants in an articulated unity.

Exhibition is the medium of modernity.

*Claire Pajackowska*

*Henrietta Goodden*

# FIFTIES' FURNISHING FABRICS

A graduate of the College in the late 1930s, Lucienne Day was commissioned by British Celanese a major producer of acetate rayon to produce the design Perpetua shown here reproduced by Sanderson and printed on linen. It was, in 1951, screen printed in twelve colourways on Travacel slub rayon for curtaining and on rayon taffeta for furnishings and marketed by Sanderson Fabrics at about 12 shillings a yard. Writing in *Design* 1952 the Council of Industrial Design applauded this experiment by a manufacturer: 'The importance of the commission lies not only in the stature of the client but in the freedom of the designer. These patterns are not stepping stones bridging the gulf between the historical and the contemporary, nor halfway houses between the traditional and the experimental. They are boldly original and advanced—as original in their day as were the ancestral fabrics in theirs. It took courage to commission them, it will need faith and enthusiasm to market them. They are, too, a welcome reminder that the English tradition is to experiment'.

Lucienne Day's design Calyx, reprinted on linen in two colourways, by Sanderson for Heals this year, was originally used at the Festival of Britain. It was awarded a Gold Medal at the 1951 Milan Triennale and the following year won the American Institute of Decorators' prize, awarded for the first time outside the United States.

Sanderson Fabrics also reprint Jaqueline Groag's Lion and Unicorn design Festival, displayed here in emerald, originally hung in the Festival Information Centre in the London department store Swan and Edgar. Also displayed here is Sanderson's print Mobiles in red and black, based on the Miro inspired designs of the 'Contemporary Style' of the 1950s. The more traditional, Festival design for wallpaper Lion and Unicorn is here printed on single silk georgette.

The Contemporary Style of the 1950s is more freehand, spontaneous, imaginative and playful than the earlier pre-war modernism. The rectilinear, geometric, modular patterns of the 1920s and 30s in monochrome and primary colours are reconfigured in livelier, dynamic and eccentric forms using secondary and tertiary colours in unexpected combinations.



# THE FESTIVAL PATTERN GROUP

In 1951 the Council for Industrial Design collaborated with scientist Dr Helen Magaw. Using the new technique of X Ray crystallography Magaw had discovered that the molecular structures of all materials are formed in patterns. Struck by the beauty of the patterns revealed by the microscope Magaw suggested that these scientific diagrams might be made available to designers to use as the basis for inspiration. The molecular patterns of quartz, mica, nylon, polythene, haemoglobin and china clay were the first to be circulated amongst designers and the Festival Pattern Group was formed. The Group commissioned 26 leading manufacturers to make floorcoverings, panelling, wallpaper, packaging, fabrics, ceramics, furniture, lighting, cutlery and glassware designs using the scientific patterns. The results were enduring, and throughout the 1950s 'atomic' design motifs were popular in domestic furnishings. In 1953 the discovery of the molecular structure of DNA—the double helix—added to the enthusiasm for the style of furniture based on scientific models of the 'ball and stick' type. The molecular structures which connected atoms proved a powerful image for the metaphor of the bonds which linked individuals in a social organization.

The Sanderson wallpaper Atomic is an example of this motif. Other motifs from laboratory microscope images include the biological, cellular designs also popular at this time. The wallpaper design Dandelion refers to the biomorphic shapes and motifs of the Festival Pattern Group.

The Festival Pattern Group clearly expressed the thought that design, science, technology and industry could collaborate to rebuild a post-war society.

The RCA Materials For Living Research Hub aims to bring this collaboration into the twenty-first century, to find current partnerships between science, design and industry.

# VICTORIAN MODERN

Although the Festival designers imagined themselves opposed to the Victorian ethos, this adversarial dynamic was, in fact, more complex. In 1851 opinion was divided between those, such as Pugin and Ruskin, who thought the Crystal Palace ‘vile’ and those such as Cole and Telford, who understood the design as revolutionary. In 1936, Nikolaus Pevsner’s *The Pioneers of the Modern Movement* noted that Paxton’s structure inaugurated a new era in design. In 1941 Sigfried Giedion’s *Space, Time and Architecture* observes that:

‘The Crystal Palace was the realization of a new conception of building, one for which there was no precedent. It was, in addition, the first building of such dimensions constructed of glass, iron and timber over a framework of cast and wrought iron girders accurately bolted together. The possibilities dormant in modern industrial civilization have never since, to my knowledge, been so clearly expressed. It was recognized at the time that this combination of wood, glass and iron—incidentally a combination resulting in an admirably practical exhibition technique—had evoked a new kind of imagination which sprang directly from the spirit of the age. Only thus can we explain the confident prediction of contemporaries, since justified in all essentials, that “the Crystal Palace is a revolution in architecture from which a new style will date”.

Lothar Boucher continues: “We see a delicate network of lines without any clue by means of which we might judge their distance from the eye or the real size. The side walls are too far apart to be embraced in a single glance. Instead of moving from the wall at one end to that at the other, the eye sweeps along an unending perspective which fades into the horizon. We cannot tell if this structure towers a hundred or a thousand feet above us, or whether the roof is a platform or is built up from a succession of ridges, for there is no play of shadows to enable our optic nerves to gauge the measurements.

If we let our gaze travel downwards it encounters the blue painted lattice girders. At first these occur only at wide intervals; then they range closer and closer together until they are interrupted by a dazzling band of light—the transept—which dissolves into a distant background where all materiality is blended into the atmosphere... It is sober economy of language if I call the spectacle incomparable and fairylike. It is a *Midsummer Night’s Dream* seen in the clear light of midday”.’

## AFTER THE EXHIBITION

The eight million visitors to the Exhibition constituted the largest displacement of the population of Britain, ushering in the popularity of railway travel. The entrance price of one shilling raised, in the six months of its duration, a profit of £186,000. The Royal Commission considered how the money might best be used to benefit the cause of uniting the arts with science and industry.

During the Exhibition Gore House, on the south side of Hyde Park, had been used by Escoffier as a restaurant. Prince Albert proposed to the Royal Commission that they buy Gore House along with the 70 acres of plant nursery land that extended from the house to what is now Cromwell Road. The land was bought for £336,000, which comprised the profit from the Exhibition and with a loan from the government. A new cultural quarter was built, including the Victoria and Albert, Natural History and Science Museums, The Royal Geographical Society, The Colleges of Art, Music and Imperial College and the Royal Albert Hall. Gore House gave its name to Kensington Gore and the Exhibition to the Road that spanned 'Albertopolis'.

Repaying the government with freehold possession of the lands of the Museums, the Royal Commission remained the freeholder of the Colleges and the Albert Hall, and was granted the right, in perpetuity, to administer the funds for education in science, engineering and design.

When the Palace came to be demounted in 1852, many suggestions were made as to how the prefabricated modular units could be reconstructed. The magazine *The Builder* suggested the construction of a tower one thousand feet high. Titus Salt the wool manufacturer wanted to move it to Bradford and use it as a factory. Paxton and Cole wanted the Palace to remain as a giant winter garden, bringing to Londoners, year round, the climate of southern Italy.

The ingenuity of Thomas Paxton, the engineering genius of Isambard Kingdom Brunel (Head of the Royal Commission's Building Committee), and the ambition of Henry Cole, Prince Albert and the Royal Commissioners were to be celebrated a century later. In 1943 Britain, still at war, began to plan another exhibition...

# MATERIALS FOR LIVING – RESEARCH HUB

Recent developments in the relationship between designers and materials in both traditional and emerging technologies can serve human need. Building on many years of successful partnership with the U.K. Technology Strategy Board KTN at the Institute of Materials, we have initiated the Materials For Living Research Hub. Bringing interdisciplinary practice to new sites of need the MFL Hub researchers are working with the departments of Innovation Design Engineering, Architecture, Product Design within the RCA and a range of materials scientists and neuroscientists in other organisations.

Two current research students Julie Behseta and Carmen Hijosa are exploring the potential for sustainability. Julie Behseta (left) recycles High Density Polymers such as drinks bottles into new plastic materials containing luminescent pigments. The research explores the relation between function, aesthetics and sensibility in plastics.

Carmen Hijosa has created a new material, from the waste product of the pineapple agriculture of the Philippines. The fibre in the leaves can be harvested in non-toxic ways, to produce a new spun fibre and non-woven fabric with a wide range of potential uses. Carmen Hijosa worked with the Lion and Unicorn AcrossRCA interdisciplinary week to find designers from other departments, generating innovative design practice. Three key features of this innovation are

- 1) *User-led design,*
- 2) *Collaboration with developing economies*
- 3) *Ecological, ethical and social sustainability*

The Materials For Living research hub, led by Professor Clare Johnston, works with the MADE (Materials and Design Exchange) and launches an international biennial conference here in 2012, featuring initiatives that are:

*Needs Driven*

*Materials Grounded*

*Design Led*

# TAILORING

In the spring of 1953 the *Tailor and Cutter*, trade paper of the tailoring industry launched a new magazine with stylish design layout, art-influenced fashion photography, quality paper and provocative editorials. *Man About Town* was unashamedly elitist. The return to peacetime and a ‘new Elizabethan era’ promised an end to the ‘draughty halls and itchy clothes’ of six years of austerity. This first of men’s lifestyle magazines aimed ‘to educate readers along channels of individuality, away from the machinery of contemporary sameness’.

The annual project at RCA brings young designers to the traditional skills of bespoke couture tailoring. Working with a range of techniques—precision pattern cutting, draping and silhouette styling—students work on a *toile* prototype, selecting fabrics, textures and colours, often in collaborations with textile design students thereby bringing another level of innovation to the tailoring project. Menswear and womenswear students may work with a number of specialist manufacturers such as Brioni, Daks, Burberry.

This year’s project includes a range of inspirations, from Soviet Constructivist architect El Lissitzky found by Sayaka Kamakura, to Titian’s baroque masterpiece *Bacchus and Ariadne*. Alex Mullins designed a lilac outfit, in the hue worn by Athenian *aristoi*, with a cruciform rucksack of lilac ponyskin containing a bottle of wine and three glasses, for those who like to Bacchanalize.

Another example of the post-war styling of masculinity through fashion photography is displayed in the Courtyard Gallery, where Nick Clements, an M.Phil researcher presents his graduation collection. The Teddy Boys heralded another ‘new era’ of the styles of sub-cultural capital, and Nick Clements analyses ‘Revival’ as one such style.

# FUTURE TEXTILES STUDENT PROJECT 2011

**F**irst year students of Textiles complete an annual project, challenging them to address their practice to the issues that most concern them as designers. The skills of design include technical skills in weave, knit, print, pattern, based on knowledge of, and experience with materials, but also the power of imagination, experimentation, respect for process, research into formal qualities of textiles such as visual qualities of colour, and the sensory qualities of tactile, haptic, olfactory, acoustic and kinetic senses. The resulting work in progress is loosely grouped, into three zones of preoccupation:

**Sensory Processing**—several designers who are interested in the way that textiles can convey a special relationship to physical experience. These projects explore the potential for designers to create experiential environments that use the cross-modal properties of materials. Several designers here experiment with materials for autism and other sensory processing disabilities.

**Sustainability**—responding to the social and political initiatives many students identified ecology as the most pressing predicament facing designers for the future. Contributions to solutions for crude oil spillage, such as in the Gulf of Mexico, include the idea of a spore-impregnated silk parachute which could transform an oil slick into a mushroom farm.

**Experimentation**—if machines could draw what would their marks look like? If walls could be eaten how would an interior designer upholster living spaces? How can the textile capacity for fold be further developed? Of what use is a blanket? Can magnetism be used as a form of joining? Which properties of printing inks can be exploited as connective matter? How do textiles link together other peoples' imaginations?

These are some of the outcomes of the Future Textiles Project from 2011 exploring the endless potential for collaboration between hard science and soft stuff.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## SPONSORS

*The Royal Commission for the Great Exhibition of 1851*

*Sanderson*

*Napier Engineering*

*AcrossRCA*

*Race Furniture*

*Nick Bell, John Bound: Innovation RCA, Ricardo Brown, Dinah Casson, Aldo and Barry Curtis, Margaret Durkan, Peter Edmonds, Paul Ewing, Chris Franklin, Caroline Hasler, Ute Hodgson, Peter Hovell, Virginia Ironside, Hilary Laurence, Hyemon Lee, Ray Leigh, Liz Leyland, Paul Lickiss, John Morton, Andrzej Pajaczkowski, RIBA archive, Henry Rzepa, Martin Salmon, Alex Seago, Milo Shaeffer, Tim Stroud, Simon Taylor, David Thomas, Dinah and Wilfrid Wood, Carola Zogolovitch.*

*Graphic Design: Camilla Fellas*

The Festival of Britain at the earliest stages of planning in 1943 was planned as an international exhibition – an instance of remarkable optimism in wartime. It's difficult to imagine what prospects were envisaged. Would Britain, supposing it emerged successfully, be in a position to reprise the achievements of the 1851 exhibition, that it was originally intended to commemorate? In 1947 Misha Black proposed a site for the Festival that appears to be an homage to the Crystal Palace – a huge, curved, streamlined, glazed pavilion like the superstructure of a futuristic ship that was to extend along the entire South Bank site, diagonally confronting and towering over the Houses of Parliament. This fascinating project suggests how, in an alternative, or uchronic history, a wealthy, technologically confident Britain might have commemorated and rivalled the moment of 1851.

The straitened circumstances of post war entailed a much less ambitious project. It was the grim year of 1947 that eventually convinced Sir Stafford Cripps that the option on an international exhibition that would 'surpass the New York World's Fair in size and technical achievement' was hardly likely, and at that point, the responsibility shifted from the Board of Trade to be taken up by Herbert Morrison and a new inflection to the brief – to illustrate the British contribution to science, technology and industrial design – began to dominate the proceedings. Although the Festival was intended to define and celebrate the National culture and heroic efforts were made to ensure that it was: 'the work of not once city, but the whole Nation', There were eight official exhibitions in different parts of the British Isles, 22 designated Arts Festivals and over 2,000 cities, towns and villages were en fete.

The organisers were at pains to keep an national autobiographical theme alive in the designing of the experience – to ensure that 'the manner of telling' was as important as the exhibits. The Festival looked back as well as forward and partly as a result of this balancing act, has been criticised for persistently falling between stools. It was modernist, yet respectful of tradition – it was seen by some of its critics as evidence of an officious persistence of the tones of the Ministry of Information so familiar from war time. It was relentlessly informative and educational and yet it was also playful and informal. The relationship to the Great Exhibition of 1851 was similarly suspended in a mood of playful reference, particularly at the Battersea Gardens site. Gerald Barry, the Director General of the Festival made a clear distinction between 1851 and 1951. He bowed to the 'sceptical' tone of post war and the impossibility of replicating the assurance or conclusiveness of the rhetoric of the Great Exhibition.



One important account of the Festival suggests that the inclusion of a small pavilion to commemorate the Great Exhibition was an 'afterthought' and yet an article in Harpers Bazaar suggested : 'comparisons with the exhibition of 1851 are legion' concluding that the V & A and the Royal College of Art were the most concrete links. With particular reference to the RCA contribution, Sir Gerald Barry hinted at the delicacy of manoeuvring necessary in steering *bet'sween the Scylla of pomposity and the often sillier vice of facetiousness*. There was a commemorative mural by Julian Trevelyn, the Arts Council put on a show *Masterpieces of Victorian Photography, and Ten Decades - a Review of British Taste - English Decorative arts 1851 - 1951 was on display at the Victoria & Albert Museum*.

By 1951 an interest in High Victorian design had been current in various forms for a generation. John Dodd's in his study of the 1840's culminating in the Great Exhibition, published in 1951 referred to that decade as 'The Age of Paradox' - so the point of reference was already recognised as complex and inconsistent. He conveys a contemporary wonder at the feats of construction - particularly in terms of the speed and efficiency made possible by prefabrication and hasty ingenuity, which must have resonated with the post war designers: *'the final realisation of the Great Exhibition (was) the work of some of those titanic Victorians whose energy, imagination and determination knew no bounds'*. He wonders at the construction of a mile and three quarters of gallery space, in a building that covered 18 acres [only a little less than the site of the South Bank Exhibition, in five months. *[five months to erect a building that covered 18 acres with a mile and three quarters of* Although the Festival seemed to work hard to present a viable version of modernism, there was much about it that drew on the inspiration of the previous century. This has been unhelpfully interpreted as a kind of weakness, or whimsy - whereas it might be more usefully considered as an attempt to forge an intricate new synthesis for postwar culture.

The Crystal Palace has remained a contradictory entity, celebrated as the largest public space constructed since the Coliseum and evidence of a grandeur that aligned the British and Roman Empires. It was justly recognised at the time of its construction as a new paradigm in architecture, or at least a brilliantly appropriate repurposing of a relatively humble horticultural environment. It was, however not just a hothouse for hyperbolic growths, or as Ruskin witheringly referred to it 'a cucumber frame', but also a cathedral with naves and transepts and miraculous exhibits tucked away in aisles and virtual chapels. Sanctioned by royalty, particularly in its grand ceremonial opening and closing, it was a Palace that had arisen almost magically and disappeared suddenly, spirited away to a

distant hill. It simultaneously fulfilled the requirements of the ecclesiologists and engineers with its polychrome and its identifiable means of construction. As well as being an innovative and spectacular exhibition hall, it was also a recognisable forerunner of the department store and the shopping mall. Its immense attractiveness was the cause of what was celebrated at the time as 'the largest movement of population ever to have taken place in Britain'. A migration that was enabled by new kinds of mass transit and tourism. In spite of its Imperial and Royal imprimatur, it was also celebrated as 'a palace for the people' – a harbinger of a new age of popular entertainment and education and as the highly profitable means by which the museums and educational institutions of 'Albertopolis' were brought into being.

Accounts of the Great Exhibition are full of the wonder it inspired. There are persistent references to the 'fairy', insubstantial and transitory quality that gesture towards its suddenness and the paradox of natural growth and technological wizardry. John Steegman, reappraising it in 1950, described its coming into being as: *a carefully ordered forest of scaffolding metamorphosing into a miracle of glass and slender iron columns glittering in the sun in the fresh green setting of Hyde Park in May*. However, the 'fairy' quality that conjures a realm of Victorian fantasy was not incompatible with its robustness and fitness for purpose.

Ironically the Crystal Palace was hailed by the immigrant modernist architect – Erich Mendelsohn as: *the only modern building in England*. The much celebrated structure confirmed the status of an emerging capital of Empire as a city of glass – the shop windows, the conservatories, winter gardens, gin shops market halls and train sheds dematerialising its architecture compatible with Karl Marx's perception that Capitalism, effected a 'melting into air' of all that was once solid.

The Festival deployed a similar kind of fascinating lightness, a quality of hovering and magical levitation that was particularly noted in the Skylon and the Dome of Discovery at night. Many of the illustrations and photographs feature the pylons, wires and tenuous structural supports that sustained a fantasia of hovering planes and gestural lines of illumination. Harold Nicolson was uplifted by the resilience and adaptability evident in the design and the more immaterial mood of 'brave laughter'. Memories of the Festival are often couched in terms of magical appearance and illusory presence. Visitors commented on the Festival as a 'wonderland' and spaces and places of vantage, most notably in the Royal Festival Hall, were provided to generate vistas of the north bank of the Thames and other views of London that were equally unfamiliar and magical. The Festival site, like the Crystal

Palace was perceived as intermediate between structure and natural form – perhaps in both cases influenced by the sense of suddenness and the brevity of the lifespan of the event.

The Great Exhibition loomed in the historical background as a monument to a strangely disturbing and attractive moment of security, complacency and power. The Crystal Palace erupted into architectural consciousness, although it was the work of a ‘gardener’s boy’ and lacked the attributes of a recognisable building. It was a synthesis of other kinds of market halls, entertainment architecture, spectacles that offered transcendent overviews and vicarious travels. But there were elements of the idea of an International Fair that were innovative and inspirational for the many subsequent fairs and expositions. Although the 1951 Festival had been forced to renounce international scope, it shared a concern for finding architectural solutions to the problem, that was relatively novel in 1851, of creating a new relationship between a large and undifferentiated public and a realm of objects. One of the recurring themes in accounts of the 1851 event, was the extraordinary spectacle of the crowd, their variety, their manifest curiosity, their congenial behaviour and their interest in looking at each other. This was all the more a revelation because it coincided with the anxious novelty of crowded museums and mass transport. Queen Victoria’s diaries testify to a surprised and exhilarated awareness of this: ‘The Green Park and Hyde Park were one mass of densely crowded human beings in the highest good humour and most enthusiastic’. There had been dire forebodings – the year of revolution – 1848 was fresh in memory and the conviviality of the crowd and their willingness to engage in an exercise that was simultaneously educational and reverential seems to have been a pleasant and inspirational surprise.

The planning of the Crystal Palace was an early example of an attempt to use an exhibition as a event that would produce something of an interactive experience, although it was still caught between a vast cabinet of curiosities and a rigorous, albeit inconsistent plan. A hundred years later, trained in camouflage and public information, the Festival designers demonstrated an infinitely more sophisticated understanding of how to create verbal and visual narratives and how to engage visitors in a participative understanding of processes and products. The reputation of the 1851 exhibition as a surreal display of bric a brac, based on a vague sense of imperial achievement is vividly conveyed in J.G. Farrell’s ‘The Siege of Krishnapur’ in which the a character known as ‘The Collector’s reverence for the catalogue and the exhibits he has transported to India is put under severe pressure in the embattled circumstances of the 1857 Indian Mutiny. The Festival sought to tame and channel this exuberant and inconsistent surreality by ensuring that all of the 10,000 objects on display,

were approved by the Council of Industrial Design which had been brought into being in 1944 to propagate 'good design' and to lay the ghost of what Pevsner had identified as the 'uneducated manufacturer' producing for consumers who had: 'no tradition, no education and no leisure'. It was as if the Festival was systematically redressing those absences. But beyond that compensatory project, there was an attempt to rehearse an enlightened urban environment – a prefiguring of a congenial, leisured and historically aware modernity.

The Festival was also preoccupied with capturing a spirit of wonder – of finding ways of designing a pleasurable experience as an envelope for a process of gentle education and an sensation of gently supervised wandering. It was even, briefly, suggested that it take place in Hyde Park as another link to 1851. Both Exhibition and Festival were largely prefabricated experiences, easily demountable and both sadly, and it seems against the will of the public taken apart and dissipated too soon and with what appeared to be a kind of malice. A major difference is that whereas in 1851 the carnival mood, with its merging of classes and nationalities was a matter of concern, in 1951 the intention was to propagate a carefree spirit of into an austere world of mourning, rationing and survival. In one very important sense the Festival was more ambitious than the 1851 Exhibition – the intention was to spread beyond London in ways that have been fulsomely explored by Harriet Atkinson. The South Bank exhibition was to function as: *a kind of illustrated handbook, as it were, to a national display in which a national festival of the arts, assisted by the Arts Council, plays an important part.*

The Festival was marked by another ambitious deviation from the project of 1851. Instead of celebrating the dominance of Britain by drawing attention to its scientific and technological superiority, it sought to establish a new kind of national authority, deriving from British values and cultural distinctiveness. Already, in 1951, some of the themes that were to be more fully explored as 'New Elizabethan' after the 1953 Coronation, were being explored. The nation, its material presence, its traditions and the deep culture of its people was conceived as a kind of branding exercise to guarantee the integrity and desirability of its products, both material and ideological. There was an implicit acknowledgement that Britain was a 'shrinking island' and that this may be an opportunity to look more closely at the Land and its People. Recent withdrawals from Palestine and India rendered Imperial addenda to the British identity problematic – the attempts to reformulate Empire as Commonwealth were acknowledged in exhibits housed in the Imperial Institute in Kensington. However, there were distinct attempts to resist a sense of Britain as a closed historic category. The people of Britain were present as a mixture of races. Gerald Barry

referred to the intention as *'a picture not only of the essential unity of our democracy, but also of the rich diversity within that unity which is an essential ingredient of it, and which, if allowed to wither, would deprive our national life of much of its vitality and colour'* Perhaps this reflects the mood of the British Nationality Act, passed in 1948 which conferred on all members of the Commonwealth the right to move to Britain and be regarded as British citizens. Its possible that the emphasis on British values and their capacity to assimilate 'invaders' was motivated by the prospect of a ethnically diverse future.

The legacy of 1851 was contradictory and the reputation of the Crystal Palace was inflected by the complicated significance of its reincarnation at Sydenham, and subsequent, less successful exhibitions and their buildings. For a long time it stood as an imposing memento of the enviable confidence of mid Victorian England. In 1935 Violet Markham, writing about Paxton and his patron the Duke of Devonshire conveys some of the inter war years scorn in referring to 'litter' of furniture and art in a 'giant glass house'. But it was at about that time that it was being redeemed in illustrations to Pevsner's 'Pioneers of Modern Design' The Festival was itself criticised for its crowded mise en scene and a sense of the impossibility of taking in the whole. John Steegman, writing in 1950 pointed out, maybe in the form of a warning, that if the earnest visitor in 1851 had devoted three minutes to each exhibit, it would have taken 36 years to visit the whole display. The Festival, although packed with objects and incident, used the resources of fifty architects and a hundred designers to stage and manage the experience and to avoid the perceived randomness and topographic arbitrariness of the vast interior of the Crystal Palace

The Great Exhibition was associated not only with 'bad taste' in general, but with a political ethos that was anathema to the Labour Government – an ominous symbol of Free Trade, Empire, social inequality and an autocratic but socially minimal form of Government. However, as Jeffrey Auerbach has pointed out, even this implacable reminder of an alien era held out some sympathetic themes. The rhetoric of the Great Exhibition was eloquent on the need to recognise the contribution of labour and the need to reduce class tensions. 1851 followed on from a period of considerable conflict and austerity and was partly conceived in a spirit of hope, if not quite as explicitly intended to raise the nation's spirits – the 'tonic' that the Festival sought to administer.

The Victorian period was not as alien to the 1950's as some accounts suggest. The small pavilion that commemorated the Crystal Palace with its light-hearted tableaux of the

opening ceremony was set on a substructure reminiscent of a seaside pier. In general, the engineering feats of the Victorians, often detached from urban surroundings were associated with popular recreational activities. The Battersea Gardens, designed by James Gardiner with its eye catching and popular renditions of 19<sup>th</sup> century engineered pleasure, captures some of the fascination with the innocent and idiosyncratic. In films like 'The Titfield Thunderbolt' (1952), Genevieve (1953) and The Maggie (1954) the old, anthropomorphised machinery is perceived as retaining inchoate values that are implicitly disappearing in the more efficient and less 'characterful' present. However, the dark side of the previous century also played a part in the popular imaginary. Notably so in Marghanita Laski's novel : 'The Victorian Chaise Longue' (1953) in which an old chaise is the vehicle that transports a young woman from a sunlit contemporary milieu back to the horror of unhygienic, repressive mid Victorian London. Other everyday horrors are rehearsed in post war films, in 'Gaslight' (1944), Dead of Night (1945) and 'The Ladykillers' (1955). Michael Balcon of Ealing Studios was a member of the Council of the RCA and staff members Edward Bawden and John Minton designed some of the posters.

Perhaps the 1851 Exhibition was close enough to the beginnings of Victoria's reign to render it nearly Regency, its greenhouse antecedents manifest enough for it to appear relatively detached from the grim urban realities that seemed so unredeemable to the post war period. Certainly writers like Kenneth Clark and John Betjeman had already done a lot to awaken admiration for aspects of the Gothic Revival. In Ark no.4 (Feb 52) the editorial apologised for a tendency to succumb to: *the current vogue for Victoriana*. In 1951 a number of stylistic themes - the New Look, abstract expressionism, the organic forms of Arp, Gabo, Calder, Moore, Scandinavian design a new interest in Regency and the baroque styling of streamlining were modifying geometric modernism. The Festival was receptive to a wide range of current shapes and styles. In general the Victorian period was regarded as a negation of all that was measured, civilised, true to materials and a violation of the delicate and desirable relationship between form and function. But it was also acknowledged that within the delirious and condensed Victorian style, there were elements of fantasy, continuity and sheer energetic wilfulness that were reclaimable. Alex Seago, writing on the Royal College of Art's contribution to the Festival, notes that even Niklaus Pevsner was prepared to concede that the revival of interest in Victorian pub interiors, that had been pioneered by John Piper in an essay in Architectural Review in 1940, was a quest for a kind of vitality that was missing in the soul-lessness of the neo Georgian.

Henrietta Gooden's book on the 'Lion and the Unicorn' pavilion is a study of designers addressing the problem of symbolising and exemplifying a national identity. The juxtaposition of the Lion's 'strength' and the Unicorn's capacity for 'letting go' relates to a complex project of stock-taking and re-evaluation. Outside the pavilion, The Skylon, like an illuminated exclamation mark, or a festive spacecraft, captures this dialectic of rationalism and fantasy. The invocation of the mathematically informed surrealism of Lewis Carroll must have seemed particularly appropriate. In Tenniel's illustration the Lion is a bit motheaten and perhaps recognisably the worse for wear, very like the landscape around the Festival site, the Unicorn, on the other hand, although not the likely victor in combat, is alert and appears to be the ally of imagination – as 'he' is rendered in the exhibition. Its difficult to reclaim the meaning at the time, but a book called 'With the Unicorn Around London' published in the year of the Festival, seems to claim for the unicorn sensibility a sense of a psychogeographic sensitivity to the overlooked and unofficial parts of the city.

Its difficult to imagine that Orwell's 1941 essay 'The Lion and the Unicorn' was not one source of reference to the young designers, setting out with an optimistic new brief in the post war years. Orwell attempted to combine his perceptions about Britishness with a speculative prefiguring of what kind of socialism would be necessary to mobilise the people and forge a new, more egalitarian society. He notes a British addiction to hobbies that seems to be respectfully gathered into the Festival's preoccupation with bricolage, craft traditions and vernacular design, already evident in the 'Black Eyes and Lemonade' exhibit at the 'Britain Can Make It' exhibition of 1946. Barbara Jones who presided over that initiative and Enid Marx, whose 'English Popular and Traditional Art' was republished in 1951, had both been students at the RCA in the inter war years, and they initiated a growing interest in the popular art of the previous century which is evident in Ark and the genesis of 'Pop' in the 1950's.

The Unicorn seems to have carried forward some of Orwell's sense of the British vernacular idea of 'liberty', as individualistic and possessive and resistant to authority. In his essay he warns against the detachment of British intellectuals : '*England is perhaps the only great country whose intellectuals are ashamed of their own nationality*'. The Festival designers particularly those from the RCA seem to have been aligned with Orwell, the filmmakers of the documentary movement and the creative initiatives of Mass Observation in trying to remedy this tendency – their playful integration of plants, tea and absurdity juxtaposed with the more weighty exhibits of Shakespearian texts, and the Magna Carta, suggest precisely the kind of synthesis that Orwell was suggesting as necessary for any kind of

redemptive 'intelligent socialism': *It will not be doctrinaire, nor even logical. It will abolish the House of Lords, but quite probably will not abolish the Monarchy. It will leave anachronisms and loose ends everywhere, the judge in his ridiculous horse hair wig and the lion and the unicorn on the soldier's cap-buttons..'*

The war had been fought against a mortal threat to British culture and, although, as Orwell suggests, it needed a mobilisation of a new order of Britishness – one that valued the lower classes and rejected established hierarchies, it was a national spirit which must have seemed more valuable as a result of experiencing the vulnerability of the national culture. Paul Fussell in his study of British writers' affiliations to 'Abroad' suggests that the post war period saw in the curves of the Baroque and the deviations of the decorative a relief from the straight lines of military discipline.

As Betty Conekin's (2003) excellent book on the Festival stresses its orientation towards the future, it was a distinctively British future that could offer the world a particular synthesis of science and culture. There was perceived to be something distinctive about the British contribution, no longer as a dominant world power, but as a mediator between the two blocs for which scientific progress was intricately bound up with military aggression. Britain's role was then, as now, a confused mixture of power politics and mediation. The 'hot' Korean war broke out in 1950 and, with its expensive re-armament, the return of some wartime controls and a rise in prices, already evident since the devaluation of 1949.

In retrospect, the harsh judgements of its critics – Noel Coward's comments on its lack of focus, Evelyn Waugh's accusations of 'imbecility' and Richard Hamilton's 1961 inquest into corridors of 'frilly whimsy' – seem *parti pris* and reductivist. What is most interesting about the discernible Festival style is its place in a longer history of attempts to compromise modernism with an English tradition and sensibility. For many there was a distinct class dimension – the Festival represented a certain kind of synthesis of good taste and quality – '...all Hell let loose' as one way put it.

The Festival can be seen as a continuation of pre-war concerns of tempering the harshness of Continental Modernism. Alexandra Harris's recent book 'Romantic Moderns' provides a widely referenced account of the struggle between abstraction and various kinds of vernacular and revivalist impulses of what she calls the 'Janus faced' decade of the 1930's. As in the Festival there is a play between the 'clean lines' and functional rigging and a pride in the technological up datedness of things superimposed on a fascination with detail and



sentiment. For many makers and visitors, it was the site that lingered in their memories – the vistas it made possible and the way that it constructed a habitable ‘outdoors’. Ernest Race’s ‘Antelope Chair’ evidently played a part in imaginatively staging this al fresco sensibility. A cartoon by Roland Emmet, whose Victorian pastiche machinery played such a memorable role in the Battersea Pleasure Gardens, shows a collection of towering Victorian upholstered chairs outside a café in the rain. The joke is the sheer absurdity of thinking it possible to dine outside in London. The Festival gestured towards a Continental affinity with the outside as a place of sophisticated pleasure in a London where lingering in public was still a suspect activity. The Guardian suggested that crossing the Thames was the equivalent of crossing the Channel: *‘the scene is quite as unfamiliar as any foreign seaside resort’*. In the rainy months of May to September, there were eight million visitors a comparable number to those who visited the Crystal Palace a hundred years previously, but instead of a huge awesome envelope, the Festival offered opportunities for a derive through what Michael Frayne described as: *an informal complex of interlocking neighbourhoods – like the piazzas of Venice or the courts of Cambridge*.

The Festival can hardly be said to relate directly to the 1851 Exhibition, but there is a play of reference and reaction. In the Battersea Festival Gardens there is a particular affection for the coming together of Victorian technology and the rural, recreational branch lines and seaside spectacles of a more innocent and flamboyant age. The resiting of the Crystal Palace as an ancestor of Modernism also hinted at the powerful constellation of post war with Georgian and Regency styles. By 1951 the Crystal Palace was still associated with the bad taste of the exhibits disinterred in Pevsner’s essay on High Victorian Design, but already the various revivals and reprises of Victoriana were regarded more in the spirit of follies – Emmet’s trains, Searle’s Gothic fantasies were comically grotesque and served as antidotes to anxieties about the functional austerity of the present.

The Great Exhibition lives on as an audacious innovation a symbol of optimism, authority, imperialism and as a harbinger of modernism. Its statistics were recorded on commemorative medals – 26 acres, 17,000 exhibitors, 6 million visitors, 300,000 glass panels – 17 weeks of construction. Although it only lasted for five months, it had an extended afterlife at Sydenham. At least one of the thousands of schoolchildren who wandered under its canopy, might have lived into their nineties to witness its ultimate destruction in 1936. It is currently enjoying another life in the animations, graphic novels and imaginative world of ‘steampunk’ as an emblem of the visible technologies that have surrendered to a world of invisible electronics. The Great Exhibition lives on as the most

vivid manifestation of the outrageous and irresponsible daring of its time. It persists as a presence in parallel and hypothetical histories in which the unrealised projects of engineers and planners – Atlantic tunnels, steam driven computers and airships, mingles with the larger than life detectives, archvillains and engineer heroes. The Festival is unlikely to figure in future fantasies in the same way, but its attempts to formulate a congenial and restrained utopia can still be inspirational for a troubled present.



