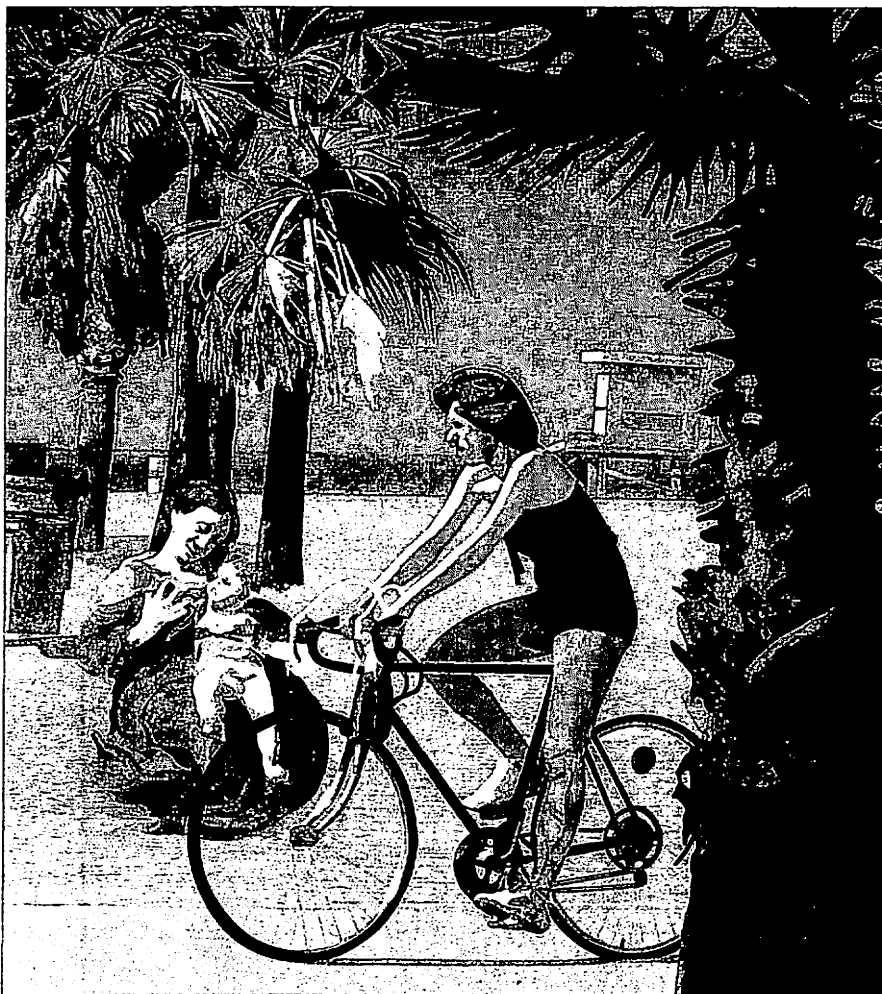


NOW WE ARE 64

Peter Blake at the National Gallery





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Marco Livingstone and Colin Wiggins

With an introduction by Peter Blake

National Gallery Publications, London

Peter Blake and the National Gallery

Colin Wiggins

Peter Blake's painting *'The Meeting' or 'Have a Nice Day, Mr Hockney'*, of 1981–3 (page 14), provided one of the reasons that led the National Gallery to invite him to become its third Associate Artist. A reworking of a painting by Gustave Courbet, it engages the past with intelligence and good humour.

The works in this exhibition continue to tackle the problem of making a serious response to the past. Since his career began in the 1950s, Blake's art has been interpreted by many critics, perhaps not quite accurately, as being humorous, whimsical and populist. For a time he was a central figure in the British Pop Art movement, a term used to describe those artists who took popular contemporary culture as the subject matter for their art. However, his work, which has been looked at, enjoyed and owned by literally millions of people, is truly popular, rather than being simply 'Pop'. Many owners of the Beatles' *Sgt Pepper* album are completely unaware that its cover is the creation of a 'serious' artist.

The National Gallery is a grand institution, whose galleries resonate with portentous echoes. The same is true of the Prado, the Louvre, the Metropolitan Museum, or any of the other great temples of 'high art', where paintings are presented and perceived as resolutely precious and highbrow. For Blake, great paintings are something other than this. Certainly, they provide the standards that transcend the whims of fashion and by which artists of today will be judged. But Blake's way of responding to the past, of making new work while being fully aware that it will be exhibited under the same roof as Michelangelo and Rembrandt, is to see through the superficial trappings of grandeur.

As Blake himself tells us in his introduction, once he had decided to accept the invitation to undertake this project the first thing he did was to walk around every room in the Gallery. It was rather like saying an informal 'hallo' to the artists already there. Nationality and date did not matter. Everybody was suddenly on equal terms, from Rubens the glamorous international courtier and diplomat, who rubbed shoulders with kings and princes, to Constable, the Suffolk country boy who never left England.

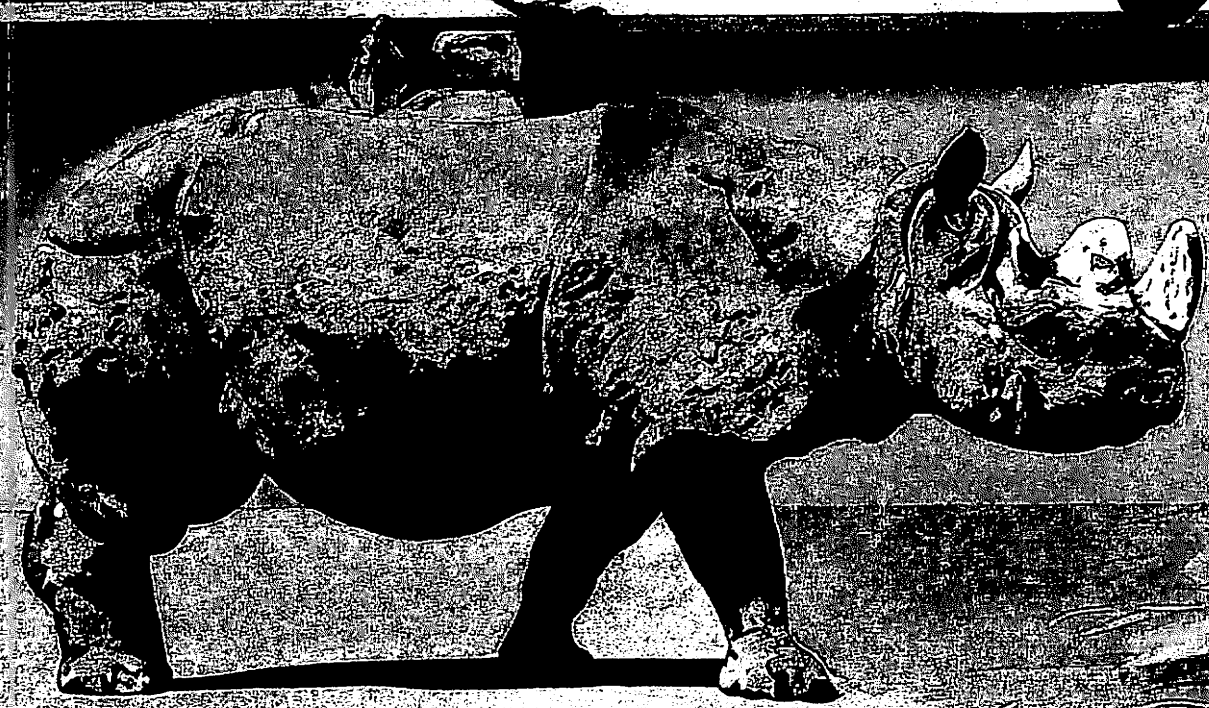
One of the central paintings of this exhibition is *The Venuses' Outing to Weymouth*. The landscape is Constable's *Weymouth Bay* and the Venuses, partying on the beach, are from great mythological paintings by Rubens, Titian, Botticelli, Velázquez and others. It is an image of comic absurdity. In the

class, and represented each one on the same scale. In some, the original heads are barely a few centimetres high, in others they are life size. From Christina of Denmark, who was painted by the world-famous Holbein and narrowly escaped being married to Henry VIII, to an anonymous middle-class Dutch woman painted by the little-known Frans van Mieris, or from the purity and smoothness of Piero della Francesca's Virgin to the wizened and wrinkled eighty-six-year-old woman depicted by Rembrandt, Blake has disregarded the artificial categories of art history. 'Another thing that struck me as I walked around the Gallery', he says, 'is that I wasn't looking at styles of painting, I was looking at people, I was not looking at a particular painting or style but at a person's face.'



After Coques, After Piero della Francesca, After van Mieris the Elder.

This mixing up of periods is one of the common characteristics of much of the work produced by Blake during his time as Associate Artist. The first painting to be started was the *Exhibition of a Rhinoceros at Venice* (page 24), based on a painting of the same title by the eighteenth-century Venetian Pietro Longhi. Blake's Venice, though, is the famous beach in California, well known for its bizarre collection of personalities and lifestyles. Longhi's figures, in their tricorne hats and masks, are sniggered at by the contemporary Californians. However, as the eighteenth and twentieth centuries meet, which is the more ridiculous?



Opposite: *After Longhi's Exhibition of a Rhinoceros at Venice*, work in progress.
Oil on canvas, 92.2 x 72.6 cm.

Pietro Longhi, *Exhibition of a Rhinoceros at Venice*, c.1751.
Oil on canvas, 60.4 x 47 cm.
London, National Gallery.



Venice, California, also the setting for *'Have a Nice Day, Mr Hockney'*, has long been a source of fascination to Blake. By coincidence, the *Madonna of Venice Beach* series was already in progress when Blake was approached by the National Gallery. In the largest of these paintings (page 26) the Virgin Mary sits in a booth suckling the infant Christ. The pop singer Madonna is suspended naked from an unseen object (a helicopter?) above the beach in the background, while in the immediate foreground a Madonna look-alike skates by. Sitting on the beach in the distance is another, tiny, image of a mother and child.

This painting is open to a whole variety of interpretations as past meets present and sacred meets profane. So much of the tradition of the art of the past is Christian, and yet in our own century, Christian subject matter, with its themes of sacrifice and redemption, motherhood and love, has been almost forbidden ground for artists. Perhaps only Stanley Spencer and Francis Bacon have seriously and successfully confronted this issue. But for Blake there is no issue to confront. The subject of the Madonna and Child is simply a natural thing to paint. He refuses to worry about the conventions of the art establishment, whether he is making jokes about Constable and 'serious' mythological painting or deciding to paint the Madonna and Child.

The National Gallery Madonna (page 19) is a painting of calm beauty, but also a powerful statement of intent. The central image is taken from one of the least-known paintings in the National Gallery, by the barely remembered

Biography of the Artist

- 1932 Born in Dartford, Kent
- 1946–51 Studied at Gravesend Technical College and Gravesend School of Art
- 1953–6 Studied at the Royal College of Art, London
- 1954 First 'Pop' pictures
- 1956–7 Travelled around Europe, studying folk and popular art
- 1960–4 Taught at St Martin's School of Art, London, Harrow School of Art and Walthamstow School of Art
- 1962 First one-man exhibition
- 1964–76 Taught at the Royal College of Art, London
- 1967 Designed the cover for the Beatles' *Sgt Pepper* album
- 1969 Moved to Bath
- 1974 Elected ARA (Associate Member of the Royal Academy, London)
- 1975 Founder member of the Brotherhood of Ruralists, who first exhibited as a group in the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition of 1976
- 1979 Returned to London
- 1981 Elected RA (Member of the Royal Academy, London)
- 1983 Retrospective exhibition at the Tate Gallery, London
Awarded CBE
- 1987 Elected RDI (Royal Designer to Industry)
- 1994 Became the third National Gallery Associate Artist