

THE ART AND SOUL OF BRITAIN

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Works of art are received in various ways. Standing before a painting, you may 'get' its meaning. Or you may realise it after knowing the context. The exhibition of British art from the 20th and the early 21st centuries, on display at the British Council (BCL), Delhi, falls into the second category. From the London Underground posters of the '20s and the abstractions of Terry Frost, a World War II soldier, to the mixed-heritage angst of Chila Kumari Burman, the spot-paintings of the internationally-acclaimed artist Damien Hirst and the 2012 London Olympics posters — here, in one exhibition, is a glimpse of everyday Britain, its resilience and anxieties, its highs and lows, expressed in art.

Britain's power play in the late 19th century birthed colonies and eventually led to its participation in two world wars. The cumulative effect on its national culture was debilitating. In the absence of an 'art scene', Frank Pick, the publicity officer of the London Underground, decided the train station could be used as an open-art gallery.

From commissioning the iconic Underground map (not included in this exhibition) to transforming it into a space for advertisers to draw attention to their products through posters, he made art meet commerce in a post-war economy. Three posters of the BCL exhibition are from that period.

The mixed media works of Hurvin Anderson (a British-Jamaican) and Chila Burman (a British-Indian) show that while dual heritage may yield interesting art, it may be personally unsettling. The designed chaos of Burman's work, *Band of Gold*, for instance, seems to express the limits of assimilation. Surely there must be limits of how British an Indian can actually be even in a multi-cultural society. At first sight though, if this work of mixed media seems as if a cheetah, binds, the phrase 'Hot dates' and female figures have been randomly thrown onto the canvas, take a deep breath. Pause. And think.

Be warned: several artworks of the exhibition may demand this effort.

Painter and print-maker Sir Howard Hodgkin's works (he won the Turner Prize in 1985) in tumultuous reds, oranges and blues also seem to be drawn from private memory. An associate of the famous Indian architect Charles Correa



■ (Top) A 1921 London Transport poster; Around Bhupen, a 2009 oil on canvas by Timothy Hyman in memory of painter Bhupen Khakhar

PHOTOS: BCL, RAJ K RAJ/HT

MUST-VISIT

WHAT: The British Council Collection

WHERE: The British Council, Kasturba Gandhi Marg

WHEN: Till October 10

OPEN: 8am to 8pm (Monday to Thursday)
9am to 6 pm (Sunday)

who designed the British Council, it is Hodgkin's mural of a banyan tree that is on the BCL façade.

The BCL collection showcases 45 works of art of 20 artists. If many on the exhibition list don't ring a bell, they are there for a reason: the BCL collection focuses on the work of young and emerging artists.



■ British-Indian Chila Kumari Burman is among the artists showcased at the ongoing exhibition, The British Council Collection in Delhi

PHOTOS COURTESY: BRITISH COUNCIL