

Save Hertfordshire's Public Art Collection

Cabinet Panel 5.6.18

1. Response to petition

The petition was started out of concern that the public consultation gave scarcely any information about the Collection and its history, and did not mention the Schools Loan Collection.

The response to the petition was excellent. In just 3.5 weeks, the petition gained 1,575 responses, nearly 5 times the number of responses obtained by the Council over a period of 10 weeks.

Unfortunately, not all the addresses were captured but, of those that were, 593 are from Hertfordshire. Also, 188 people added their own comments, of which 86 were from Hertfordshire. (All comments can be seen on the petition's website).

The number of signatures shows the strength of support for the Collection. Many people understand that the Schools Loan service may no longer be viable. But the responses show that people want the Collection to remain in the county, either with the council or with a museum or art gallery, and available to the public as a cultural resource.

Some of the comments from the petition:

- *This is such an important collection for the county, initiated with such vision. It should be kept as a complete collection for public benefit and for future generations.*
- *Hertfordshire has a wonderful collection of art which belongs to, and should be enjoyed by, all the inhabitants of the county, in perpetuity. This heritage must never be sold off.*
- *Our art collection is an extraordinary gift from the past. I'm signing because I can see so many ways in which we could put it to inspirational use in Hertfordshire, for children, for older residents and visitors alike.*

2. Art Consultants' Report

The Matassa Toffolo Report has now been released by the Council, although it's unclear why so much of the report has been redacted.

The Council's previous Report (7.11.17) on the Art Collection says *'it is from the consultants comprehensive report that we draw our proposal to*

rationalise the collection by selling or gifting 1,659 works that are understood to have little or no significance to Hertfordshire.'

But it is hard to reconcile this statement and the Council's plans with the art consultants' report.

The art consultants specifically advise against reducing the SLC on the basis of relevance to Hertfordshire:

*'The original brief for this project gave special significance to works of art that have relevance to Hertfordshire. ... Relevance to the County does not seem to have governed acquisition policy at all in the early decades of the SLC's history; instead, what did govern it was quality. ... Placing too much emphasis on this factor would therefore distort the results of this survey and possibly encourage the jettisoning of quality works of art in favour of those of less cultural worth. **We strongly recommend therefore that the most important criterion in assessing the SLC should be that of cultural significance.**'*

The consultants also say:

'If it is decided to terminate the scheme, the chance could be taken to make it available to all the people of Hertfordshire, not just its schoolchildren.'

This is very much in line with the responses to the Petition.

3. Schools Loan Collection significance

The Council's report now recognises that Hertfordshire's Schools Loan Collection is probably one of the last remaining local authority school loan collections. It may therefore be of much wider significance, and this needs clarification before any decisions about its future are made.

The art consultants say:

- *'In the first two decades or so of this scheme, hundreds of works of art were purchased by contemporary British artists, many of them of high, even museum quality. ... As a result, the collection includes some important works, and is particularly strong in unique works by mid-20th century British artists.'*
- *'There are a number of items in the SLC that have important cultural and financial value.'*
- *'The absence of the SLC from (the ArtUK website) is much to be regretted, as the paintings in the collection are hardly known and so are not currently playing their full part in the cultural story of the*

*County or the UK (and so contributing to research and scholarship).
We recommend that in the future the paintings are placed on the ArtUk's database ...'*

The University of Hertfordshire, School of Creative Arts says:

- *the SLC is 'of very significant art historical interest' and 'forms a component part of a national as well as local heritage and should, we believe, be preserved and shared accordingly.'*

A curator with experience at a top public gallery:

- *the SLC contains 'a core group of works purchased from some of the most important artists of the last century and therefore of national interest ...'*

The SLC is a timeline of local and national modern British art. It is of historic, social, artistic, cultural and educational value. It helps place Hertfordshire into the story of British art and education. It's an important part of the county's heritage. It's history could be celebrated and shared. It could be a source of pride and interest in our county.

The pioneers who founded this collection did so with the ethos of access to art for all – the response to the Petition shows strong support for this ethos.

Additionally, the connections and relationships that exist within a collection are important, as well as how it relates to other collections. These connections will be lost if the SLC is split-up. For this reason it's important that the SLC remains intact.

4. Hepworth Wakefield

The Hepworth Wakefield have just hosted a six month exhibition about the 1940's School Prints scheme where artists were commissioned to create prints that brought art to school children. (This was a sort of sister scheme of the Schools Loan Collections).

Six well-known contemporary artists were invited to create limited edition prints responding to the original 1940's brief. The contemporary and original prints were displayed together in the exhibition, and there was much engagement with local schools as well as the general public.

The contemporary prints retail at £500 each and the money raised will fund the museum's learning programme. These sales will generate £255,000 gross.

Additionally, low-cost posters are available to schools so that the artwork can also be enjoyed and used in schools.

The Hepworth Wakefield is a big museum with a big reputation, but this project shows how exhibitions can be alive and influential, how education and art can be combined in imaginative ways, and how commerce can be threaded into that, helping to achieve sustainable outcomes.

The Schools Loan Collection lends itself to similarly imaginative community projects, which could benefit the public and help finance its upkeep.

5. Summary

The Petition highlights that there is no public consultation on the overall plans for the collection.

If the Council starts to sell or gift artworks without an overall plan in place, then the Schools Loan Collection will be dissipated forever.

Additionally, the Art Collection is a county-wide matter and of national significance.

We therefore request the Council to:

- clarify the significance of the Schools Loan Collection
- develop an overall plan for the art collection through its dialogue with public museums and art galleries in Hertfordshire
- that the overall plan is then referred to Cabinet