

the new londoner



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How a tiny gallery mastered the art of reinvention

Our neighbour now has an international standing, and is still innovating

Since becoming our close neighbour, the Ben Uri Gallery has gone on a momentous journey. When it moved into 108a Boundary Road in 2002, it was just beginning to emerge from what might be called its undistinguished period. In 1995, the renowned collection of works by Jewish artists had lost its gallery space with the closure of the synagogue building in which it had been housed and, after a few office moves, settled in the Sternberg Centre in Finchley. It remained in store and was rarely exhibited, and then only to a local audience.

Just over 20 years later, Ben Uri, still at its St John's Wood address, has been elected to the World Art Foundations, which comprises some 300 of the world's leading institutions and is part of the international museum loan circuit with often, as this year, collection works

'When Covid hit, Ben Uri was ready, because it was already leading with digital'

included in eight city exhibitions in Europe and the USA. In January, it was the guest museum at the London Art Fair, and its growing collection is being viewed around the world. It also has its eyes very much on the future, and is developing innovative ideas together with colleagues with world-leading expertise.

None of this has happened without significant strategic thought and hard-nosed decisions, which came with the election of David Glasser as chairman in 2000 (a role he carries out

full-time on a pro bono basis). David, a long-time art collector, brought with him many years' business and corporate experience. About the move from the Sternberg Centre, home of Reform Judaism, he says any synagogue was, and remains, the wrong location for Ben Uri as the collection would engage only with the Jewish community, which is self-defeating. "It immediately reduces your potential market by 99.5 percent," as he puts it.

As a Jew, an immigrant (one might say) to England and someone prepared to swim upstream, David has something in common with the founder of the Ben Uri. It was in 1915 that Lazar Berson, a Russian-born, Yiddish-speaking artist, set up a society of Jewish artists – named after Bezalel Ben Uri, the craftsman who designed and built the Ark of the Covenant. It gained more than a hundred members and held many events during its first year. Whilst Berson returned to France in 1916, David, born and



David Glasser, chairman of Ben Uri



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© The Estate of Josef Herman

West Indian Waitresses (c1955) by Eva Frankfurter, born in Berlin, and *Refugees* (1941) by Josef Herman, born in Warsaw, helped to attract 25,000 visitors to Ben Uri's stand at the London Art Fair in January

bred in Scotland, has stayed the course for 23 years and has led the reinventions and repositioning of the charity following six years of being without a gallery.

One of the first and most important steps it took was to recontextualise its collection. "I don't see art in a religious context, and neither does the academic world," says David. "And artists don't want to be described as Jewish artists. They may be very happily Jewish, but they want to be described as artists and recognised as artists who happen to be Jewish – or Catholic or Muslim or whatever." For the art and academic sector it is the artistic impact and contribution that is defining - not the artist's religion. If Ben Uri was to be taken seriously it had to reflect that reality. Viewing their work in this way also enables it to reach new audiences. Ben Uri welcomed 25,000 people to its stand over the four days of the London Art Fair, where it displayed highlights from its permanent

collection: paintings, drawings and sculpture by 32 artists from 13 countries of birth, from Germany to India. Those highlights, under the heading of 'Art, Identity, Migration', included David Bomberg's *Ghetto Theatre*, Frank Auerbach's *Mornington Crescent*, *Summer Morning II*, Eva Frankfurter's *West Indian Waitresses*, Lancelot Ribeiro's *King Lear* and Tam Joseph's playful work *The Hand Made Map of the World* (a detail of which is on the front cover of this magazine).

Joseph's work was the "star of the art fair", David says, "because everybody's looking for where their country has now been reallocated to". He describes the artist, who was born on the island of Dominica, as "such a good man", who has strong views about being categorised as a black artist or a Windrush artist. "What Tam was trying to do was to say that in many ways our lives are determined by fate – by where our mothers delivered us and brought us up – and what would our life be like if we were somewhere else." cont/...

Being brought up by “two left-of-centre medics”, David broke the mould by not going to medical school and, he jokes, perhaps more shatteringly for his parents, by going into trade. One of things he inherited from them, though, was an intellectualism, and a sensitivity to the needs of the dispossessed. Of London Art Fair’s museum partnership, he says: “What better time for it to be Ben Uri, at our time of crisis across Europe? The whole issue of migration is absolutely live. There are 12 million people from Ukraine displaced. My personal view is the Jewish community should be at the forefront of supporting as much migration as we possibly can.”

Over the past two decades Ben Uri has made significant acquisitions generously supported by grants from national institutions and a small group of community philanthropists. These works have transformed the international

recognition of the collection as they have widened the landscape to include fellow refugee and immigrant artists to Britain. There are now over 900 works in its collection by over 400 artists from 45 countries of birth. It is proud that of those artists, 29 percent are women, compared with 3 percent nationally (and a page on its website explains why). But its expansion has not been linear and in 2018 it took a bold decision to deaccession some 500 works that were almost never exhibited. Selling works is a big issue in the museum sector and the move was not entirely popular with the gallery’s advisory board, from which Sir Nicholas Serota, chair of Arts Council England, resigned. David is unapologetic: the gallery needed to fund its future, and saw no option but to raise funds from the sale of a few valuable but second or third best examples. David says: “The alternative was stagnation and financial melt down as the Jewish Museum experienced in 2019.” Among the works it sold were *At the Window* by David Bomberg, which had been exhibited only nine times in 100 years; it sold for £600,000.

What the gallery did next was characteristically both pragmatic and visionary. Seeing that its future was digital, it set about finding a way to build a web presence that showed its collection to as wide an audience as possible. It helped to have a chairman who doesn’t take no for an answer. When David approached Artlogic, the biggest art gallery web template provider, the company said it did not do museums because they are too big. But he persuaded them that Ben Uri could, with their help, stretch the capacity to support a mother site, benuri.org, and seamlessly link the existing sites, benuricollection.org.uk and the research site buru.org.uk, a solution that meant Ben Uri spent its money on developing and uploading its content, rather than on buying a new website that would



©The Estate of Marc Chagall

Self-portrait (1925) by Marc Chagall, on long-term loan to Ben Uri Collection

add no intrinsic value. The result is a rich and wide digital presence, in addition to the physical gallery it still has. Visitors to the benuri.org 'digital museum' can see more than 45 exhibitions.

While the website can't give the emotional hit of standing in front of a great painting, it gives people who can't get to exhibitions the chance to see the work, what David calls a "huge second best". The site has also added a range of 3D exhibitions, where visitors 'click and enter' a room they can walk around, strolling (scrolling) up to works that interest them.

Ben Uri's digital presence meant that when Covid hit, unlike most institutions it was all set: already leading with digital, and free of most of the overheads the traditional museum model was saddled with. It is now building on its skill at innovation and digital. Among this year's projects are 'insight' exhibitions, focusing on one or two works. The first such exhibition (14 June to 14 July 2023) is of a huge painting by Peter Howson, *Holocaust Crowd Scene II*, which the gallery bought in 2020. Howson was Britain's official war artist in Bosnia, which had a huge influence on his work. The second (26 July-1 September) is of two drawings of the Nuremberg courtroom by Laura Knight, a British-born war artist at the trials, that are on loan to Ben Uri. The large final studies were for the painting that is on permanent show at the Imperial War Museum.

Building on the education aspect of its digital work, its 'arts and mental health' arm is aimed at older people, and presents programmes and tutorials for residents in care homes and people with dementia, all of which is available



Prisoners in the Dock at Nuremberg Trials, 2 (1946), by Laura Knight

to all on its website. The gallery wants to go further in its work for older people, and reach the 95 percent who live in their or their families' own homes.

All of which shows that rather than having lost a 'Jews-only' art gallery London now has an energetic and purposeful institution – with Jews and immigrants centre-stage – whose collections can be enjoyed by anyone with an internet connection. The bonus for New Londoners is that, being so close, we can get that emotional hit by going to the physical exhibitions too.

Shaping the Future: New Arrivals from Chagall to Ribeiro is at the Ben Uri Gallery, 108a Boundary Road, NW8 0RH, Wednesday-Friday until 2 June. Entry is free