



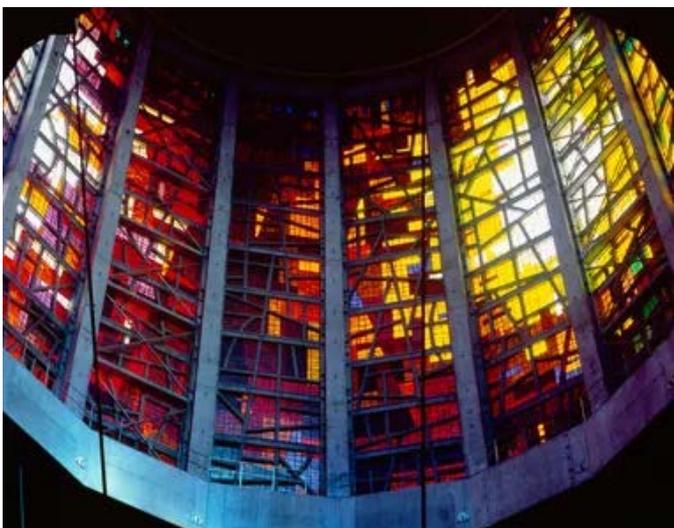
George VI remarks, with some acuity: “You seem to have very bad luck with your weather, Mr Piper.”

It is never a fine day in the work of John Piper (1903-92); not even in the Shell Guides which, together with his stained glass windows in the cathedrals of Liverpool and Coventry surely remain among his greatest contributions to English art. But the king’s quip gathers new meaning in this very odd survey at Tate Liverpool. Here is an English landscape painter, a neo-romantic admired for his atmospheric sense of place, from the soft Wiltshire hills to the rolling Sussex Downs to the chalky Chilterns where he lived for 60 years; a war artist respected for his burned-out London and wintry desolation in the shires. But instead we are presented with Piper the internationalist.

Here he is aping the ideas of Braque and Picasso, with a nod to the work of Jean Hélion. Here he is reprising - or repeating - cubism, constructivism, European abstraction and more. If Picasso works an extract of *Le Figaro* into a collage then Piper follows suit, dutifully scissoring a page of the *New Statesman* into the shape of a cliff at Eastbourne. In one especially dud pastiche he paints a view of the sea through a window in a sub-Matisse interior and then glues lacy fabric to the surface. His characteristically muddy colours are overlaid, here and there, with shiny silver paint. And this is not the least embarrassment.

For a while Piper was associated with Ben Nicholson’s Seven and Five Society and produced Nicholsonian reliefs in flat monochrome colours. Here, too, he struggles to contribute anything of his own. In one, sand is mixed with the paint to give a spuriously nautical hint. Others have absurd dowelling lattices laid over the canvas. They look ready to collapse; and sometimes did, for Piper took very little care of them. He regarded these abstractions, in the end, as nothing more than an exercise.

A caption reveals this fact, if you hadn’t already deduced it. Indeed the wall texts keep giving the game away - here’s the direct influence of Mondrian or Arp; here’s an end to abstraction, or the example of Turner, Constable, Cotman. For no matter how hard the curators want to sell their dry international theme, the work itself keeps on reverting to English traditions.



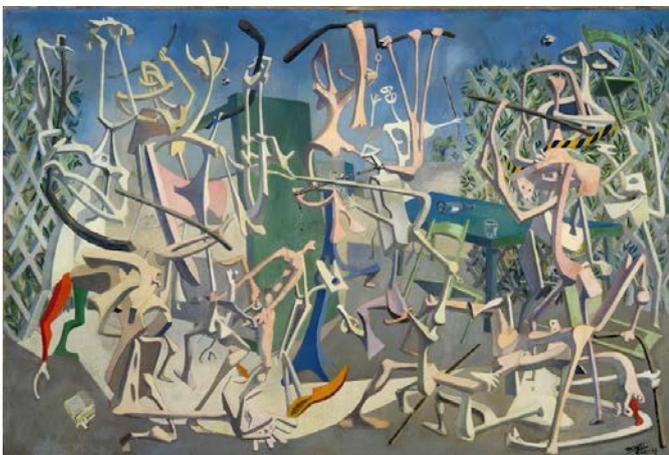
Stained glass by John Piper and Patrick Reyntiens in the Cathedral of Christ the King, Liverpool. Photograph: Alamy

Which is where the unlucky weather comes in. It is very hard to get any sense of a distinctive Piper in the chaos of this show. This is partly because most of the works that aren’t second world war commissions were made in the experimental flux of the 1930s; there is a 40-year career still to come, which includes murals, stained glass windows, gravely beautiful prints and watercolour landscapes that are almost luminous with nostalgia. But there is a constant here nonetheless, and it amounts to a characteristic - Piper’s dark and lowering palette. The tide pulls back and forth beneath slate-grey clouds; the bare,

ruined choirs of a charred church reach up to charcoal heavens. Holkham Hall is a golden box held in a claggy dun landscape.

And that gift for making England glow in the darkness of war or destruction, or simply deep dusk and heavy winter, transforms the best images in this show, above all the paintings of Coventry Cathedral, bombed in November 1940. The traceries of shattered windows rise up against the cold night and yet there is something not lost in the devastation. This is the memory of voices and human emotions continued in the singing escalation of Piper's colours.

There is no door between this show and the next, which feels right, since nothing could prepare you for the sheer strangeness of **Surrealism in Egypt**. If you once thought this movement oversold, from Buñuel's sliced eyeballs to Dalí's molten watches, consider an art that turns tortoises into heroes and flying eggs into eyes, where donkeys laugh their heads off and a lizard's tongue becomes the barbed wire binding a chain gang.



Coups de Bâtons, 1937 by the Greek-Egyptian painter Mayo.  
Photograph: Tate Liverpool

Art et Liberté, the short-lived group celebrated here, had its roots in politics. Its 1938 manifesto, Long Live Degenerate Art, was a protest against the Nazi persecution of the avant garde, and the Hitler lampoons here are both ribald and brilliantly savage. Fascism was preying on Egypt, and one monumental painting - a horrifying lagoon of drowning bodies, harbinger birds circling above, one dangling a sinister black rat - was made after the Axis bombing of Alexandria in 1941.

Painters, poets and intellectuals clashed with the police in Cairo cafes. One of the most startling images here is *Coups de Bâtons* (1937) by the Greek-Egyptian painter Mayo, in which batons rain down on a flailing throng of tubular figures, some with their hands or tongues trapped in ominous crevices. Mayo studied in Paris, and Egyptian surrealism had a distinctly cosmopolitan character (the US photographer Lee Miller was a member), though this could stifle originality. There are Dalíesque clocks and extruded limbs in every gallery.



Untitled (Underwater Skeleton), 1940 by Amy Nimr.  
 Photograph: Tate Liverpool

But at its strongest, Egyptian surrealism is a thing apart. It turns the country's long coastline into a theatre of wild events; mocks the absurdity of cat gods; shows women as brave rebels rather than the passively erotic objects of Parisian surrealism. The photographers, in particular Etienne Sved, who fled Hungary for Cairo during the war, got to the heart of Egypt's double life as a culture simultaneously ancient and modern. The alien gigantism of pharaonic statues is juxtaposed with the real scale of living people so that one sees anew just how monstrous these stone gods were, just how peculiar an architectural structure is the pyramid.

Mayo is probably the most famous name here. But for me the biggest revelation in a show of art almost entirely unknown in Europe was the Cairo-born Amy Nimr. Her paintings are delicately shocking. A nude woman caught like a fish in a net, dignified in her evident grief; graveyards visited by fish beneath the waves. Strangest of all is a headless skeleton walking jauntily along the bottom of the sea. Nimr's young son had been playing in the sands outside Cairo in 1943 when he was killed by a sudden stray bomb. His mother paints him dead, and yet somehow still living.

*Star ratings (out of 5)*

*John Piper* ★

*Surrealism in Egypt* ★★★

John Piper and Surrealism in Egypt: Art et Liberté 1938-48 are at Tate Liverpool until 18 March

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