

# Dickens and the Visual Imagination

9 July 2012 - 10 July 2012

## Conference Report



This international two-day conference, marking the bicentenary of the birth of Charles Dickens, was organised by the University of Surrey's School of English and Languages and co-hosted by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art (the first day took place at the University of Surrey campus and the second day at the Paul Mellon Centre in central London). The first day concluded with a viewing of the Dickens and the Artists exhibition at Watts Gallery in Compton, Surrey, and a convivial dinner at the nearby Withies Inn. The conference considered Dickens's fascination with sight and the visual, and studied the ways in which the visual qualities of his writing have affected his reputation and the reception of his work, both in the Victorian era and today.

The conference welcomed Dickens scholars from around the world, including delegates from France, Switzerland, the USA, Australia, and India. It also brought together academics from a range of disciplines, including English Literature, Art History, and Law, to present a range of different perspectives on the theme of Dickens and the visual. The interdisciplinary approach of the conference reflected the School of English and Language's commitment to exploring links between English Literature and other art forms and disciplines.

## The papers

A complete programme with paper abstracts can be found [here](#).

## Conference themes

The conference used its focus on Dickens's 'visual imagination' to examine a range of topics relating to Dickens's writing and his position in twenty-first-century culture, to literary studies more generally, and to interdisciplinary scholarship on nineteenth-century culture and history. Across the conference's 28 papers, the following issues emerged as the most prominent and significant themes:

- **Adaptations of Dickens:** several papers used Dickens as a case study to examine the process by which literary texts are adapted into other art forms and media (including illustrations, paintings, films, graphic novels, and theatrical productions). This theme was exemplified in the keynote address given by Professor Lynda Nead (Birkbeck, University of London), which analysed David Lean's 1946 film adaptation of *Great Expectations*.
- **Victorian visual technologies:** another concern of the conference was the influence on Victorian culture of the new visual technologies that developed in the nineteenth century, including panoramas, photography, and innovations in the technology of the theatre. Professor Sambudha Sen (University of Delhi) gave a keynote paper on the urban and technological aspects of Dickens's visual aesthetic.
- **Dickens's writings on the visual and visual art:** a number of papers considered the various ways in which Dickens represented visual experiences and the visual arts (including paintings, theatrical performances, magical illusions, interior design, architecture, and the sights of London) in his writing. Professor Andrew Sanders (University of Durham) gave a keynote address on Dickens's evocation and description of interiors in his novels.
- **Dickens's links to artists and to other art forms:** the conference papers consistently examined the two-way exchange of ideas between Dickens and visual artists, showing that Dickens was influenced by William Hogarth, J. M. W. Turner, and (as demonstrated by Professor Kate Flint from the University of Southern

California in the closing keynote paper) Victorian street art, and that the novelist in turn went on to influence artists such as Vincent van Gogh.

A number of these themes were brought together when conference delegates viewed the Dickens and the Artists exhibition at Watts Gallery, which showcased works of art which inspired Dickens as well as paintings that drew on themes and incidents from Dickens's writing. Delegates were also given a rare opportunity to view the Watts Chapel in Compton, a fascinating Art Nouveau building designed by Mary Seton Watts and built by the people of Compton between 1898 and 1904.

## **Outcomes**

Through its focus on Dickens's 'visual imagination', the conference made an important and innovative contribution to the study of Dickens's work and cultural reception in his bicentenary year. The event brought scholars from around the world to the University of Surrey and promoted the interdisciplinary and intercultural research of the newly formed School of English and Languages. The conference also helped to reinforce Surrey's links with the Paul Mellon Centre and with English Literature departments in the University's partner institutions, specifically the University of Delhi and North Carolina State University.

## **Short interviews with participants**

[Prof Janice Carlisle](#), Yale University (Dickens as an Artist).

[Prof Sambudha Sen](#), University of Delhi, India (Links: Surrey & Delhi and International Dickens).

[Esther Bendit Saltzman](#), PhD student, University of Memphis (Academic Training).

## **Conference blog**

The conference was also promoted through an [interview](#) with Gregory Tate in Advance, the magazine for the University of Surrey's postgraduate students.

## **Acknowledgements**

The University of Surrey organisers (Churnjeet Mahn, Beth Palmer, Gregory Tate, and Hilary Underwood) would like to thank the following organisations and individuals for their invaluable help in planning and running the conference.

- **The Institute of Advanced Studies** at the University of Surrey provided essential financial support for the conference. Mirela Dumic at IAS provided equally essential

administrative and organisational support, and the success of the conference owed much to her hard work and attention to detail.

- **The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies** in British Art was immensely generous in funding and hosting the conference's second day. Particular thanks are due to Martin Postle for his help in organising the conference, and to Maisoon Rehani for her support on the day itself.
- **Watts Gallery** generously welcomed conference delegates to a viewing of the Dickens and the Artists exhibition. Thanks to the Gallery's curator, Mark Bills, for this and for the crucial role he played in planning the conference and in securing keynote speakers.

Thanks, too, to Lucy Ella Hawkins for her hard work and for her tireless and enthusiastic help with the conference.

Dr Gregory Tate

Email: [G.Tate@surrey.ac.uk](mailto:G.Tate@surrey.ac.uk)

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