Somewhat late in the day, Tate Britain has got around to an exhibition about the British Empire and its legacies. For an institution set up in part from the profits of colonial dominion – the generosity of the sugar refiner Henry Tate, and the sugar and sheep fortune of the Australian collector, George Salting – Tate Britain has been surprisingly slow to follow other galleries in gazing back at the aesthetics of the imperial past and their contemporary resonance. Since the National Portrait Gallery’s sumptuous ‘The Raj: India and the British, 1600–1947’ that ran during the winter of 1990–1, there has been a succession of empire-themed exhibitions. The Victoria & Albert’s 2001 ‘Victorian vision’, marking the centenary of the death of Queen Victoria, was perhaps the grandest. But there have been many smaller specialist showcases. The Yale Centre for British Art in New Haven has covered East India Company culture (2003) and slavery (2014). The National Gallery in London displayed Rudolf Swoboda’s Indian portraits (2002), whilst its counterpart in Edinburgh ran a show on ‘Tipu Sultan and the Scots’ (1999). The National Army Museum (‘Indian armies, Indian art’, 2010) and the Royal Academy (Johan Zoffany, 2012) have both given an unfamiliar imperial twist to artefacts and artists better-known in other contexts. And coming right up to the present-day, plenty of post-colonial art featured in two recent London shows: ‘The empire strikes back: Indian art today’ (Saatchi Gallery, 2010), and the ‘Australia’ exhibition (Royal Academy, 2013).
The tardiness of the Tate seems even stranger when it is recalled that the gallery once led a mission to export Britain’s artistic heritage to the Commonwealth. The fourth Director (1) of the Tate, John Bolivar Manson (1930–8), chaired the ‘Empire Art Loans Collection’ which either side of the Second World War organized the shipping out on loan of British old masters to museums and galleries in the white settlement colonies. Manson also brought to the Tate its first ever exhibition from outside Europe, ‘A century of Canadian art’, in 1938. Chastised at home as no friend to modernism – English and French post-impressionism was as far as he went – Manson was an unusual champion of art for empire’s sake, and surely deserves further consideration as a mover and shaker in the colonial art world of the inter-war years.

Tate Britain’s own poor institutional memory is typical of a wider amnesia about empire that this exhibition is designed to cure. As curator Alison Smith suggests in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, Britain is good at forgetting its imperial past. There is a marked absence of empire in the holdings of the country’s major art galleries. To this day the souvenirs and curios of empire are more likely to be found in private collections, or adorning the domestic interiors of stately homes, or in the stores of the learned societies of London that were established after the Great Exhibition of 1851. Tate Britain is a case in point. Its first modernist Indian acquisition only came in 1965, and it has furnished just 20 items for this current exhibition, half of which have joined the gallery since the 1960s. Collecting from the empire has been the task of ethnologists and soldiers, not curators. The single largest external donor of exhibits to ‘Artist and empire’ is the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. The National Army Museum is not far behind. We should not be surprised. Imperial objects induce what Paul Gilroy in his foreword to the catalogue calls ‘nostalgia and melancholia’ (2), a source of misplaced patriotism, or deep embarrassment. We shy away from archiving or displaying empire. The British Empire and Commonwealth Museum at Bristol was a short-lived affair (2002–8), and Lord Baker’s plan for a national museum of British history (including the empire) has been derided as a vanity project.

So in presenting an exhibition that itself is akin to an ‘imperial museum’, Tate Britain has had to tread carefully. Slavery, for example, is not included, on the grounds that it was, Smith claims, ‘simply not represented’ for it was too brutal to illustrate.(3) That does not ring true. William Wilberforce’s campaign to outlaw the slave trade in the late 18th century generated some of the most compelling images ever seen of racial violence. There was the ‘Brooks’ slave-ship diagram of 1788 showing slaves packed like sardines below deck, and George Cruikshank’s 1792 cartoon depicting a slave being punished on deck. And Josiah Wedgwood provided the campaign with its most iconic and widely-circulated image of all: the ‘Am I not a man and brother’ (1787) medallion depicting an enslaved African. This curious omission aside, however, the exhibition succeeds in showing the complexities of empire, by taking an expansive view of its subject.

‘Artist’ is defined broadly for a start. The canon of great British artists is absent. They were oblivious to empire it seems. True, in 1764, George Stubbs captured an Indian cheetah gifted to George III (this wonderfully allegorical painting is included in ‘Artist and empire’), Thomas Gainsborough painted Warren Hastings in 1784 at the height of his infamy as Governor-General of Bengal (not included here), and in 1800 from the safety of his studio in London J. M. W. Turner depicted the last stages of the British offensive against the Marathas in Mysore (two water-colours held by the Tate, but not included in this exhibition). The pre-Raphaelites kept clear of the colonies, although Edward Burne-Jones did send out a stained-glass window for St Paul’s Cathedral in Calcutta (modern-day Kolkata). One would struggle to find a lascar in the crowd-scapes of William Frith or Hubert von Herkomer. Later prominent painters did produce portraits of imperial celebrities: Walter Sickert’s Maharaja of Bhavnagar (1893, now in the Courtauld), John Singer Sargent’s 1904 study of the Straits Settlement Governor, Sir Frank Swettenham and Augustus John’s 1919 portrait of Lawrence of Arabia (the latter two both are both featured in the exhibition) are amongst the examples of the genre.

However, generally speaking it was not these household names, but rather a second tier of artists, who really made empire their canvas. A long list might include Thomas Davies in early colonial Canada, Augustus Earle in New South Wales, Thomas Daniell and William Hickey in Bengal and Madras, the Prinseps in India and Australia, Charles Heaphy and George Angas in New Zealand, Charles Davidson Bell in the Cape
‘Artist and empire’. ‘Artist’ is also interpreted generously to include the botanist, cartographer, collector photographer and surveyor, and also to include artists from the empire, both anonymous and named. Similarly, as one would expect, ‘art’ encompasses not just portraits, landscapes and abstracts, but architectural drawings, maps, pendants, wooden figures, busts and statuettes, wall-panels and reliefs, flags and even a tobacco pipe.

Casting the net so widely allows ‘Artist and empire’ to interpret the culture of imperialism through six themes: maps, trophies, heroics, power-dressing, portraits and lastly the art that came out of empire. The exhibition is particularly good at showing the work done by art on behalf of empire. In the first section, ‘Mapping and marking’, we are introduced to the soldier-surveyors who plotted the new territorial acquisitions of the early colonial era, and the jobbing artists whose water-colours romanticised the new settlements as quintessentially European – Whitby in Tangier by Wenceslaus Hollar (1669) – stands out in this respect. We also see much later the famous maps of the world with Britain’s dominion shaded in red. These displays of imperial girth have become so familiar – reproduced in school text-books for much of the first half of the 20th century – that we tend to forget that the colouring-in of colonies was a device that dates back to the 1830s and to the work of the colonial statistician, Montgomery Martin, and was originally deployed to pick out the disparate spread of British possessions that were otherwise hard to see. Mapping here is treated as ‘art’ and comes over as a polite form. But of course the borders and boundaries that the British map-men made unleashed some of the worst human tragedies of the 20th century, as the former Ottoman empire, Ireland, India and Palestine were partitioned. Partition has produced its own artistic ways of remembering and forgetting and some of that might have been shown here.

Going into the next room of the exhibition, ‘Trophies of empire’, the visitor might expect to come across the booty and plunder of colonial warfare: captured ordnance, the regalia of deposed native rulers, ornamental weaponry and jewellery. There is after all plenty to choose from. Instead, the focus here is on the empire as a collector’s cornucopia. This starts with the gathering and documenting of exotic plants and animals during the age of exploration by men such as Joseph Banks. Then we see the British fascination with Indian culture: Sanskrit texts, Rajput miniature paintings and ancient religious architecture. Marianne North’s ‘Entrance to the cave of Karlee’ (1878), showing the overgrown ruins of the temple hewn out of rock still managing to dwarf the modern visitor, says so much about how the British viewed India: as a civilization in decline, needing the modernizing touch of a western power. At the same time, as Rudolf Swoboda’s 1886 portraits of the Indian village craftsmen at the Colonial and Imperial Exhibition of that year underline, British audiences liked to be reminded of Indian backwardness. Loot does finally appear in this section of the exhibition in the shape of a pair of bronze miniature busts captured from Benin in West Africa, part of a huge horde of court art displayed in London in 1897. The busts convey a sense of nobility and power, more potent than much of the merchandise produced at home that year for Queen Victoria’s diamond jubilee.
Room three, and ‘Artist and empire’ is now in full swing, with a sampling of the historical painting and photography generated by empire. All the set-pieces are here – Plassey, Quebec, Tipu Sultan and onto the Indian rebellion and Sudanese campaigns of the 1880s. There is not much blood or gore in the painted vistas. Only George Joy’s well-known snapshot of the moment before General Gordon was killed in Khartoum anticipates violence. Mostly, painters went for the outcomes of conflict, and not the fighting itself: the signing of treaties, or the dying moments of generals (Benjamin West’s ‘Death of General Wolfe’ (1770) proving most popular. With photography came the opportunity for more graphic reportage. Felice Beato’s corpse-strewn images from the war in China (1860) stand in here to represent a whole new genre of artistic representation, although photographs, it should be noted, were initially used as providing the raw material for conventional engraved illustrations that still tended to airbrush out the carnage. Historical painting, we are reminded, was often unashamedly propagandist. Thomas Barker’s ‘The secret of England’s greatness’ (1863), showing Queen Victoria presenting a bible to an African prince, enjoyed a global audience, even though the incident it depicted never happened. Conversely, Elizabeth Butler’s ‘The remnants of an army’ (1879), portraying the exhausted sole survivor of the retreat from Jellalabad in the first Afghan war, was a timely protest against the second Afghan war of 1878–80.

For this reviewer the next two sections of the exhibition are the most memorable and satisfying. ‘Power-dressing’ is both visually stunning and thoughtful in its commentary. Empire drove a new demand for portraiture. Seeking to emulate the cultural etiquette of the vanquished Mughals and Marathas, East India Company officials used miniature and full-length portraits in gift exchanges with Indian rulers. The lure of the romantic East also encouraged cross-dressing, that is to say, Byronesque characters who donned Oriental garb. Later, black visitors to Britain would dress in European-style civvies, or sometimes wear a mix of their own ‘native’ dress and English tailoring. We are told that this was not so much vanity or conformity, but a way of wearing one’s CV or résumé, showing the cosmopolitan and multi-cultural worlds experienced by the wearer. All very convincing. Photography comes into this section too. There is a dramatic portrait of John Buchan (1937) in Niitsitapi (first nation people of Canada) head-dress. But more might have been added, including some examples from the photographic carte de visite phenomenon of the later 19th century – the studio portrait that served as a calling card. As the recent ‘Black Chronicles II’ exhibition (Rivington Place, 2014) in London showed, many overseas visitors to London took to this medium. Imperial statues also now appear in the story. There is a miniature bronze cast of General Gordon astride a camel. Full-size versions of statues of Gordon went up in the Crystal Palace, Chatham and Khartoum (and a memorial in Southampton too, although it is not mentioned here), leaving later generations with the headache of what to do with these monuments when the fuss of empire had passed. Not an easy decision, as the present fellows and students of Oriel College, Oxford can surely confirm.

‘Face to face’ comes next, as we get up close to the ways in which British artist-travellers represented non-European peoples, and in turn, were pictured by indigenous artists. This is quite a sympathetic selection, that is to say many of the cruder, racist images that dominate the graphic satire of the 18th and 19th centuries are excluded, as are the often dubious photographic surveys of ethnic peoples undertaken in the name of anthropology. Instead we have the ‘noble savage’ discovered in the explorations of the Pacific and North America. We also see a growing nostalgia for races thought to be in decline, such as the Maori of New Zealand, represented here by the rather dreary ‘ethnographs’ of Charles Goldie (here I would have rather seen the better-known martial portraits of the Maori chiefs by Gottfried Lindauer, or even the earlier work of William Beetham that showed Maori interacting with Europeans). In this section the exhibition is most successful at showing how the cultural traffic of empire was two-way. We are offered sensitive re-readings of William Hickey’s and Johann Zoffany’s Indian commissions. And a series of Yoruba wooden sculptures of the British royal family, and other Nigerian busts of European figures, show how the imperial gaze was returned. In the same vein, we see the Union Jack subverted in Gold Coast nationalist fabrics of the first half of the 20th century.

Finally, the exhibition moves out of empire, or rather plots the long retreat through the medium of art from imperial certainty to post-colonial anger and irony. This is the most original part of the show. Occidental bias against indigenous art traditions began to go, not least in the early 20th century as African and Asian
‘primitivism’ became the inspiration for European modernists such as Giacometti and Modigliani. Out of empire came painters with world-wide reputations, notably Rabindranath Tagore. Artists from the Caribbean such as Ronald Moody joined ‘colonies’ of sculptors and painters in inter-war Britain. The end of empire and the resurgence of national artistic expression in the decolonized world began to produce art-forms that were neither derived from the west, or even hybrid, but which still registered clearly the displacement brought by empire. And in the last half-century British black artists have turned their attention to the colonial legacy, finding novel uses for statues (Hew Locke’s ‘Restoration’ of 2006 in which imperial heroes are draped with bling jewellery), and alternative ways of representing plunder (as in Donald Locke’s ‘Trophies of empire’, 1972–4) suggesting bondage and bullets. And then we come full circle and bid farewell to the show with Andrew Gilbert’s ‘All roads lead to Ulundi’ (2013), a clever re-creation of the red map of empire from the 1880s.

This is a thought-provoking exhibition, one of the best historically-themed shows that Tate Britain has done for some years. It doesn’t so much take the lid off empire, revealing contents we did not know about. There has already been so much fresh thinking about Britain’s inconvenient colonial past in the last 30 years. But ‘Artist and empire’ does remix the ingredients of imperial culture in ways that complicate the relationship between the gazer and the gazed, and which foreground the formative role played by artists of all kinds in that exchange.

**Notes**

1. Technically he was the second Director: the first two heads of the gallery were known as ‘Keepers’.  
   [Back to (1)]
3. Ibid, p. 12.[Back to (3)]

**Other reviews:**

Guardian

Financial Times
[http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/6b7e47c2-92ba-11e5-bd82-c1fb87bef7af.html](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/6b7e47c2-92ba-11e5-bd82-c1fb87bef7af.html) [3]

Wall Street Journal

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