

**Lives Less Ordinary:
Working-Class Britain Re-seen**
Two Temple Place's new exhibition
unpacks a century of misunderstanding
and misrepresentation



Rene Matić, *Paul and Zac in the Garden*, 2022,
Inkjet Print © The Artist

25 January to 20 April 2025 | Free admission

2 Temple Place, London WC2R 3BD

🚶 Temple: 2mins, Blackfriars/Embankment: 10mins, Waterloo/Charing Cross: 15mins

- Exhibition curated by Samantha Manton
- Including more than 150 works, many never shown before in London
- Exhibition builds on Two Temple Place's confident recent showcase of projects
- Accompanied by an all-ages programme of workshops, talks, music and more

Art has a class problem. Historically, the representation of working-class life has been filtered through the reductive and distorting lens of the middle-class gaze. Working-class subjects have been under- or misrepresented, stereotyped or sensationalised. Working-class artists have been misinterpreted, pigeonholed, or overlooked altogether. And, for anyone looking for a career in the art world, a working-class background can present a significant barrier to entry.^{1 2}

Lives Less Ordinary: Working-Class Britain Re-seen, a major new exhibition at Two Temple Place, seeks to explore and address these inequities head-on. By celebrating and reevaluating working-class representation in postwar Britain the show sets out to overturn long-standing misrepresentations, enrich limited and limiting narratives, and trigger fresh thinking about the lives of working-class people, showcasing more authentic and nuanced depictions of working-class experiences and identities.

Conceived and curated by Samantha Manton, the exhibition includes more than 150 art works of painting, photography, film, sculpture and ceramics, exclusively from working-class artists and those from working-class backgrounds. In keeping with Two Temple Place's role as a major London platform for the UK's regional collections, the exhibition brings together a wide-ranging body of work from museums and galleries, archives, artists' estates and contemporary artists up and down the country.

Reframing narratives, challenging stereotypes, exploring identities

Lives Less Ordinary provides a platform to champion contemporary artists from working-class backgrounds, while also encouraging audiences to reappraise the work of underappreciated 20th-century figures such as Beryl Cook and Monica Ross, and discover works, perhaps for the first time, by little-known artists including Sandra George and Eric Tucker.

Artists like Roman Manfredi, Joanne Coates and Mahtab Hussain make visible overlooked working-class communities, defiantly challenging reductive stereotypes, while Hannah Starkey, Ken Grant, Masterji and others draw attention to

¹ <https://www.culturehive.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Panic-Social-Class-Taste-and-Inequalities-in-the-Creative-Industries1-6.pdf>

² <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/uk-working-class-art-2523393>

quiet, interior lives. Artworks by the likes of Rene Matic, Chila Burman, Corbin Shaw demonstrate the plurality of working-class identity, illuminating how class intersects with gender, race, religion, sexuality and migrant status. Early work by this year's Turner Prize nominee Jasleen Kaur features and taking centre stage in Two Temple's Place's atrium will be an inaugural London-based presentation of Matthew Arthur Williams' two-channel film and sound installation *Soon Come*.

Acts of censorship and erasure are brought to the fore in works by photographers Jo Spence and Sirkka Lisa-Konttinen – and exemplified by Bert Hardy's famous 1948 photograph *Gorbals Boys*, an image deemed too hopeful to suit the bleak narrative of *Picture Post*, for which it was taken.

"My aim has been to feature artists and photographers whose work challenges reductive, negative and one-dimensional representations of working-class lives and communities; those that offer positive, celebratory imagery, but also those that reflect the complexity, nuance and depth. Brought together, they challenge a canon which typically upholds the notion of working-class life as depressing, homogenous, undeserving of attention, only about poverty, crisis and deprivation. The exhibition is a call to action for museums and galleries to ensure that more authentic expressions of working-class life are present on their walls and in their collections."

– Samantha Manton, curator, *Lives Less Ordinary*

The result is a complex, nuanced and compelling examination of what Richard Hoggart called the 'sprawling and multitudinous and infinitely detailed character of working-class life' in all its pride, playfulness, humour and hope.

An exhibition in dialogue with its setting

Lives Less Ordinary unfolds across Two Temple Place in a thematic, non-chronological journey; the works in dialogue with each other and in juxtaposition with the conspicuous wealth of their surroundings. Originally built to house the offices of real-estate heir William Waldorf Astor, scion of one of the richest dynasties in US history, Two Temple Place has a heritage that stands in stark opposition to the realities of working-class life, lending an uneasy and intriguing tension to the exhibition.

The opulence of the setting is more complicated than it might first appear. The interiors and exteriors of Two Temple Place may be ornate and extravagant, but they

too are the work of working-class artists and artisans, who contribute their skill, material knowledge and passion to the friezes, flourishes and intricate detailing that define the building. Their work, largely unsigned and anonymous, adds a further dimension to the story of working-class art and creativity.

“Our exhibitions tell stories that are not being told elsewhere. As well as showcasing collections from outside London, we also share stories of people and communities who are underrepresented within the arts and arts organisations. So many of the objects in collections today are representative of middle- and upper-class lives, and rarely those of people from working-class backgrounds. Lives Less Ordinary strives to redress that balance, challenging both the elitism of the arts sector and the exuberant opulence of the neo-Gothic building itself.”

– Rebecca Hone, Head of Culture & Community, Two Temple Place

Kinship, community, connection and identity

The exhibition opens with a gallery exploring family: the first half focusing on the home as a site of care and kinship – including the work of the male artists of the Kitchen Sink realism movement in the '50s and working-class female artists of Feministo in the '70s; the second half showcasing artists such as Kelly O'Brien and Hetain Patel, who reflect family histories and intergenerational legacies of class in their work.

The exhibition goes on to include a display of photography in which artists explore and give visibility to diverse communities, from working-class Muslim men in Birmingham (Mahtab Hussain) to butches and studs from working-class backgrounds (Roman Manfredi).

In Two Temple Place's Library, further artists express their plural identities, demonstrating the intersections between class and other identity markers such as race, gender and sexuality. The main gallery gives space to artists exploring their connections with place, whether rural, urban or suburban. This progresses into a focus on community and social spaces beyond the home, including sites of leisure and pleasure from pubs, clubs and cafés to the seaside and the stadium.

Lives Less Ordinary concludes with a selection of Jo Spence's self-portraits produced during a 'photo-therapy' session on the subject of class in the late 80s

raising questions about the objectifying gaze, the distinction between object and subject in art – and who gets to make it.

Workshops and events

The free exhibition will be accompanied by a wide-ranging calendar of events for adults and children, including creative workshops, artist talks, performances and live music sessions, to help extend the conversation beyond the gallery walls. Throughout *Lives Less Ordinary*, Two Temple Place will continue working with state primary schools from around London, offering free workshops in literacy and creative activities designed to complement the exhibition's themes and content.

In addition, Two Temple Place is inviting participation from 10–15 individuals, with an interest in art or photography and who identify as working class or coming from a working-class background, to take part in a paid participation programme comprising a series of fortnightly dinner workshops exploring working-class lives and people within art. The outcomes of these discussions and creative activities with this group will be presented during the final month of the exhibition.

Lives Less Ordinary: Working-Class Britain Re-seen

(twotempleplace.org/events/lives-less-ordinary) is free to visit at Two Temple Place, London WC2R 3BD, from 25 January to 20 April 2025.

Notes to editors

Full programme announcement to be shared in early January 2025.

For more information about the art and artists featured in *Lives Less Ordinary*, interviews with Samantha Manton or Rebecca Hone, or to find out more about Two Temple Place's history and mission, contact twotempleplace@zetteler.co.uk.

Opening times

Tuesday, Thursday to Saturday: 11am – 6pm

Wednesday: 11am – 9pm

Sunday: 11am – 4:30pm

Closed Mondays

Accessibility information for the venue is available here: twotempleplace.org/visit-us/accessibility

Two Temple Place welcomes school visits to the building during exhibition openings. Find out more here: twotempleplace.org/learning/plan-your-school-visit

Samantha Manton

Samantha Manton is a London-based curator, researcher and exhibition-maker who is passionate about widening access to museums and cultural institutions. She holds a Master's degree in Art Gallery and Museum Studies from the University of Manchester and has over 15 years' experience in the creative industries. Six of these were spent working on V&A East, co-developing the curatorial vision for the new Storehouse and museum, curating the latter's permanent galleries and delivering participatory outreach projects with and for local communities. With working-class roots of her own, Samantha's curatorial practice puts underrepresented people at its heart.

Instagram: @samantha_may_manton

Rebecca Hone

Two Temple Place's Head of Culture & Community, Rebecca Hone has been with the organisation for over eight years, taking a leading role in working with curators to develop their exhibitions. Building on a degree in History of Art, Rebecca has spent her professional life embedded in the arts and cultural sector, with experience at a variety of galleries and arts organisations, including the De La Warr Pavilion, Jerwood Gallery, the Public Catalogue Foundation (now ArtUK) and Culture24 – as well as running Mascalls Gallery in Paddock Wood, Kent, before she joined Two Temple Place in 2016.

An advocate for the power of art and creativity to positively shape both individual wellbeing and wider society, Rebecca is proud to work with Two Temple Place to improve access to arts and arts education, while supporting diverse artists, creatives and curators.

Instagram: @remhone

Paddy Altern

The Director of Two Temple Place and the Bulldog Trust since February 2024, Paddy Altern brings 30 years of commercial, cultural, charitable and academic research experience to the charity. With MAs in both History and Archaeology, and a

professional background in international finance, Paddy has led a diverse career that has seen him advising on large-scale infrastructure projects all over the world, nurturing a wide-ranging knowledge base, a powerful sense of curiosity, and an open mind.

Before taking his post as Director, Paddy led a research project exploring the histories behind the art of Two Temple Place and the Astor fortune that built it, through a social justice lens. In this context, he is determined to ensure that Two Temple Place fulfils its ambition to make the UK cultural sector more accessible and inclusive with sincerity, independence of mind, and intellectual rigour.

Two Temple Place and The Bulldog Trust

Two Temple Place is a magnificent and eccentric neo-Gothic mansion in central London, owned and run by registered charity the Bulldog Trust. Since 2011, the major free annual exhibition programme showcasing regional public collections has invited 430,000 people to exhibitions that tell new stories which offer curating and employment opportunities for early-career cultural talent.

In keeping with the trust's goal of creating opportunities for those without them, Two Temple Place's flagship exhibition forms the heart of a busy year-round programme of community and cultural activity that offers opportunities to a wide range of people and shares the building with partners as a tool for conversation, education and advocacy. As a charity, the building generates income through fundraising and commercial hire. As a building, Two Temple Place inspires, provokes and welcomes creative reimaginations of its spaces, new retellings of its stories, and new artistic responses to its history and craftwork.

twotempleplace.org

Instagram: @twotempleplace