

As a writer and as an artist, the use of fragments of found material is an abiding interest.

I'm fascinated by the way in which disparate traditions and philosophies are drawn together in the poem. Researching this exhibition has forced the group to make novel connections between artworks; I'm delighted by this.

**Nigel Hutchinson**

For me, life is a series of adventures and challenges. Curating an art exhibition was certainly something new for me and looked like another way to broaden my experience. And so it has proved. Working alongside lovely people, trips to London and Margate, deepening my understanding of Eliot and his poem and, of course, contributing to the choice of artworks for the exhibition. What fun!

**Celia O'Donovan**

Well, if ever a project had my name on it it's this one! Two loves, Poetry and Art in one project, and T.S. Eliot to boot! Often quoted by my father throughout my childhood, I always felt a connection with Eliot. To spend time with like-minded people to create this exhibition has been a delight.

**Karen Parker, Mead Gallery**

I've worked in galleries since 1978 and curated lots of exhibitions. Working with people from outside the gallery world but who know Eliot's poem so profoundly has opened up all sorts of ideas, particularly about exhibition making and how we encourage responses to artworks from viewers.

**Sarah Shalgosky, Mead Gallery**

Ex Head of English, jazz pianist, poet, songwriter, guitarist, linguist. English was an antidote to the drudgery of school life in the '60s. Often our teacher read poems out loud, which often haunt me to this day. It was the SOUND that grabbed me – poetry as incantation or music rather than sense. And when he read us some Eliot it was like the first time I heard 'Waterloo Sunset' – that moment of recognition – the feeling of 'That's me'. It's been a privilege to work with so many talented people in putting our exhibition together.

**Chris Stanley**

I had previously studied the poem The Waste Land, and knew it to be very difficult. Meeting the other group members made me realise there is no right or wrong – no answers in this poem, as everybody's interpretation is different. This is reflected in the range of artwork on display. The study and discussion of these paintings has given me a lifelong interest in art.

**Jayne Stanley**

At the start of Journeys with 'The Waste Land', five years ago, it was crucial that the idea – of a group of people from different backgrounds curating an exhibition together – generated more than one version. It has been so exciting to see such a different project evolve in Coventry compared to the version made in Margate earlier this year.

**Mike Tooby, Lead Curator**

I came to this exhibition with little knowledge of The Waste Land but a large pinch of scepticism as to whether we could secure the interest of a group of volunteers for over two years in researching and delivering an exhibition. Not one of the group who joined us in 2016 has fallen by the wayside. As we come to the end of this project, my overwhelming feeling is one of respect: for the poem, which now seduces me as much as it does confound; but, most of all, for the group whose commitment has been unwavering.

**Fiona Venables, Mead Gallery**

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**Herbert**  
Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry

**COVENTRY CATHEDRAL**

**mead gallery**

**warwick arts centre**

Turner  
Contemporary

# Journeys with 'The Waste Land'

A visual response for Coventry  
to T.S. Eliot's poem

**Herbert**  
Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry

Saturday

15

September

until

Sunday

18

November

**COVENTRY CATHEDRAL**

Saturday

15

September

until

Thursday

15

November



Unknown photographer, Vivienne and T.S. Eliot at  
18 Crawford Mansions, July 1919.  
Courtesy of the T.S. Eliot Foundation

'What can you make of the man in this picture? Fine-looking, well-dressed, successful, clever, smart – a 'city gent' perhaps? His wife by his side is Vivienne, a society lady. He looks rather like a man who has everything. Yet the photo is the tip of the iceberg. The word 'nothing' appears in the poem nine times. The Waste Land is the work of a troubled soul.

We look at the date: 1922. Among many other things, it's a war poem.

Tom Eliot, reserved, reticent man, has given us perhaps the most deeply personal poem ever written. To take you into his world, we've put together some great works of art. We'll also give you the SOUND of the poem, which is all-important.

Nobody 'understands' The Waste Land. But you'll soon find it casts a spell.'

**Chris Stanley**

## About T.S. Eliot

Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888–1965) is generally acknowledged as one of the 20th century's greatest poets. Born in St Louis, in the United States, he moved to England in 1914 at the age of 25, settling, working, and marrying here. He became a British citizen in 1927.

In addition to *The Waste Land*, Eliot's canon includes the poems *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock* (1915), *The Hollow Men* (1925), *Ash Wednesday* (1930) and *Four Quartets* (1943). In the 1930s, he wrote *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (1939), which is the basis for the musical, *Cats*. He also wrote plays including *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) and *The Cocktail Party* (1949). Eliot was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948.

At the time of writing *The Waste Land*, Eliot's physical and mental state was poor, as was that of his wife, Vivienne, whom he had married in 1915. The couple would formally separate in 1933 and in 1938 Vivienne's brother, Maurice, had her committed to a lunatic asylum. In a private paper written in his 60s, Eliot confessed: 'I came to persuade myself that I was in love with Vivienne simply because I wanted to burn my boats and commit myself to staying in England. And she persuaded herself (also under the influence of [Ezra] Pound) that she would save the poet by keeping him in England. To her, the marriage brought no happiness. To me, it brought the state of mind out of which came *The Waste Land*.' (The Letters of T.S. Eliot: Volume 1, 1898–1922. London: Faber and Faber. 1988. p 533.)

In 1957, at the age of 68, Eliot married Esmé Valerie Fletcher, who had been his secretary at Faber and Faber since 1949. The poet died of emphysema in 1965. After his death, Valerie edited and annotated *The Letters of T.S. Eliot* and a facsimile of the draft of *The Waste Land*. Valerie Eliot died in 2012.

## The Waste Land

*The Waste Land* was written by T.S. Eliot in the aftermath of the First World War. It was edited by Ezra Pound and published in 1922. Today it is regarded as one of the most important poems of the 20th century and a central work of modernist poetry.

Early drafts of the poem reveal that it originally

contained almost twice as much material as the version published in 1922. The most significant cuts are due to Ezra Pound's suggestions, although Eliot himself removed large sections of the poem and Vivienne also requested a number of changes.

Eliot's poem is divided into five sections: *The Burial of the Dead*, *A Game of Chess*, *The Fire Sermon*, *Death by Water* and *What the Thunder Said*. It loosely follows the legend of the Holy Grail and the Fisher King combined with vignettes of contemporary British society.

The poem employs multiple voices, languages and locations. It makes reference to, amongst others, the works of Homer, Virgil, William Shakespeare, Geoffrey Chaucer and Richard Wagner; and uses scriptural writings including the Bible, the Hindu Brihadaranyaka Upanishad and the Buddha's Fire Sermon. Among its most famous phrases are 'April is the cruellest month' and 'I will show you fear in a handful of dust'.

*The Waste Land* is a poem widely acknowledged to be 'difficult' and defies any single interpretation or reading. Yet, it can be argued, it is best appreciated directly, as a flowing, jarring sequence of sounds and associations.

The poem remains a powerful evocation of one man's response to the time in which he lived. Although written nearly a hundred years ago, it continues to resonate with successive generations of readers, including many visual artists. In a world with continuous conflicts and destruction, and the unknown future impact of development and climate, we see new *Waste Lands* appearing. The complexity and conflicts are described in the poem and reflected in the exhibition.

## The Waste Land in Coventry

*Journeys with 'The Waste Land'* is an exhibition led by independent curator, Mike Tooby, and organised in collaboration with Turner Contemporary in Margate by the Mead Gallery and the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum in Coventry.

The exhibition in Coventry is the second iteration of *Journeys with 'The Waste Land'*. The first was presented at Turner Contemporary in Margate from 3 February – 7 May 2018. Researched by a group of volunteers from the local area, this first exhibition was initially

prompted by Eliot's relationship with the town, which he visited in 1921 with Vivienne, and where he wrote a significant section of the poem.

The selection of works for exhibition in Coventry has been made by a group of volunteers from the Coventry area who first came together in early 2016. Although several works were selected for exhibition in both Margate and Coventry, the two exhibitions are distinct. For the exhibition in Coventry, the research group chose to explore themes within Eliot's poem of journeys and fragmentation – relating these to the history of Coventry as a city fragmented by, and rebuilt upon the ruins of war. The lead curator, Mike Tooby, grew up in Coventry. He says: '*The context of Coventry and Warwickshire offers many resonances with The Waste Land: the everyday situations of people coming to terms with the aftermath of war, but evoked within a great tradition of poetry and myth, and offering glimpses of redemption in many voices from many different cultural and faith backgrounds.*'

## Coventry Waste Land Research Group

The Coventry Waste Land Research Group are: Eve Fleming, Wendy Freeman, Roger Green, Susan Green, Nigel Hutchinson, Celia O'Donovan, Chris Stanley and Jayne Stanley. Working with the exhibition's lead curator, Mike Tooby, and with staff from both the Mead Gallery and the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, this group has together selected works for exhibition, written explanatory texts, designed the gallery lay-out and developed a programme of events. Here are their accounts of the experience:

*In my role as Exhibitions Manager at the Herbert, I enjoy creating opportunities for different voices to be heard in the gallery. The Coventry Waste Land Research Group have shared their responses to T.S. Eliot's poem through the unique body of work in this exhibition – but that's only been the start of the conversation, as they've gone on to link the poem to the Herbert's collections, bringing fresh perspectives to works on permanent display.*

**Rosie Addenbrooke,**  
**Herbert Art Gallery & Museum**

*For me 'The Waste Land' exhibition has been my own journey, from an interest in literature and poetry to the opening in Coventry. Highlights have included our walking trip round the places in the city of London, described by Eliot in the poem, and the opening of the exhibition in Margate, at Turner Contemporary. It has changed my understanding of both the creation of and detail needed for an exhibition and also how I look at art.*

*As a doctor I have been interested in the different ways in poetry of describing stress and conflict.*

**Eve Fleming**

*Artist and Poet.*

*My involvement was made possible by the X18 bus service from Stratford upon Avon.*

*Old Kent Market, Margate and Coventry Market sustained my perpetual residence within the poem. 'and drank coffee, and talked for an hour' (The Waste Land) helped team meetings. The Sand Sample, taken in Margate on November 9th 2016, became my rock, while Violet Grey evolved.*

**Wendy Freeman**

*I came to this project as a complete layman. However I soon became interested in The Waste Land as I realised that no one could understand the entire poem, which is open to interpretation. We visited the exhibition at Margate. By then I felt I had learnt enough to make an informed judgement of the exhibition – most of which impressed me. Since my mobility had deteriorated, I borrowed a wheelchair to see part of the display and I became aware of the different experience this gave me. I have gained a lot from my involvement in the project.*

**Roger Green**

*Helping curate an exhibition was a new experience for me. I first became acquainted with Eliot when I did an Open University course in 20th century poetry. I used to listen to his poems on tape while I worked on large canvases. Now I have had other vistas opened up with the varied opinions from the group. I have concluded that The Waste Land is far too complex for mere mortals to grasp in its entirety. All we can hope for are glimpses, some more enlightened than others.*

**Susan Green**