

Exhibition Proposal

*Victorian Currents:  
The Telegraph Cable and Culture*

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prepared by Professor Caroline Arscott (The Courtauld Institute of Art) and Professor Clare Pettitt (King's College, London) April 2015

This exhibition will bring a discussion of Victorian art in a variety of genres into focus drawing on terms brought into prominence in the flood of publications that constituted the popular responses to cable telegraphy. It will be a spectacular show with strong visual focus and arresting narrative. It will say something new about the resources and concerns of Victorian art, not resting on the familiar style categories. Sections will revolve around large-scale pictures presented in original contexts.

In the Victorian period the cable-mad culture led to a re-imagination of time and space. This transformed understandings of the material environment. Distance, conjunction and splicing, transmission and conductivity or impedance became key terms for the interpretation of nature. These themes produced new possibilities for artists in their efforts to make meaningful history paintings, portraits, genre scenes and landscapes. The increasing commitment to pattern and ornament in late nineteenth-century art is apparent in the works on display and we argue that this is indicative of a shift to digital engagement with the world.

In each section up to four loans will feature alongside works from the Guildhall, producing a fresh framework of interpretation for the permanent collection. The use of loans is crucial to the expression of the themes and the aesthetic impact of the show. As far as possible we have identified works in London collections to minimise transport costs. At this stage the scheme has not been developed in terms of exact sizes and gallery dimensions. We have prepared a list of alternative possibilities for loans for each section in case of non-availability or the need to expand the size of any section. Alongside the fine art items we would include some maps, charts, images from graphic reportage, and if possible items such as code books. The themes of each section can be emphasised by the use of passages from contemporary literature to be displayed on wall panels. The exhibition makes a strong statement about the integration of scientific and technical ideas with cultural production. Art is not insulated from other departments of life, and this exhibition shows that knowledge is reconfigured in fundamental ways during the period 1850-1900.

The anniversary of the laying of the cable gives a strong rationale for the timing of the exhibition, the location yards from Telegraph Street a geographical one. The exhibition with its striking visual appeal will cater to a general gallery-going audience. The arguments about history and culture will be broadly accessible at the same time that the novelty and nuances of the arguments will engage a more academic audience, including one enthused by the history of science. The inclusion of a facility for generating coded messages will be of special appeal to a younger school-age audience, alert to rapidly changing twenty-first century communications technologies and ready to engage via text message or similar means.

# Section One

## Distance

The ambition to lay the cable stimulated Victorian imagination. The sheer distances involved in bridging between continents produced a reaction of awe. From 1851 when a submarine telegraph cable was laid between England and France the much bigger project of a transatlantic cable came to the fore. The necessity to house thousands of miles of cable on twin ships forced a visualisation of immense distance in compact accommodation.

This section shows seascapes and landscapes which are all in fact attempts to reach into history.

The ambitious, large-scale exhibition picture similarly sought to encompass vastness; locations could be presented as minimally differentiated and largely empty of incident but the ambition to load the image with poetic, historical, religious and emotional freight was intensified rather than abandoned.

Thus empty-looking historical landscapes were produced, which lack singular points of focus or maroon meaningful motifs in dispersed, evenly-notated fields of vision. The tactic allows for a threading through of intensity in every inch making for pictures that are emotionally powerful, yet highly challenging for the Victorian viewer. The paintings themselves can be thought of as vast conveyances. To unpack these pictures in terms of meaning was akin to paying out mile after mile of the cable into the ocean.







William Ayerst Ingram



Henry Moore



John Brett



William Dyce

# Section Two

## Conjunction

The 1850s saw the successful laying of the cable involving the repair of broken lines and the linking together of relay stations. The cable was a military technology that came to serve warfare, commerce, journalism and private life and so linked up these formerly separate areas of life.

This section shows soldiers, a journalist and a paper manufacturer.

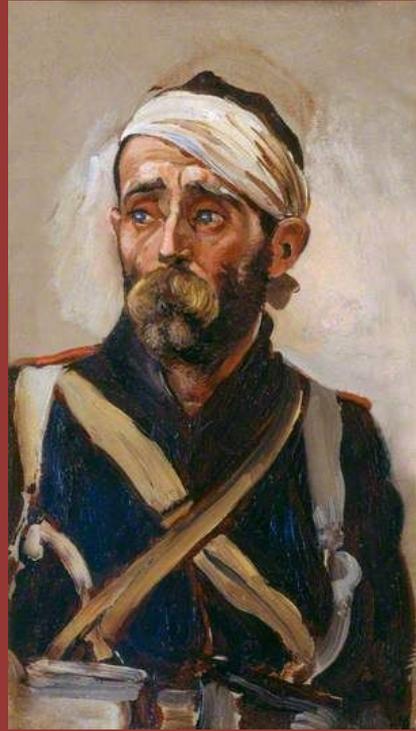
A revised formula for bourgeois portraiture emerged in the Victorian period that reconfigured the space allotted to the figure. The composition, and sometimes the figure itself, could be laterally compressed, and the sitter might be shown in a state of relaxation (temporarily suspended action) rather than busy or alert.

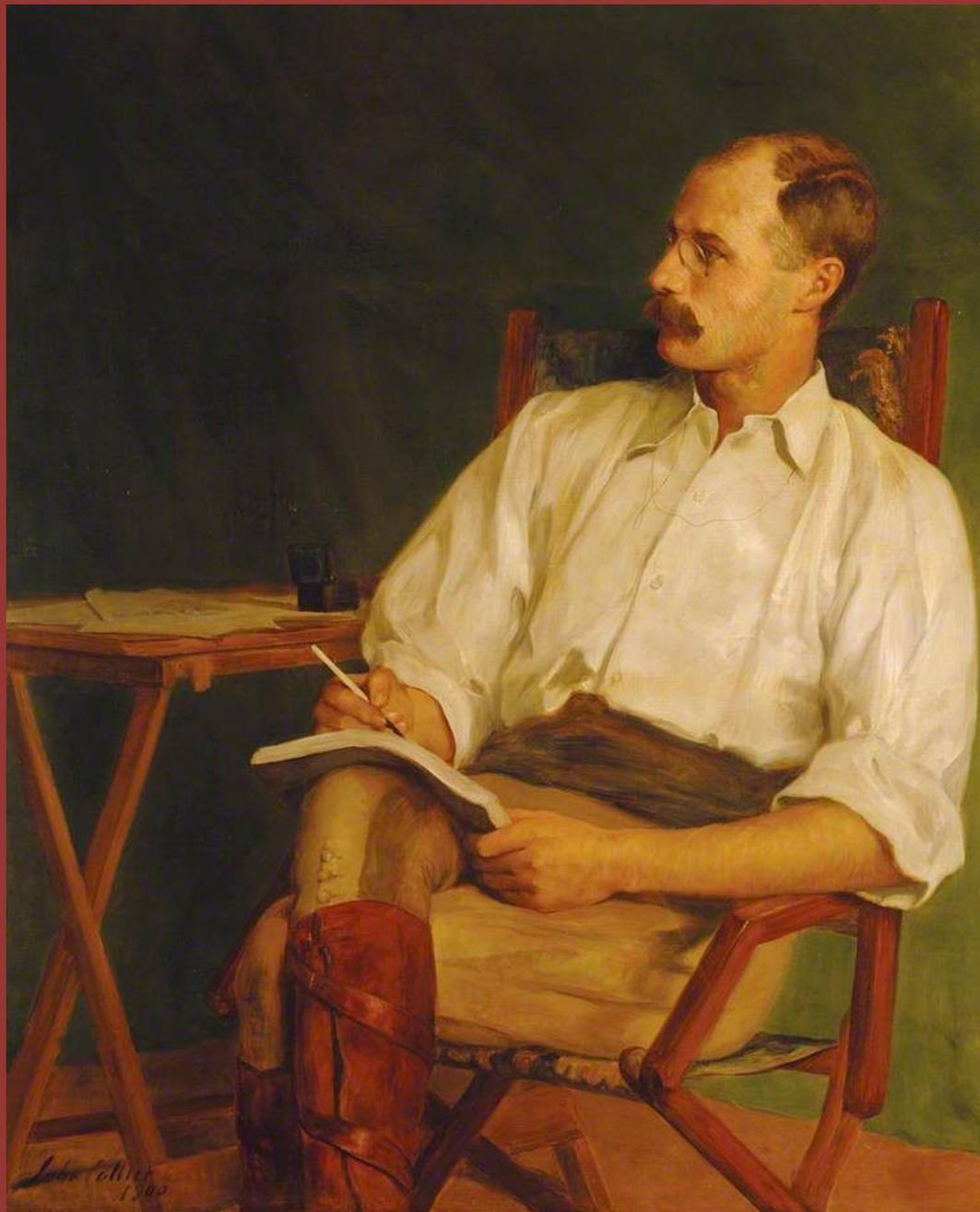
Military might and journalistic acumen were presented in a softened manner; the battlefield was joined to the drawing room or hospital ward. The genre figure of a convalescent soldier shows the womanly action of stitching and piecing together rather than military engagement. Journalism itself, in its mass distribution of papers, bridged the theatre of war and domestic settings. The assignment of gender roles was complicated by this conjuncture. The logic of ornament, with its conjunction of pattern elements in rhythmic repetition enters the pictures through the floral and geometric fabrics. The textile stripe on a uniformed leg substitutes for strategic lines of communication on the map above. The mobile joints of folding furniture challenge ideas of fixity.











# Section Three Transmission

The drama of electrical connection entranced Victorian publics. Contiguity, meaningful touching, the flow of affect from figure to figure, the passing of knowledge across generations, epochal transitions and generational transmission became pervasive cultural motifs.

This section includes figure paintings which belong to the category of genre and historical genre.

Potential, polarity and multiplication of figures in chains feature in this section. Artists imagine energy flowing through identical units arranged in sequence.









# Section Four: CIPHERING

In telegraphy, ciphers transform the unruly aural and/or graphic character of language to produce orderly (binary) electrical impulses. They also compress the extent of messages thereby allowing speedy transmission. Secrecy for public and private reasons was preserved. Technicians and scientists had to devise and deploy codes and be ready to decode the messages for customers.

This section focuses on genre paintings.

Victorian genre painting developed scenarios which deliberately problematised clear narrative. Enigmatic situations were presented, where the viewer was faced with fractured elements, prompting the process of decoding. Emotional clues in these pictures lead to the expectation of legibility of narrative but the overall meaning often remained uncertain, trapping the viewer in an undeciphered world.







# Section Five Impedance

Publicity about cable science made the materials of telegraphy highly visible. The failures of the cable forced commentators to acknowledge that signal didn't flow without impediment due to issues relating to conductivity and non-conductivity of materials. It was understood that sound, vision and electrical signals depended on waves passing through matter.

This final section returns to landscape painting.

Landscape painting in this period could produce drama out of the accumulation of organic and inorganic matter, where the thickness of the environment pressed on the consciousness of the viewer.

This concluding section of the exhibition suggests that rural, maritime and urban environments could all be represented as having the potential to obstruct and tear apart the traveller (or his/her surrogate, the picture viewer) as the Franklin crew were envisaged as being caught and torn apart by ice and wild bears in Landseer's picture. A process of exchange ensues in which the standard separation of body and environment gives way to a random assimilation in an energised and anthropomorphised cosmos. *Membra disjecta* within landscape could include rocks, waves, smoke and clouds. The drama of endeavouring to see through material, or failing to pass through it, brought viewers of landscape to consider mortality, obduracy of matter, and the uncontrollability of natural forces.



