

British Art Journal – Editorial - The Tate in a spot of bovver

In its long, vain and offensive struggle to retain unnecessary control over the images of out-of-copyright works in the collection (see past issues of *The British Art Journal*) the Tate, along with other like-minded museums, has sometimes argued that if it does not scrupulously monitor the use of these images, who knows what they might be used for. Great works of art might, heaven forbid, be put on utterly inappropriate items for sale to common people: biscuit tins, shower mats and the like, defiling the sacred images in the Tate's tender care.

You may remember the exchange between the master and pupil in *Forty Years On*:

SCHOOLMASTER: If anyone else touches you there that person is wicked. (He places his hand on FOSTER's knee.) No matter who it is, you should say to him, 'That belongs to me. It is my property. You have no business to touch it.'

FOSTER: That belongs to me and you have no business to touch it.

SCHOOLMASTER: Doesn't apply to me Foster. (Hitting him.) Doesn't apply to me.

Well that is the Tate's position: it doesn't apply to them. If you are the Tate, you can 'license' two of Turner's greatest paintings, *The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire* and *Fishermen at Sea*, to appear on... a pair of Doc Marten bovver boots (above). It is good to know that control over the reproduction of our historic masterpieces is in such good hands. The Tate evidently knows best. Why are we complaining about having to pay anything from £40–£90 pounds to reproduce a single out-of-copyright picture for the foolish purpose of expanding public appreciation of the works of art in the Tate? The Tate can do that for us: on carefully selected, eminently appropriate footwear.

The sensible thing to do, of course, would be for the Tate and the others in cahoots with it to make all images free for any use. The whole business of public downloading of images in places like the Tate should be automated: that is what digitization and computers are for. They are meant to save time, effort and money. Doesn't the Tate understand this? Other museums do, all over the world, from the Rijksmuseum to the Met to Yale to the Getty. Come on, the Tate: free up all that staff space. You might even be able to put more pictures on display. Save on salaries and pensions. Keep more senior curators instead of sacking them. Make redundant staff truly redundant: all those pointlessly chasing their own tails trying to prevent the expansion of knowledge while fussing over grabbing a few pennies from 'licensing' bovver boots. As if that kind of foolery could make any significant contribution to the problems of an institution that has been wasting money for decades. When there is a genuine opportunity to slim down its operations while actually doing some good, the Tate shuffles about and looks at its feet.