

# Exhibition Guide

## John Flaxman

*Line to Contour*

13 February – 21 April 2013

First Floor Galleries

## Timur Novikov

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Second Floor Galleries

## Nástio Mosquito

*Nástia Answers Gabi*

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Tower Room

**IKON**



## **John Flaxman**

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**First Floor Galleries**

John Flaxman (1755–1826) was internationally renowned during his lifetime. A close friend of the visionary poet and artist William Blake, his sculpture, decorative designs and illustrations inspired successive generations of artists.

This exhibition, curated by art historian David Bindman, consists of drawings and plaster models for sculpture from UCL Art Museum at University College London. Much of the work, including sketches from everyday life, is rarely seen and gives us an extraordinary insight into Flaxman's working methods as he developed ideas from two dimensions to three, from drawings to sculpture, so that his lines became contours.

Much of Flaxman's work exemplified neoclassicism and the renewed interest in the art and architecture of ancient Greece and Rome. He responded to the concerns of his time, living through the Age of Enlightenment which gave way to the Industrial Revolution, characterised by scientific, philosophical and intellectual enquiry often combined with Christian beliefs that simultaneously informed a development of the British Gothic revival.

Born in York in 1755, Flaxman learnt the techniques of sculpting in his father's plaster-cast workshop, beginning

his own career as a designer for Josiah Wedgwood, the world famous potter and pioneer of industrial mass production. An early self portrait (1779) reflects his classical interests, with an acanthus leaf design and an antique figure on a plinth in the background. Flaxman presents himself as an artist, staring intently at the viewer, with his right hand resting on a human skull, a typical motif of *memento mori* (Latin: 'remember you must die'). This is prophetic of Flaxman's later work as a designer of funerary monuments.

In 1787 Flaxman travelled to Rome to study antiquities there, initially financed by Wedgwood. Staying for seven years, this was an exceptionally creative period of his life, when he produced his most famous works, engravings for publications of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Dante's *Divine Comedy* and *The Tragedies of Aeschylus*. This exhibition includes preliminary drawings for these works, much copied by nineteenth century European artists, including David, Ingres, Delacroix and Goya.

Flaxman developed an innovative drawing style, with pure outline and little detail, as can be seen in later illustrations of Roman street scenes. Outline studies of male figures in cloaks and the famous sketch of a woman shaking a cloth out of a window are distinctive in their stylistic purity, reduced to a few essential lines. These simplified, often idealised studies of the human form are concerned with the essential movements of the body.

On returning to London, Flaxman continued his practice in sculpture, finding commissions for major public sculptures as well as for numerous smaller funerary monuments produced in large numbers for churches throughout Great Britain and the Empire, including St Paul's Cathedral and Westminster Abbey. Amongst these is a portrait bust of the influential local industrialist Matthew Boulton, now in Handsworth Church, Birmingham.

Flaxman's workshop was extensive, with the artist often confining himself to drawings and preparatory clay models, subsequently cast in plaster, leaving others to create the final marbles. Relief plaster figures, sometimes preceded by sketches, are shown here and were intended to be scaled up and then carved. They epitomise an emotional dimension in Flaxman's work which is, paradoxically, heightened through aesthetic restraint and deliberate simplicity. He contrasts figures with architectural features, setting the flow of the human body against straight lines and rectilinear forms. Drapery was particularly important to him, and in a lecture devoted to the subject he describes its relation to the body as being 'like speech to thought'.

Flaxman was the first Professor of Sculpture at The Royal Academy from 1810 until 1826 when he died in relatively poor circumstances despite his fame. His work was saved from creditors by his sister-in-law, Maria Denman, who donated the surviving pieces to UCL in 1847.

## **Associated Event**

### **John Flaxman: Sculptor and Accidental Revolutionary Wednesday 13 March, 6.30–7.30pm – FREE**

David Bindman, Emeritus Professor of the History of Art, University College London, gives an illustrated lecture on the work of John Flaxman and discusses the current exhibition, *Line to Contour*. Chaired by Dr. Malcolm Dick, Director, Centre for West Midlands History, University of Birmingham. David Bindman also signs copies of Ikon's John Flaxman catalogue. Places are free but should be reserved by calling Ikon on 0121 248 0708.

### **Ikon Shop**

*Line to Contour* is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue with texts by David Bindman priced £15, special exhibition price £13.

### **Exhibition Supporters**

UCL Art Museum acknowledges the financial support of UCL and the Higher Education Funding Council for England.

**Timur Novikov**  
**13 February – 21 April 2013**  
**Second Floor Galleries**

Timur Novikov (1958–2002) was pre-eminent and extremely influential in Russia during the 1980s and 1990s. Born in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) Novikov is best known for his use of fabric whereby he developed a style with instantly recognisable, almost childlike motifs. His later work was a kind of repudiation and culminated in the New Academy – a local art movement he founded in order to encourage a return to classical ideals of beauty. Photographs, often of cultural heroes such as Oscar Wilde, became incorporated into his appliqué collages and his work became increasingly luxurious and tactile, especially poignant as during his last years Novikov was blind.

During the 1980s, coinciding with the Perestroika years (President Gorbachev's re-structuring and opening-up of the Soviet Union), Novikov's fabric pieces reflected a youthful pop optimism which gained him international recognition. A large scale series of them were exhibited at the World Financial Center in New York in 1997. Flag-like, they convey ecological and anti-war sentiments with subtle humour often derived from his response to the sewing and patterns in the fabric. Two tractors make their way along diagonal stripes, while three kayaks negotiate the rapids of all-over paisley curves. Novikov often makes explicit reference to an horizon, using the line formed by the seam of the two main pieces of cloth as basis, for example, for

the sun setting or a city skyline. Novikov accounted for its recurrence in his work through the influence of the years he spent as a child on the northern coast of Russia:

I spent my days wandering through tundra, catching lemmings, observing polar bears from a distance, enjoying the Northern Lights, sailing down fjords on makeshift rafts and engaging in a whole host of other activities beyond the dreams of any city-dweller. I think that was when I fell in love with horizontal perspectives. Looking at my landscapes, one can clearly see my penchant for open horizons, far-off distances and small objects.

In 1989 Novikov invented the 'New Russian Classicism', espoused by his New Academy of All Kinds of Arts. Originally the group was made up of acquaintances including affiliates such as Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage and Andrew Logan. However, with an increasing conservatism and sense of alarm at the speed of change within post-communist Russian culture, the group changed their name to the New Academy of Fine Arts and set themselves on a course against popular (Americanised) culture. Preferring to follow old masters such as Raphael and da Vinci they searched out classical music evenings and rare books, rather than techno raves and ephemeral literature.

Dressed as dandies, with frock coats and velvet dresses, commitment to New Russian Classicism was total and won the support of foreign artists such as Pierre et Gilles and

Brian Eno. The New Academy organised many exhibitions during the post-communist 1990s, featuring other St. Petersburg artists. Novikov was defiant during the years he spent fighting for the cause of New Russian Classicism. He often wrote and lectured on the subject of the self-styled Neo-Academists in a polemical style:

Fellow Europeans! Let us turn our looks away from what is palmed off to us instead of culture! Isn't it time for us to get down together to recreating traditions to be deserving children of our ancestors?

We should learn to paint beautiful canvases, carve beautiful sculptures, erect beautiful palaces, write beautiful verses, create beautiful music.

Then we would deservedly be called Europeans in the next century.

From Novikov's *Manifesto of the European Society on Preserving Classic Aesthetics*

From the late 1990s, with his sight lost due to illness, Novikov continued to develop his philosophy. His interest in art from the Far East, is evident in his *Euro-China* series (2002), 13 works which combine embroidered thread and beads with Western old-master reproductions on tasselled satin. Similarly, *Seven Pictures on Rice Paper* (2002) were drawn in Chinese ink. A video exhibited here

documents their production, in which we see the artist sightless, carefully feeling his way around the paper with the assistance of his close friend and fellow artist Sergei Bugayev (Afrika). We see the trees, houses and boats against a mountainous horizon, characteristic of Chinese landscape, as opposed to the straight line where sky met the flat expanses he experienced as a child. They are the output of an artist at the end of his life yet still at the height of his imaginative powers.

This exhibition is co-curated with the artist's step-daughter Masha Novikova-Savelyeva.

## **Associated Event**

**John Cage**

***Water Music***

**Thursday 14 March, 6–7pm – FREE**

Ikon and Birmingham Contemporary Music Group present John Cage's *Water Music* for piano. Performed by Christopher Hobbs, this seminal work also features radio, whistles, water containers and a deck of cards. Timur Novikov, with Cage and others, performed *The Water Symphony* by the composer, in St. Petersburg in 1988. A six minute concert, it is performed twice during the event, also giving an opportunity to view the Novikov exhibition. Pay bar available.

## **Nástio Mosquito**

### ***Nástia Answers Gabi***

**13 February – 21 April 2013**

### **Tower Room**

Angolan artist Nástio Mosquito is one of the most energetic and versatile artists of his generation. He uses music, photography, film and performance poetry to explore the nature of our globalised world. His videos, dwelling particularly on contemporary art and society, could not be smarter or funnier, more knowingly politically incorrect with respect to post-colonialist clichés.

In *Nástia Answers Gabi* (2010), we first encounter the artist in a derelict building after listening to his haunting a capella version of *Time is on My Side*, talking to the camera as 'Nástia' (the female equivalent of Nástio) and in a joke-Russian accent.

There follow nine short scenes in which he answers questions posed by Gabi Ngcobo, an independent curator, writer and artist from Durban, sometimes with passion, in musing diatribes, sometimes dismissively. Easily misread as a kind of world-weariness, it is the extraordinary expression of an urgent desire to engage with reality at all levels.

Contains strong language that some may find offensive.

### **Access**

The Tower Room is only accessible via a number of steps.

**For more information about these artists and our off-site programme please visit the Resource Room where you can find a selection of books, audio and film.**

**If you have any questions about the exhibition please ask the Visitor Assistants in the gallery.**

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