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Understanding art from its context

From Lady White

Sir, I have nothing but joy in the current spate of openings at several of our major museums and art galleries. But I am worried at the new displays at one museum — the Millbank Tate — in eschewing a chronological approach to the displays and concentrating on four thematic displays which occupy most of the gallery space. “Tate Britain” must, I suggest, soon return to being just that — a permanent exhibition of British art, displaying the major part of its collections in chronological order.

The gallery’s primary purpose after all is to tell the evolving story of British art — and since the recent re-opening, it clearly does not do this as it should. As a teaching tool to children, students and foreign visitors it is now a failure.

Thematic displays can be challenging, but they should not be allowed to predominate in our national art collections. The history of art is a long story of development and social change: to understand it we need the occasional frisson of thematic displays, but we need even more the strong historical line throughout to give us a sense of what has gone past, to understand the present, and to anticipate the future.

Yours faithfully,
ANNE WHITE.

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