

Institution: Oxford Brookes University		
Unit of Assessment: 28, History		
Title of case study: Transforming Curatorial Practice and Enhancing Understanding through Themes in British Art		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2007–2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Christiana Payne	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Professor of History of Art	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: [text removed for publication]
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014–2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Christiana Payne's novel research approach, focussing on themes in British landscape painting, has had significant impact on curatorial practice within UK museums and galleries and increased the viewing public's understanding of art. Her research has generated:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • three loan exhibitions at the Royal West of England Academy, Bristol (RWA) • three collection-based exhibitions at the Higgins Bedford (HB) • educational activities and online resources at the National Gallery, Tate Britain and the Victoria and Albert Museum. <p>Payne's work has led to enhanced appreciation of links between historic and contemporary art, and the contribution of trees to wellbeing. Her accessible writing style for exhibition texts has enabled the RWA and HB to widen their appeal, increase visitor numbers and achieve national press recognition. Her work has had a lasting effect on curatorial practice at these two collections of national importance. Payne's work has also directly supported the National Gallery, Tate Britain and the Victoria and Albert Museum to enhance their outreach activities.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Payne is one of the leading authorities on British art of the long 19th century. Her research is rooted in social and political history. Instead of focussing on artistic movements, she has pioneered the study of themes, beginning in the 1990s with groundbreaking publications on agricultural landscape and cottage scenes. Since 1993–4, when her PhD thesis became the foundation for exhibitions at the Djanogly Art Gallery, University of Nottingham and the Yale Center for British Art, Connecticut, USA, she has produced publications based on extensive scholarly research, written in an accessible style.</p> <p>Payne's books have illuminated the subject matter of paintings, highlighting the relationship between figures and landscape, and the stories 18th and 19th century art conveyed to its original audiences. Drawing on a wide range of sources, including artists' writings, exhibition reviews, poetry, and accounts of work processes, she has shown how important landscape paintings were to ideas of national identity, class relationships, scientific discovery and the growth of environmentalism. In recent years, she has undertaken research on two major interrelated themes: the coast and the sea; and the depiction of trees. She has published a monograph on each theme: <i>Where the Sea Meets the Land: Artists on the Coast in Nineteenth-Century Britain</i> (2007) and <i>Silent Witnesses: Trees in British Art, 1760–1870</i> (2017) (R1, R2).</p> <p>1. The coast and the sea</p> <p><i>Where the Sea Meets the Land</i> demonstrated the importance of themes of shipwreck and rescue in 19th century painting: lifeboats and lighthouses providing a counterpoint to the emphasis on distress and loss. Another chapter was devoted to artists' studies of the movements of the waves.</p>		

The publication of the book led to an approach from practising artist, Janette Kerr. Having read the book, Kerr invited Payne to collaborate on an exhibition 'The Power of the Sea: Making Waves in British Art 1790-2014' (April–June 2014, RWA), devoted to the power of the sea in historic and contemporary art. Payne selected the historic works, researched and wrote labels, catalogue entries, and an essay for the catalogue (**R3**). The exhibition highlighted the dangers of the sea – shipwrecks in earlier centuries, rising sea levels as a result of climate change in our own – as well as the role of the sea as a space for contemplation. The success of this exhibition led to further commissions from the RWA to co-curate the exhibition 'Air: Visualising the Invisible in British Art, 1768-2017' (June-September 2017) with the artist Stephen Jacobson, and 'Fire: Flashes to Ashes in British Art, 1692-2019' (June–September 2019) with the artist Rachael Nee. In each case Payne once again wrote labels, catalogue entries and an essay (**R4**, **R5**), as well as undertaking further research on the themes and the individual works. 'Air' continued the environmentalist emphasis of 'The Power of the Sea' with its consideration of air quality and air pollution, 'Fire' contrasted the creative and destructive forces of the natural element.

The final chapter of *Where the Sea Meets the Land*, on the representation of fisherfolk as exemplars of virtue, provided the groundwork for an application to the Arts Humanities Research Council (AHRC) for a collaborative doctoral award. The PhD student, Mary O'Neill, completed her thesis in 2015, and in 2014 she devised and curated an exhibition, 'Model Citizens: Myths and Realities' at Penlee House Gallery and Museum, Penzance.

2. The depiction of trees

Silent Witnesses (**R2**), like *Where the Sea Meets the Land*, was based on extensive research in primary and secondary sources. Payne revealed how important the drawing of trees was to the development of British landscape painting. Different species were carefully distinguished and individual trees became the subjects of portraiture. Artists such as John Constable, Samuel Palmer and Edward Lear approached trees as living beings and powerful sources of wellbeing and symbolism. Ancient trees were particularly valued as links with the history of Britain and especially of the growth of democracy; oak trees had significance as the foundation for the wooden ships of the navy, protector of the coasts.

These themes had strong resonance in 2017, the year of the Woodland Trust's Charter for Trees, Woods and People, and Payne undertook activities in a range of museums to enhance public understanding and enjoyment of drawings and paintings of trees from the 18th and 19th centuries. The Curator of the Cecil Higgins Collection at HB invited Payne to co-curate an exhibition, 'A Walk in the Woods: A Celebration of Trees in British Art' (September 2017–February 2018). The success of this exhibition has led to two further exhibitions at the HB: 'Round and Round the Garden: A Celebration of Horticulture in British Art' (April-September 2019) and 'Dreams and Nightmares' (October 2019–March 2020). Through these exhibitions, Payne has developed distinctive strands in her research, looking at the ways artists work – from their drawing techniques to their use of dream imagery – and at ideas about the restorative power of nature. Payne, with Professor Fiona Stafford, Oxford University, also organised a conference, 'Trees and Wellbeing: Past, Present and Future' (18 May 2018), which brought together Humanities scholars and environmental activists.

3. References to the research

R1. Christiana Payne, *Where the Sea Meets the Land: Artists on the Coast in Nineteenth Century Britain*. Bristol: Sansom and Company, 2007. ISBN 9781904537649

R2. Christiana Payne, *Silent Witnesses: Trees in British Art, 1760-1870*. Bristol: Sansom and Company, 2017. ISBN 9781911408123

R3. Janette Kerr and Christiana Payne, eds. *The Power of the Sea: Making Waves in British Art 1790 – 2014*. Bristol: Sansom and Company, 2014. ISBN 9781908326577 Catalogue to accompany the exhibition *The Power of the Sea: Making Waves in British Art 1790 – 2014* at RWA, Bristol.

R4. Gemma Brace and Christiana Payne, *Air: Visualising the Invisible in British Art 1768–2017*. Bristol: Sansom and Company, 2017. ISBN 9781911408130 Catalogue to accompany the exhibition *Air: Visualising the Invisible in British Art 1768 – 2017* at RWA, Bristol.

R5. Gemma Brace, Rachael Nee and Christiana Payne, *Fire: Flashes to Ashes in British Art, 1776–2019*. Bristol: Sansom and Company, 2019. ISBN 978-1-911408-38-3 Catalogue to accompany the exhibition *Fire: Flashes to Ashes in British Art, 1776–2019* at RWA, Bristol.

Evidence of quality: AHRC Research Leave Scheme, 2003, GBP18,145, ref AH/G005877/1 (research leave supported writing of *Where the Sea Meets the Land*). AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Award, 2011–2014. GBP54,250, ref AH/I023244/1.

4. Details of the impact

The main beneficiaries of the research were the institutions and their curators. Payne's approach has proved to have genuine reach and significance because it has had a major impact on two provincial galleries with nationally important art collections, the RWA and the HB. In each case, the initial exhibition was so successful that it was followed by two further exhibitions, all co-curated by Payne. Payne's research proved very accessible to museum and gallery visitors, enabling them to relate to universal themes and historical events, in a refreshing departure from the usual emphasis on art movements. In this way the RWA and HB were able to reach out to new audiences, while at the same time providing enough academic rigour to satisfy their core supporters. As the Director of the RWA comments, 'Christiana combines academic rigour with the ability to write display labels for a broad audience, making complex, often fascinating, information accessible without compromise' (**S1**). Payne's research has also had demonstrable success in enhancing understanding, appreciation and wellbeing amongst the wider public of exhibition visitors and conference delegates.

1. Exhibitions at Royal West of England Academy

The exhibition 'The Power of the Sea', with its combination of historic and contemporary items, proved to be a winning formula. In the words of the RWA Director, it was an 'exemplar for future exhibitions' (**S2**), each taking one of the four elements as their theme. These exhibitions have introduced visitors and wider public to the historical and contemporary treatments of the same themes, enhancing understanding of a shared tradition. They have broadened visitors' horizons: practising artists and those who primarily enjoy contemporary art have come to appreciate earlier art, while art historians and more conservative visitors have recognised the intellectual content and visual appeal of current work. Payne's emphasis on artists' writings and methods has made her work readily accessible to contemporary artists, and therefore particularly appropriate for this venue.

Over 11,000 visitors came to the 'The Power of the Sea' exhibition, an increase of 3,000 over those who had visited previous RWA exhibitions. The exhibition also had over 2,000 more paying visitors than to any exhibition over the previous year. In April/May alone, visitor numbers were 44% higher over the same time in the previous year. Shop takings increased by 200% and the number of patrons (i.e. those who give over GBP300) increased by one-third (**S1**). Visitor feedback was very positive – 'the most inspirational exhibition I've been to for many years'; 'an excellent and well-conceived exhibition'; 'outstanding exhibition – more please'; 'superbly curated and very good contextual information and interesting interpretations' (**S3**).

Of the 229 people who completed the visitor survey, 82% considered their enjoyment was enhanced by having the contemporary and historical paintings side-by-side; 85% had discovered artists who were new to them; and 87% felt they had 'learnt new things about artists' responses to the sea'. Payne's labels and catalogue entries were well-regarded with over 80% of viewers considering them 'just right' in both detail and level of information (**S4**).

'Air' followed the same format, with historic and contemporary sections, and was also very successful, particularly for the prestige of the RWA. The RWA benefited from its first loan from the National Gallery (Joseph Wright's *Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump*) and a double page review in *The Times*: Rachel Campbell-Johnston described it as 'wonderfully ambitious, delightfully eloquent ... a show to aerate the imagination' (04.08.17).

'Fire' further enhanced the prestige of the RWA. Important works were loaned from the National Gallery of Scotland, the National Maritime Museum and the Imperial War Museum. A lengthy preview of the exhibition in *The Spectator* was followed by another review in *The Times*, both of which recognised 'Fire' as 'the third in a trilogy of exhibitions on elemental themes' (**S5**). Rachel

Campbell-Johnston praised the 'diversity of ideas', especially in the historical section, which 'leads the viewer from the domestic hearth to the conflagrations of war, from the mysticism of religion to the dawning age of science, from a world of utilitarian practicality into a febrile land of the imagination' (*The Times*, 21.6.19) (S5).

The RWA's Director confirms the importance of Payne's research in the growth of the RWA's reputation: 'Thanks to [Payne's] support and curation, the calibre of the three shows we have collaborated on so far has tangibly contributed to our long-term strategy of building a reputation befitting our beautiful gallery spaces ... Visitor reception of the "Elements" cycle has been consistently excellent ... It is a sustainable model that we will be pursuing with "Earth" in 2023' (S1). Payne will co-curate this fourth exhibition in the series.

2. Exhibitions at Higgins Bedford

'A Walk in the Woods' proved a winning formula for the Cecil Higgins collection at HB. This collection is based in the town museum, which is committed to working with 'a massively diverse community of 172,402 people' to widen access and enhance wellbeing. As the Curator says, it 'holds an exceptional art collection of international standing' and 'aims to reach the broadest mix of audiences to bring them into a space that, ideally, they feel is theirs' (S6). As finances are limited, the HB has to find new ways of displaying its existing collection, rather than staging loan exhibitions.

The exhibition resulted in visitor numbers increasing by 55% compared to the same period in the previous year (24,798 visited the HB while the exhibition was on), and shop sales increased by 59%. The popularity of the exhibition enabled the HB to find new partners and put on events for families and children (S6). Payne participated in two of these, encouraging children and parents to draw in the gallery and observe trees more closely outside the museum. The HB held its first Study Day, which was a great success and was followed by a further Study Day on 'Dreams and Nightmares'. 'A Walk in the Woods' was favourably noticed in the *Daily Telegraph*, the *i*, the *Guardian* and the *Mail on Sunday* (the first time such national coverage had been achieved), and Payne was interviewed by Three Counties Radio (07.11.17) (S7).

'A Walk in the Woods' was sponsored by the Friends of the Museum, who were very pleased with it and announced their willingness to sponsor further thematic shows. It also appealed to non-traditional audiences, enabling the museum to widen its reach. The Curator felt that it offered a model of an art exhibition with an intellectual quality without the need for jargon. She says, 'I've never worked thematically before, but the Higgins Bedford collection is perfect for thematic exhibitions with a genuine multi-level appeal. The tree theme was very accessible and suited to social media, and Christiana's approach, her writing and interactions with our audiences got the pitch just right.' She adds, 'This was my first experience of co-curating with an academic ... it has reinforced my professional confidence ... and has changed how I think about exhibition design' (S6).

Visitor feedback was overwhelmingly positive: 'World class works. Stimulated and inspired to get out there and draw/paint look at trees'; 'the explanations were fantastic' and 'will look at trees in a new way', being typical comments (S8).

The collaboration between Payne and the HB Curator has led to two further thematic exhibitions: 'The Garden' (March 2019) and 'Dreams and Nightmares' (October 2019). They worked together on a catalogue of the latter exhibition, the first time the HB had produced a catalogue of one of their temporary exhibitions. Visitor responses continued to be uniformly enthusiastic – for example, for 'Dreams and Nightmares': 'A wonderfully thoughtfully curated exhibition!'; 'Fascinating – drawing so many diverse artists and traditions together'; 'Excellent – the best exhibition I've seen here, thank you!' (S9)

3. Working with national museums and galleries

The reach of Payne's research has been underscored by extensive work with major national institutions, keen to make use of her groundbreaking approach to enhance their own public outreach. The three most important national institutions, the National Gallery, Tate Britain and the Victoria and Albert Museum, have all made use of her research in this way. In 2016 Payne was invited to contribute essays on a painting at Tate Britain. She chose to do further research on William Dyce's *Pegwell Bay*, and engaged two collaborators, Professor Fiona Stafford (Oxford

University) and Professor Clare Willson (Glasgow University). Their findings have been published on the Tate website in the 'Art in Focus' series (**S12**).

In 2017 the National Gallery invited Payne to teach a course on trees in art (attended by 60 participants) and the Victoria and Albert Museum invited her to assemble three topic boxes for public viewing in their Prints and Drawings Study Room. Her discussions with the latter museum resulted in two successful exhibitions there, also in 2017, on trees in photography and in book illustration. As the Curator of the Prints Section attests, this was 'the first occasion when an approach from an academic has triggered two simultaneous displays ... accompanied by new topic boxes ... this represents ... a new model in national museum and university partnership working' (**S10**). Payne's success in curating exhibitions has led to an invitation from the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, to curate an exhibition of their Pre-Raphaelite drawings (scheduled for February 2021).

4. Trees and wellbeing

Payne's research on trees in British art perfectly suited one of the Tree Charter's ten principles, 'celebrate the power of trees to inspire.' The Woodland Trust invited her to speak at the Hay Festival in May 2017, at the launch of the Charter in Lincoln Cathedral in November 2017, and at the Cheltenham Festival in October 2019.

Many visitors to 'A Walk in the Woods' commented on the calm feeling they got from their visit. The Curator comments that the wellbeing effect was 'another unexpectedly strong outcome of the exhibition ... it brought in users, from a local yoga group to people recovering from mental illness, for the first time' (**S6**).

The wellbeing theme was pursued further in the May 2018 conference at Oxford Brookes on 'Trees and Wellbeing'. The participants included artists, academics, environmental activists, healthcare professionals and horticulturalists. 48 of the 135 delegates filled in evaluation forms. Nineteen said they would change the way they think about trees and wellbeing 'a lot' and a further 25 'a little' as a result of the conference; all 48 said that the conference had made them more aware of the role of trees in literature and art. One of delegates noted: 'I have always liked trees but I am now more convinced than ever about their important role in our wellbeing and as a source of inspiration for poetry and art, and also in education' (**S11**).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

S1. Testimonial from Director of The Royal West of England Academy

S2. Interview with Director of The Royal West of England Academy

S3. Extracts from visitors' books for 'The Power of the Sea' exhibition, The Royal West of England Academy, 2014

S4. Analysis of visitor survey for 'Power of the Sea' exhibition, The Royal West of England Academy, 2014

S5. Evaluation of 'Fire' exhibition by The Royal West of England Academy, 2019

S6. Testimonial from Curator of Cecil Higgins Art Collection, Higgins Bedford

S7. Evaluation of 'A Walk in the Woods' exhibition by Higgins Bedford, 2018

S8. Extracts from visitors' books for 'A Walk in the Woods', Higgins Bedford, 2017

S9. Evaluation of 'Dreams and Nightmares' exhibition by Higgins Bedford, 2019

S10. Testimonial from Curator, Prints Section, Word and Image Department, Victoria and Albert Museum

S11. Analysis of evaluation forms for 'Trees and Wellbeing' conference, 2018

S12. Tate website, In Focus project, Christiana Payne, with Fiona Stafford and Clare A. P. Willson, 'Pegwell Bay, Kent – a Recollection of October 5th 1858, ?1858-60 by William Dyce', <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/in-focus/pegwell-bay-kent-william-dyce/the-painting>