

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY



### Hodgkin wins first Swarovski Whitechapel award

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*The first Art Icon Award Winner Howard Hodgkin*

Wanted: “a living modern master”. That was what the Whitechapel Gallery was after to launch its inaugural Swarovski Whitechapel Gallery Art Icon award. The 2014 winner, announced this week, is 81-year-old British painter Howard Hodgkin.

How was he chosen, why is he an “art icon”, and what is an art prize for? Does it primarily honour an artist, amuse the public, endorse a museum, bolster the market, or comment on contemporary culture?

These are some of the questions that, when Whitechapel’s director Iwona Blazwick asked me to join the Art Icon jury, made me ambivalent. The art world is already top-heavy with a few insanely fashionable, bestselling names. And British awards given annually decline in interest, because they run out of creditable winners: the Turner Prize, given in its first decade to significant figures including Anish Kapoor, Antony Gormley and Hodgkin himself, has since 2000 become trivial, failing to produce any winner who will be even a footnote in art history at this century’s end.

Prizes tied to institutions tend anyway to be narrow, predictable. The Turner, under Tate’s auspices, is concentrated on conceptual art; the National Portrait Gallery’s £30,000 BP Portrait Prize and the Mall Galleries’ £25,000 Threadneedle Prize reward conservatism; the Royal

Academy's £25,000 Charles Wollaston Award favours international celebrity (Jeff Koons, Anselm Kiefer, the Chapman Brothers, in the past decade).

Prizes represent establishment consensus, but art is anarchic, unconventional – “truth is the daughter of time, not of authority”, as the 16th-century philosopher Francis Bacon said. But I said yes to the Whitechapel, because its Art Icon Award comes as close to taking a long view as a prize can. In recognising “an artist whose work has made and continues to make a profound mark upon both subsequent generations of artists and the wider cultural landscape”, Blazwick attempts to redress the art market's obsession with youth and the new by acknowledging, instead, sustained careers, and the thrill of late work. The prize offers no cash but some intellectual graft: an “in conversation” between the winner and “a key cultural figure” at the gallery.

As it becomes established over the years, the award, which will be marked by a lavish Swarovski-sponsored ceremony in April, should be a balance in the art world calendar with the Turner, which since 1991 has been restricted to artists under 50, working in the UK. The Whitechapel's approach to contemporary art is pluralistic and, while it felt appropriate – though not essential – that the first winner is British, the global scope of the Icon Award promises a varied roll of winners.



Hodgkin's 'In Bed in Venice' (1984-88) © Gagosian Gallery

Drawing attention to historical continuity, the award also defies today's trend for gallery-pushed reputations created overnight. Artists now in their seventies and eighties began their careers slowly, and when modernism was a living force, with Picasso, Miró, Chagall still working. Hodgkin quotes Degas as his greatest influence; he was a schoolboy when the poet Paul Valéry wrote of visiting Degas' studio, noting that “the labour of the artist is of a very old-fashioned kind; the artist himself a survival, a craftsman or artisan of a disappearing species, working in his own room, following his own homemade empirical methods.”

Valéry feared the artist of the future would be “a specialist officially clad in white, rubber-gloved, keeping to a precise schedule”. In a 21st century of brand-name factories run by celebrity artists, Hodgkin, who defines his expressive, mysterious, abstract works as “representational pictures of emotional situations”, is in turn a presence for young British abstract painters who have grown up in the internet age. At one of the best recent group exhibitions of this generation, *Nothing Fixed* (2011) at Redchurch Street Gallery, up the road from the Whitechapel, six promising abstract artists under 40 including Varda Caivano, Shaun McDowell, Alice

Browne and Ralph Hunter-Menzies chose to show alongside a single senior British painter – Hodgkin. They borrowed one of his small, luminous works from its private owner and hung it like an icon at the centre of the raw Shoreditch space.

For many reasons, therefore, Hodgkin was an obvious but not inevitable first Whitechapel Art Icon. To limit a dauntingly wide field, Blazwick suggested that for the inaugural award the jury consider artists who had had a major solo show at the Whitechapel – the gallery boasts an impressive number of premieres, from the only British exhibition of Picasso’s “Guernica” (1938) to the pop art show *This is Tomorrow* (1956) and Mark Rothko’s first British display (1961). Hodgkin’s 1985 Whitechapel show was his breakthrough, achieved at the age of 53.



*Hodgkin's 'Memoirs' (1949), a surprising early work © Gagosian Gallery*

Three decades on, Hodgkin’s work continues to surprise, increasing in scale and abstract daring, and experimenting with different media – notably his monumental 20ft long etchings “As Time Goes By” (2009), acquired by Washington’s Phillips Collection, and the extravagant yet simplified 2012 series “Acquainted with the Night”.

If the Art Icon continues to acknowledge late work of such quality and rarity, this new award will become the UK’s most serious art prize.