

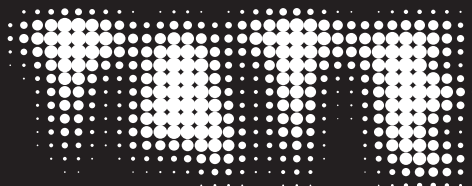
EDWARD BURRA

13 JUNE – 19 OCTOBER 2025

LARGE PRINT GUIDE



Please return after use



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All information is correct at the time of publication

CONCOURSE

Edward Burra (1905–1976) was born in London and lived most of his life at his family home near Rye, East Sussex. He was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis as a child and also had a blood condition which caused anaemia. His health shaped the course of his life and career. Encouraged by his parents, Burra pursued his interest in art, later calling painting 'a kind of drug' that helped relieve the pain. He studied in London at Chelsea Polytechnic and the Royal College of Art. At Chelsea, Burra formed lasting friendships with fellow students William 'Billy' Chappell, Barbara Ker-Seymer and Clover Pritchard. They remained close throughout their lives.

After art school, Burra and Chappell travelled to France. Drawn to the popular cultural entertainments in Paris, they visited museums and galleries, socialised in cafés and enjoyed the city's pulsing nightlife. Burra and his friends also made several trips to the sunny south of France, visiting port cities and towns including Marseille, Toulon and Cassis. They frequented crowded markets, dockside cafés, bars and dance halls. Burra's paintings capture the energy of the 'Roaring Twenties'. The French called the decade 'les Années folles' ('the crazy years'). It was a period of social and cultural liberation.

Burra drew inspiration from French literature, cinema and music. Like a magpie, he collected elements he liked and worked them into his paintings. He also incorporated memories of the places he visited and the people he saw, depicting them with an acute eye for detail. His imagination transformed these sources and recollections into satirical and surreal artworks.

## VISITOR INFORMATION

- The exhibition is divided into 6 sections, with 81 artworks and 85 archival works in total.
- There are no videos elements or sculpture.
- There will be music aka 'sound showers' playing in Room 2, specifically from Burra's record collection. There will also be music in Room 5, playing songs from performances linked to his design work. There will be a list of songs on the wall and a Spotify link to listen online.
- The exhibition is organised chronologically, a journey through Burra's travels abroad.
- Lighting levels in the gallery vary.
- There is seating in some rooms and portable stools are available at the exhibition entrance.
- Ear defenders, ear plugs, magnifying glasses, reading overlays, ramble tags and communication cards are available on the shelf at the exhibition entrance.
- Large print guides are available at the exhibition entrance and on the Tate website.
- A quiet room is available for anyone to who would like to spend some quiet time away from the gallery environment. You can find it on the main floor, next to the Play Studio.
- Toilets are located outside the exhibition space on the ground floor.
- The Changing Places facility can be accessed through the Clore Gallery. Please ask a member of Tate staff for directions.

Edward Burra

13 Jun – 19 Oct 2025

In partnership with



With additional support from

The Edward Burra Exhibition Supporters Circle:  
Lefevre Fine Art Ltd. and the Corcoran Family

Tate Members

### Supporter's Statement

As the world's largest independent insurance brokerage firm, Lockton prides itself on being purposefully unconventional, insatiably curious and uncommonly independent. We are committed to promoting greater cultural awareness and are proud to support the arts through our partnership with Tate, championing artistic freedom and expression.

This year, we are delighted to support Edward Burra at Tate Britain. This groundbreaking exhibition explores Black culture, disability, gender and sexuality through Burra's lyrical yet disruptive accounts of the cultural renaissance of the mid-1920s. We are proud to support art that aligns with our vision and shared values of independence, diversity and inclusion. At Lockton, our culture celebrates individuality among our Associates, clients and communities.

EJ Hentenaar CEO, Lockton Europe

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#### COLLECTION REGISTRARS

Giulia Caverni, Caroline McCarthy

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## BUILD

MCD Heritage Ltd

Graphics Printing & Installation

Albemarle Graphics

## LIGHTING

Dalkia UK

ROOM 1

## FRANCE AND METROPOLITAN CULTURE

Edward Burra (1905–1976) was born in London and lived most of his life at his family home near Rye, East Sussex. He was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis as a child and also had a blood condition which caused anaemia. His health shaped the course of his life and career. Encouraged by his parents, Burra pursued his interest in art, later calling painting 'a kind of drug' that helped relieve the pain. He studied in London at Chelsea Polytechnic and the Royal College of Art. At Chelsea, Burra formed lasting friendships with fellow students William 'Billy' Chappell, Barbara Ker-Seymer and Clover Pritchard. They remained close throughout their lives.

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## CLOCKWISE FROM WALL TEXT

### French Scene

1925–6

Watercolour on paper

This scene of a bustling market in the south of France is one of the first paintings Burra made after graduating from the Royal College of Art. He populated **French Scene** with depictions of people he knew. In the foreground, his elderly nanny acts as a flower seller while his mother, Ermentrude, holds a bouquet. The bus to Mont Orion indicates that the location could be the Mediterranean port town Marseille or perhaps nearby Toulon. It was the first painting that Burra sold, bought by his close friend, the society photographer Barbara Ker-Seymer.

Private collection London, courtesy of Austin Desmond

Fine Art

X89067

## Market Day

1926

Watercolour on paper

Here, Burra shows two sailors on shore leave, strolling through a crowded market in the south of France. A port is visible in the background as well as a sign for a cinema. When he painted **Market Day**, Burra had not yet visited the Mediterranean coast. Instead, his painting draws inspiration from French films and literature. When it was first exhibited at the Leicester Galleries in 1929, critics noted that the work offered 'impressions of the seething life of Marseille'.

Pallant House Gallery, Chichester (On Loan from a Private Collection, 2004)

X89068

## Balcony, Toulon

1929

Oil paint on canvas

Here, three glamorously dressed figures embody the bohemian lifestyle that many wealthy young people embraced in the 1920s. Although the figures sit together like friends, their body language suggests a sense of ambivalence and mistrust. Seated on a balcony, they overlook the streets of Toulon. Bohemians often held anti-establishment viewpoints and prioritised art and literature over money. Burra came from an upper-middle-class family but frequently rebelled against his background. He preferred to live frugally and often escaped abroad. Originally titled 'Plain Dirt', after a song by the US jazz band McKinney's Cotton Pickers, the painting knowingly parodies the lavish lifestyles of bohemians drawn to southern port towns.

Private collection, courtesy of Lefevre Fine Art, London  
X89070



## The Two Sisters

1929

Oil paint on canvas

Burra was fascinated by popular culture and incorporated contemporary influences into many of his paintings. **The Two Sisters** shows the famous Hungarian-born US entertainers Jenny and Rosie (Yansci and Rosika) Deutsch, known professionally as the Dolly Sisters. Burra portrays them with grotesque make-up, extravagant jewellery, plunging wrap dresses and matching blue hats, attended by a servant and jesters. The sisters were popular performers in the 1910s, achieving great acclaim for their vaudeville stage shows and films. Burra admired their performances from a young age and collected press cuttings of them, which inspired this work.

Private collection

X89071

## **The Railway Gang**

1929

Oil paint on canvas

**The Railway Gang** depicts a team of labourers repairing railway tracks close to the coast. One worker can be seen calling out to the others to warn them of an approaching train. Though Burra made many works while in France, he also memorised scenes and painted them after returning home to East Sussex. This painting likely recalls a train journey Burra made while in Toulon the previous year. He stayed there for a month, socialising with friends before travelling to Paris.

Private collection

X92049

## **Le Bal**

1928

Oil paint on canvas

**Le Bal** refers to a bal musette, a French social gathering featuring lively accordion music and dancing. These evening festivities were popular among working-class communities in Paris. This painting likely depicts a venue located on Rue de Lappe in the Bastille neighbourhood, a vibrant centre of queer culture in 1920s Paris. Burra wrote enthusiastically about his visits to the street. In a letter to Barbara Ker-Seymer on 19 October 1928, he recalled 'We went to the rue de Lappe on Sunday, me and Billy danced a beautiful tango. My dear you should have seen it.'

Private collection

X89075

## The Tea-Shop

1929

Gouache on paper

Burra often sought to capture the vitality of people socialising in bars, dance halls, and cafés. In this comical scene, Burra imagines a tea shop staffed by scantily clad cabaret performers. One waitress appears so engrossed by her dance that she pours tea over the head of a shocked customer. The waitress's short haircut and leafy skirt recall the legendary US-born French entertainer Josephine Baker. Burra saw Baker's debut in the **Revue Nègre** at the Théâtre des Champs Élysées during his first trip to Paris.

Private collection

X89074

## Les Folies de Belleville

1928

Gouache on paper

Erotic performances were a common feature of Paris's nightlife. Burra enjoyed the provocative displays at the Folies de Belleville, a lively music hall in the Belleville neighbourhood. His painting features naked and partially undressed white dancers, wearing diamanté undergarments and exaggerated smoky-eye makeup. On the stage behind them stands a Black performer wearing a large ceremonial knife. This, along with the presence of a Buddha painting in the background, underscores the exoticisation and cultural stereotyping that were prevalent in popular entertainments at the turn of the century.

Private collection

X71697

## Marriage à la Mode

1928–9

Graphite, watercolour and gouache on paper

This surprising composition was inspired by the wedding of Burra's close friend Clover Pritchard. Here, Burra employs surrealism and satire to create an atmosphere of uneasy absurdity. A cherub watering flowers in the groom's hair, a tearful woman with a bird nesting on her hat, and a Picasso-like abstraction of a veiled figure, all contribute to the strange scene. The title **Marriage à la Mode** pays homage to a series of 'conversation pieces' painted by 18th-century English social critic and artist William Hogarth. His work tells the story of a disastrous marriage and its consequences.

Private collection

X63310

## **Dockside Café, Marseilles**

1929

Tempera on canvas

**Dockside Café, Marseilles** was inspired by Burra's visits to bars and cafés in the more disreputable areas of France's southern towns and cities. The painting depicts waitresses and a sailor deep in conversation in a café adorned with eclectic decorations. Other sailors occupy the space in a nonchalant manner. The scene is rich with innuendo and hints at opportunities for excessive drinking, gambling and casual sexual encounters. Through the open doorway, the Old Port of Marseille can be seen. The city's red-light district was located close to the port, suggesting the café's role in the local sex trade.

Private collection

X89076

## Three Sailors at the Bar

1930

Watercolour on paper

**Three Sailors at the Bar** is Burra's most explicit depiction of the sexual appeal of sailors. Framed by a doorway, Burra pays particular attention to the sailors' form-fitting uniforms, which accentuate their bodies. The artist and his circle were obsessed with sailors. His friend Frederick Ashton recalled that 'everyone was sailor mad', incited by exaggerated stories of their racy exploits in French literary fictions and cinema. Burra painted the work following a visit to the south of France with the surrealist artist Paul Nash and his wife Margaret between February and April 1930.

Private collection, courtesy of Hazlitt Holland-Hibbert  
X89077



## Minuit Chanson

1931

Watercolour and gouache on paper

In 1931, Burra painted a group of figures standing outside Minuit Chanson (Midnight Song), a fashionable record shop in Paris. The same year, he wrote to Paul Nash, saying: 'My new occupation is going to the Boulevard Clichy to Minuit Chanson which is glorious. You put bits in the slot and listen to gramophone records. The clientele is enough to frighten you a bit.' Burra was evidently delighted by the variety of people who frequented the establishment, painting each figure with an acute eye for detail, embellished with his fantastical style.

Private collection

X89078

## **WALL BEHIND VITRINE**

**Left to right:**

### **Scene with Figures**

c.1930

Graphite on paper

### **Café**

c.1930

Ink on paper

### **Jazz Fans**

1928–9

Ink on paper

### **Rue de Lappe**

1930

Graphite on paper

Tate. Purchased 1972  
T01543

Victoria and Albert Museum  
X89081

UK Government Art Collection  
X91773

The Mayor Gallery, London  
X89669

Burra's drawings capture the feeling of social liberation which Burra and his friends experienced during the 1920s and 30s. They feature scenes of flirtations in bars, sailors dancing together in music halls and party guests listening to jazz records. Burra produced line drawings throughout his career. Rather than functioning as preliminary sketches for his paintings, they stand as his immediate recollections of events. Though some of the drawings appear incomplete (Burra's attention was perhaps diverted by a new composition) they reveal his confidence and precision as a draughtsperson.

## **WORKS IN VITRINE 1**

### **Letter from Edward Burra to Barbara Ker-Seymer**

28 December 1926

Tate Archive: TGA 974/2/2/13  
Z90017

### **Letter from Edward Burra to Barbara Ker-Seymer**

24 September 1926

Tate Archive: TGA 974/2/2/12  
Z90018

### **Letter from Edward Burra to Barbara Ker-Seymer**

28 December 1926

Tate Archive: TGA 974/2/2/12  
Z90019

## **Letter from Edward Burra to Barbara Ker-Seymer**

9 December 1926

Tate Archive: TGA 974/2/2/11  
Z90020

## **Letter from Edward Burra to Barbara Ker-Seymer**

23 July 1926

Tate Archive: TGA 974/2/2/8  
Z90021

## **Letter from Edward Burra to Barbara Ker-Seymer**

23 July 1926

Tate Archive: TGA 974/2/2/8  
Z90022

## **Letter from Edward Burra to Barbara Ker-Seymer**

4 November 1925

Tate Archive: TGA 974/2/2/5  
Z90025

## **Envelope from Edward Burra to Barbara Ker-Seymer**

4 November 1925

Tate Archive: TGA 974/2/2/5  
Z90026

## **Envelope from Edward Burra to Barbara Ker-Seymer**

15 September 1925

Tate Archive: TGA 974/2/2/4  
Z90027

## **Letter from Edward Burra to Barbara Ker-Seymer**

28 October 1927

Tate Archive: TGA 974/2/2/33  
Z90028

## **Letter from Edward Burra to Barbara Ker-Seymer**

3 February 1928

Tate Archive: TGA 974/2/2/47  
Z90029

## **Letter from Edward Burra to Barbara Ker-Seymer**

2 June 1928

Tate Archive: TGA 974/2/2/57  
Z90030

## **Letter from Edward Burra to Barbara Ker-Seymer**

15 September 1925

Tate Archive: TGA 974/2/2/4  
Z90024

## **Letter from Edward Burra to Barbara Ker-Seymer**

15 September 1925

Tate Archive: TGA 974/2/2/4  
Z90023

Burra maintained lively correspondence with his friends throughout his life. His tongue-in-cheek letters update his tight-knit group on the latest gossip, including salacious details of their exploits in London and abroad. He also writes animatedly about the latest stage shows, ballets and films he has seen. Burra's letters show his distinctive writing style, composed as an eccentric stream of consciousness with phonetic spelling and contemporary slang. Many of his letters were embellished with satirical drawings that illustrate the outlandish outfits he saw during his travels.



## WORKS IN VITRINE 2

### The Queen, The Lady's Newspaper

26 October 1901

This Edwardian newspaper is the only known surviving source material for Burra's collage works. He cut out an image advertising a bolero jacket, which he then included in **Collage 1930** (shown close by). **The Queen, The Lady's Newspaper** was published in 1901 before Burra was born, revealing how the artist not only sourced contemporary material but also incorporated historical imagery in his surreal collaged works.

Tate Archive: TGA 771/4/1  
Z90032

## **Collage**

1930

Collage, gouache, ink and graphite on paper

## **Venez avec moi**

c.1930

Graphite with collage on paper

National Galleries of Scotland. Bequeathed by Gabrielle  
Keiller 1995

X89667

Leeds Museums & Galleries (Leeds Art Gallery). Bought 1976  
X89668

Burra created collages by sourcing images from newspapers, advertisements, and film and music magazines. Pencil and ink drawings link together the collaged elements to create fantastical characters who inhabit humorous tableaux. Burra first met the surrealist artist Paul Nash in 1925. He became his friend, artistic mentor, and travel companion. In 1930, they collaborated on several collages which echo Dada and surrealist approaches. Burra's collage practice was short-lived but had a lasting effect on his paintings, which regularly combine disparate motifs to conjure a surreal scene.

## The Hand

1931

Oil paint on canvas

This painting features many elements extracted from **Café** (shown close by), including the hand and cigarette as well as the patterned tabletop. Here, Burra reworks the composition into a more surreal scene. He incorporates objects associated with superstition, including a pair of dice and a cup with an all-seeing eye. **The Hand** is one of the few artworks Burra made using oil paint, rather than watercolour. Living with rheumatoid arthritis and anaemia, he preferred to work with watercolour flat on a table rather than painting in oil at an easel.

Private collection

X89080

## Café

1930

Watercolour and gouache on paper

In French novels, cafés were often portrayed as places where the lower classes and criminals socialised. Here, two shady figures are shown conversing while drinking coffee and smoking at a table, over a lifestyle magazine. The cropped viewpoint over the man's shoulder conveys an air of mystery, reminiscent of close-ups in photographs or cinema. Burra pays close attention to the pattern of the floor tiles and wood grain, while the overlapping geometric shapes and glimpses of lettering suggest the influence of cubist painting.

Southampton City Art Gallery

X89079

ROOM 2

## MUSIC AND THE AMERICAS

Burra was obsessed with music from a young age. He amassed an eclectic collection of gramophone records, which he listened to in his studio while he painted. Music became an integral part of Burra's working practice. His artworks are infused with the rhythmic beat of his records.

Jazz gained worldwide popularity in the 1920s, and Burra was eager to experience the music live in its birthplace, the USA. In 1933, he travelled to the country for the first time. A free spirit, it is said he walked out of his family home one afternoon and disappeared without saying a word. His parents only discovered that he had visited the USA when he returned.

Burra stayed in New York City for several months. He frequented well-known bars, clubs and music halls in the neighbourhood of Harlem, including Club Hot-Cha, Apollo Theatre, and the Savoy Ballroom. These venues hosted many now-legendary musicians, from Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong to Cab Calloway and Billie Holiday. Harlem also attracted performers from other countries, such as the from this time celebrate the exuberance of Harlem's nightlife through his unique satirical style.

Burra returned to the USA throughout the 1930s and 1950s. As well as staying in New York, he spent time in Boston with the writer and poet Conrad Aiken. In 1937, Burra and Aiken travelled to Mexico, visiting Mexico City and Cuernavaca.

The music playing in this gallery has been chosen from Burra's personal record collection, which is now held in the Tate Archive.



## ANTI-CLOCKWISE FROM WALL TEXT

### Harlem Theatre

1933

Watercolour on paper

When Burra first travelled to New York in 1933, he immediately sought out music venues in the neighbourhood of Harlem. **Harlem Theatre** shows a group of musicians on a stage. Surrounded by tropical scenery, they shake maracas and wear elaborately ruffled outfits typical of performers playing Afro-Cuban music. The artist remembered the scenes on stage with an acute eye for detail, enhancing the drama with his characteristically satirical style. One of the first performances Burra recorded in Harlem, the painting shows the beginnings of his immersion in the cultural life of New York.

The Mayor Gallery, London

X54075

## **The Band**

1934

Watercolour on paper

At the beginning of 1934, Burra was still staying in New York but had relocated from Upper Manhattan to the Lower East Side of the city. Despite the move, he returned to Harlem almost nightly to socialise and see musical performances.

**The Band** depicts a large jazz orchestra on stage with a conductor and two singers. Burra crops out the right-hand side of the stage, the partial view conveying his viewpoint as part of the audience. He likely remembered the performance and painted it upon his return home to Britain.

Courtesy of the British Council Collection

X89164

## Red Peppers

1934–5

Tempera on paper

In this painting of a high-energy performance, Burra embellishes the scene by framing the composition with large vibrant red peppers. A spotlight casts a surreal blue tinge over the performers, who smile knowingly at one another. The band depicted here might be Rodney Rogers's Red Peppers, a lesser-known Hawaiian-style guitar group active in the early 1930s, who Burra may have seen perform in Harlem. They could also be the Lecuona Cuban Boys, an internationally successful orchestra whose records Burra owned.

Dundee Art Galleries and Museums (The McManus)

X89165

## Savoy Ballroom, Harlem

1934

Gouache and watercolour on paper

Here, Burra captures the atmosphere of the dancefloor at the Savoy Ballroom, a popular venue located on Lenox Avenue, between 140th and 141st Street in Harlem. In a letter to his friend Barbara Ker-Seymer, Burra wrote about his experience: 'We went to the Savoy dance Hall the other night you would go mad I've never in my life seen such a display an enormous floor half darksurrounded by chairs & tables and promenade on one side and the band on the other with a trailing cloud effect behind I've never seen such wonderful dancing [...] its an experience not to be missed at any price [sic].'

Ömer Koç Collection

X89163

## Savoy Ballroom

1934–5

Watercolour on paper

In this painting, Burra returns to the subject of the Savoy Ballroom, detailing his fond memories of people dancing to music. He observed the scene from booths located beside the dancefloor. In his poem, 'Juke Box Love Song', poet Langston Hughes called the Savoy Ballroom the 'Heartbeat of Harlem'. Unlike many establishments during the Jim Crow era, the venue welcomed a racially integrated crowd. It was also the birthplace of the Lindy Hop, a swing dance style invented by African American dancers.

Private collection, courtesy of Lefevre Fine Art, London  
X24035

## Harlem

1934

Ink and gouache on paper

While many of Burra's paintings from New York show night-time entertainments, he also captured the hum of the street during the day. Several men and women are shown in front of a row of recognisable brownstone tenements, with a train rattling past in the background on New York's elevated railway. The street is shown as a place of social interaction: people linger on their doorsteps to smoke, talk and read newspapers. The depiction of everyday conversations in Harlem gives the scene a sense of community, highlighting the rhythms of daily metropolitan life.

Tate. Purchased 1939

N05004

## HARLEM RENAISSANCE

At the start of the twentieth century, many African Americans left the racial segregation of rural southern states in search of employment and better living standards in northern cities. The neighbourhood of Harlem in New York City became a centre for Black artists, writers, musicians, performers and academics. The period between 1917 and the 1930s became known as the Harlem Renaissance. New styles of music, dance, literature and art developed as artists worked across disciplines and blended African and European influences. In giving a voice to the African American experience and celebrating Black life, the movement contributed to the fight for civil rights.

The Harlem Renaissance was defined by the meteoric rise of jazz, with musicians achieving international recognition. Popular painters such as Aaron Douglas, Jacob Lawrence and Archibald Motley also depicted Harlem's famed nightlife.

## Dancing Skeletons

1934

Gouache and ink on paper

Burra often combined dark subjects with humour to create macabre paintings. Here, colourful skeletons dance in flamboyant hats, as if in a music hall. They are surrounded by a decaying landscape. Other references to death include hanging figures silhouetted against the surreal skyline. Painted while staying in the USA, **Dancing Skeletons** is one of the few works Burra made in response to Mexican culture. It features a Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) mask in the moon. The artist visited Mexico for the first time in 1937, travelling there with writers Conrad Aiken and Malcolm Lowry.

Tate. Purchased 1939

N05005



## Izzy Orts

1937

Watercolour and graphite on paper

Burra visited Boston in 1937, staying with his friend, the US writer and poet Conrad Aiken and his wife, Mary. This painting depicts the dance floor of Izzy Ort's Bar & Grill, a popular jazz venue in Boston. It was a bar which was known to welcome patrons of different sexualities. **Izzy Orts** features many sailors on leave, drinking and dancing to the live music. Many have strange milky white eyes that suggest supernatural possession, giving the painting a menacing air. It is one of the few compositions to feature a likeness of the artist, located to the left of the stage.

National Galleries of Scotland. Purchased 1980

X89672

## Striptease (Harlem)

1934

Gouache on paper

This work shows Burra's engagement with the tawdrier aspects of New York's nightlife, showing a burlesque performer dancing seductively on stage. Special attention is given to the leering crowd, with the artist creating studies of individuals' clothing, hairstyles and mannerisms. Burra expressed his intention to visit the Apollo Theatre in a letter to Barbara Ker-Seymer in October 1933: 'New York would drive you into a fit. Harlem is like Walham green gone crazy we do a little shopping on 11 6th St every morning there are about 10 Woolworths of all sorts also 40 cinemas & Apollo burlesk featuring Paris in Harlem which I am plotting to go to. It must be seen to be believed [sic].'

Private collection, courtesy of Eykyn Maclean

X90999

## WORKS IN VITRINE 1

Louis Armstrong

**I Got Rhythm**

1931

Connie's Inn Orchestra

**You Rascal You**

1931

Ethel Waters

**Am I Blue?**

1929

Cab Calloway

**When You're Smiling**

1936

Tate Archive: TGA 771/8/2  
Z90000

Tate Archive: TGA 771/8/29  
Z90001

Tate Archive: TGA 771/8/99  
Z90002

Tate Archive: TGA 771/8/22  
Z90003

Clarence Williams  
**Cushion Foot Stomp**

1927

Duke Ellington  
**It Don't Mean a Thing**

1932

Ella Fitzgerald & Her Savoy Eight  
**All Over Nothing At All**

1937

Tate Archive: TGA 771/8/151  
Z90004

Tate Archive: TGA 771/8/38  
Z90005

Tate Archive: TGA 771/8/46  
Z90006

Leucona Cuban Boys  
**International Rumba**

1927

Lil Armstrong  
**Doin' the Suzie Q**

1936

Teddy Wilson and his Orchestra  
**The Mood That I'm In**

1934

10 78rpm gramophone record

Tate Archive: TGA 771/8/183  
Z90007

Tate Archive: TGA 771/8/1  
Z90008

Tate Archive: TGA 771/8/106  
Z90009

Burra had a large and eclectic collection of gramophone records. His collection included swing, big band orchestra and blues music as well as Latin and Afro-Cuban jazz, Spanish flamenco and South American tango and rumba. Authentic international music was not commonly known or easily experienced in Britain at the time, so he bought records while abroad or imported them through specialist shops such as Levy's Phono and Cycle Shop in Aldgate, London. Photographs show Burra's studio littered with records, amongst mountains of magazines, newspapers, letters, postcards and clothing piled on chairs and stacked on the floor. Billy Chappell recalled: 'bending down [he] would crank up the gramophone; then pick this or that jewel from his splendid collection of 78 rpms ... Miss [Mildred] Bailey wailed sweetly and tinnily through the scratches streaking those so ill-treated and now so valuable pieces of bakelite.'

## **WORKS IN VITRINE 2 (PAIRED)**

### **Swing Music**

May–June 1936

Tate Archive: TGA 771  
Z90033

### **The Sixteenth Record Songbook**

c.1920s

Tate Archive: TGA 771  
Z90044

### **Jazz Hot, No. 39**

December 1949

Tate Archive: TGA 771  
Z90035



## **Jazz Hot, No. 41**

February 1950

Tate Archive: TGA 771  
Z90037

## **Jazz Hot, No. 27**

November 1948

Tate Archive: TGA 771  
Z90034

## **Jazz Hot, No. 44**

May 1950

Tate Archive: TGA 771  
Z90036

## **Jazz Journal, Vol. 3, No. 6**

June 1950

Tate Archive: TGA 771  
Z90038

## **Jazz Journal, Vol. 1, No. 4**

August 1948

Tate Archive: TGA 771  
Z90039

Burra subscribed to numerous music magazines, from the French quarterly **Jazz Hot** to British based **Jazz Journal**, **Jazz Music** and **Swing Music**. International jazz journalism influenced Burra's musical interests and shaped his appreciation of Black culture. Articles written by prominent critics such as Charles Delaunay, Hugues Panassié and Sinclair Traill emphasised the African American roots of jazz. Burra also bought publications like **The Record Song Book**, which listed lyrics and information on popular songs.

## **WORKS IN VITRINE 3 (PAIRED)**

### **Jazz Music, Vol. 3, No. 8**

1948

Tate Archive: TGA 771  
Z90040

### **Jazz Hot, No. 30**

February 1949

Tate Archive: TGA 771  
Z90041

### **Jazz Hot, No. 46**

July–August 1950

Tate Archive: TGA 771  
Z90042

**Edward Burra's scrapbook**

c.1929–36

Ink and collage on paper

Tate Archive: TGA 939/8/1

Z90045

**Newspaper cutting of Cuban dancers**

c.1930s

Tate Archive: TGA 939/8/2

Z90051

**Newspaper cutting of Cuban dancers**

c.1930s

Tate Archive: TGA 939/8/2

Z90052

**Jazz Hot, Numéro Special**  
1950

Tate Archive: TGA 771  
Z90043

## BURRA'S RECORD COLLECTION

The music playing in this gallery has been chosen from Burra's personal record collection, which is now held in the Tate Archive. The track listing is as follows:

1. Lil Armstrong, 'My Hi De Ho Man' (1936)
2. Louis Armstrong, 'I Got Rhythm' (1931)
3. Cab Calloway, 'You Gotta Ho Di Ho (To Get Along with Me)' (1932)
4. McKinney's Cotton Pickers, 'Plain Dirt' (1929)
5. Connie's Inn Orchestra, 'You Rascal You' (1931)
6. Billie Holiday, 'Billie's Blues' (1936)
7. Ethel Waters, 'Am I Blue?' (1929)
8. Cab Calloway, 'When You're Smiling' (1936)
9. Lecuona Cuban Boys, 'International Rumba' (1938)
10. Clarence Williams, 'Cushion Foot Stomp' (1927)

11. Lecuona Cuban Boys, 'Cubanacan (Rumba Foxtrot)' (1936)
12. Lecuona Cuban Boys, 'Dime Adios' (1936)
13. Duke Ellington, 'It Don't Mean a Thing' (1932)
14. Ella Fitzgerald and Her Savoy Eight, 'All Over Nothing At All' (1937)
15. Carmen Miranda, South American Way (1939)
16. Lecuona Cuban Boys, 'International Rumba' (1938)
17. Lil Armstrong, 'Doin' The Suzie Q' (1936)
18. Mildred Bailey, 'Down Hearted Blues' (1935)
19. Orquesta Casablanca, 'Solea' (1936)
20. Teddy Wilson and His Orchestra, 'The Mood That I'm In' (1936)

Use the Spotify app to listen on your mobile.  
Go to 'Search' then scan this code.



ROOM 3



## CULTURE AND CONFLICT IN SPAIN

Burra was enamoured with Spanish culture. He avidly consumed Spanish art, literature and music and taught himself the language. His artworks conjured a fantasy of Spain, before he even visited the country.

Burra first travelled to Spain in 1933, visiting Barcelona, Granada and Seville. On his return to Rye, he produced paintings inspired by the cultural traditions he had seen. His strange depictions of Spanish governesses, known as duennas, were included in the International Surrealist Exhibition, which opened in London in June 1936. The exhibition sought to introduce surrealism to the UK. Burra's paintings were shown alongside works by other artists exploring imagination, dreams and the unconscious mind. Though his art resonated with these surreal themes, Burra showed little interest in joining surrealist groups.

In April 1936, Burra returned to Spain, visiting Madrid. There, he witnessed the violent unrest that foreshadowed the Spanish Civil War:

One day when I was lunching with some Spanish friends, smoke kept blowing by the restaurant window. I asked where it came from. 'Oh, it's nothing', someone answered with a shade of impatience, 'it's only a church being burnt!'

That made me feel sick. It was terrifying: constant strikes, churches on fire, and pent-up hatred everywhere.

Burra fled Spain in July to escape the escalating hostilities. The Civil War marked a radical turning point in the artist's practice and outlook. His paintings from the period chronicle the destruction of the war, drawing on newspaper articles filtered through Burra's macabre imagination. Otherworldly demons and devils stalk ruined cities, conveying his nightmarish vision of the horrors of war.

## CLOCKWISE FROM WALL TEXT

### Bullfight

1933

Watercolour on paper

This painting depicts the final act of a bullfight, when the wounded bull faces the matador. In a letter to Barbara Ker-Seymer in 1935, Burra described the atmosphere of the bullring and the matadors' outfits: 'my dear its gorgeous the bulls gore everyone... the costumes are lovely my favorite costume was vermillion trimmed with black lace.' Burra was drawn to the way bullfighting combines flamboyance and drama with violence and death. He chooses not to capture the action but focuses instead on the matador's skintight pink costume and the blood streaming from the bull's mouth and open wound.

Private collection

X89184

## Madame Pastoria

1934–5

Watercolour on paper

Burra depicts the renowned Spanish flamenco dancer Pastora Rojas Monje (known as Pastora Imperio), accompanied by a guitar player in front of a bustling crowd. He may have seen her at a flamenco competition at the Circo Price in Madrid in 1935, painting the composition when he returned home. In a letter to Billy Chappell, he remarked: 'I've never seen anything like it I went in at at 6.30 & came out half dead at 10.30 & it was still going on [sic].' Burra adored flamenco music, remarking that it was a sound 'to bring tears to your eyes it's so beautiful.'

Private collection, courtesy of Lefevre Fine Art, London  
X89185

## John Deth (Hommage to Conrad Aiken)

1931

Graphite and gouache on paper

In 1931, Burra met the US poet Conrad Aiken, who had moved near to Burra's home in Rye. The two became close friends, and Aiken later accompanied Burra on his first voyage to Spain in 1933. **John Deth** was created for an unrealised edition of Aiken's poem of the same name. It depicts a gathering in which the character John Deth (the personification of Death) stands in the forefront of the composition. Deth's skeletal arms are draped around Millicent, a character in Aiken's poem. She stands frozen by Deth's touch.'

The Whitworth, The University of Manchester  
X89169

## The Duenna

1930

Watercolour on paper

In the early 1930s, Burra embarked on a series of paintings of surreal figures in landscapes. He referred to the figures as duennas, a Spanish name for governesses or chaperones who look after younger women. In this painting, two duennas stand in the foreground. Burra presents them as an assemblage of almost-decorative abstract forms. One wears an elaborate dress, while the other perches on impossibly small bird's legs. Burra places them in a surreal landscape, featuring strange insect-like creatures among crumbling Spanish-style architecture.

Pallant House Gallery, Chichester (On Loan from a Private Collection, 2004)

X89187

## The Hostesses

1932

Watercolour and gouache over graphite on paper

Two duennas stand in front of a bare tree in a desolate landscape. Their curved figures echo the undulations of the tree, suggesting a synergy between humanity and nature.

**The Hostesses** and **The Duenna** (shown close by) were both included in the **International Surrealist Exhibition** at Burlington House, London in 1936. Though Burra was not a formal member of the group, his work took an increasingly surreal turn in the early 1930s, encouraged by his friendship with surrealist artist Paul Nash.

Leeds Museums & Galleries (Leeds Art Gallery). Bought 1982  
X89677

## **WORKS IN VITRINE**

**Newspaper cutting**

**Newspaper cutting**

**Newspaper cutting**

**c.1930s**

**Raquel Meller: su arte, su vida y sus canciones**

**1935**

**Las mejores y más populares canciones del momento**

**Cancionero, No. 31**

**Newspaper cutting of Conchita Martínez**

**c.1930s**

**Newspaper cutting titled 'Eyes on the Kill...'**

**1936**



**Newspaper cutting of a bullfighter**

c.1930s

**Newspaper page titled 'La Corrida de Resurreccion'**

1930

**Newspaper cutting**

**Newspaper cutting of a church burning**

**Newspaper cutting titled 'War Women of Spain'**

c.1936

**Illustrated London News**

**Illustrated London News**

10 October 1936

Burra's friend Clover Pritchard was married to Antonio de Pertinez, a Spanish Republican politician. When the violence that preceded the Civil War began to escalate, they escaped Spain, together as a group. Burra followed the conflict through newspaper articles. He kept clippings of images of Spanish fighters and refugees, as well as countless images of destroyed buildings. He also collected earlier newspaper articles featuring photographs of bullfights and flamenco singers and dancers, which inspired his paintings of traditional Spanish entertainments before the war.

Tate Archive: TGA 939/8/1  
Z90053–4

Tate Archive: TGA 939/8/2  
Z90055

Tate Archive: TGA 771  
Z90046–8

Tate Archive: TGA 939/8/1  
Z90056–9, Z90061, Z90060, Z90062–4

## ANTI-CLOCKWISE FROM VITRINE

### The Eruption of Vesuvius

1930

Collage and watercolour on paper

Burra described making this work in a letter to Barbara Ker-Seymer: 'we never bother to paint in this part now we just stick things on instead. I have such a twee one started of two ladys walking along with pieces of motor engine for heads.' Combining elements from fashion magazines and old engravings, Burra creates a composition that is both humorous and unsettling. Heads are replaced by machinery, while a bowlful of faces sits on a table whose legs belong to the actress Anita Page. In the distance, a boat sails perilously close to the erupting volcano Vesuvius, known for its destruction of the Roman city Pompeii in 79AD.

Private collection London, courtesy of Austin Desmond

Fine Art

X71684

## The Torturers

c.1935

Watercolour on paper

**The Torturers** is one of Burra's earliest responses to the violence that preceded the Spanish Civil War. It represents a profound tonal shift in the artist's practice. Two masked naked figures wield elaborately barbed weapons dripping crimson blood. Behind them enormous, spiked wheels resemble torture devices used by the Spanish Inquisition. The scene is darkly theatrical, expressing Burra's fascination and despair at humanity's capacity for violence and cruelty. It is made all the more unnerving by its underlying erotic charge.

Offer Waterman Fine Art, London

X91661

## Bal des Pendus

1937

Watercolour on board

**Bal des Pendus** imagines the construction of gallows and the hanging of Spanish civilians. The harrowing scene is dominated by two grandly dressed figures who oversee the violence taking place from a balcony. Meanwhile, the demonic entity Beelzebub is shown grinning on a tree branch, holding a noose which hangs a figure below. The title **Bal des Pendus** (Ball of the Hanged) was inspired by Arthur Rimbaud's poem of the same name. It derives from an expression which describes a hanging figure as 'dancing on air'.

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchased 1948  
X89190

## Camouflage

1938

Watercolour on paper

Though the title most likely refers to the combat gear worn by Spanish soldiers, Burra's focus in this painting is the figure repairing a military vehicle. In the background, ghostly figures inhabit a shelled-out building. Watercolour paintings were traditionally composed at a small scale. However, Burra challenged convention and pasted together sheets of paper to form larger compositions. The greater size of the works provided more space to capture the violence of the Spanish Civil War and convey the exalted level of tragedy.

Daniel Katz Family Trust

X91582

## War in the Sun

1938

Graphite, ink and watercolour on paper

Soldiers armed with tanks and anti-aircraft guns survey a scene, while in the background, dissidents are taken away in a truck. The military figures appear to revel in their brutality while civilians cower in the shadows. Burra's depictions of people changed following the outbreak of the war. Rather than illustrating individual characters' faces, clothing and personalities, he began painting them as anonymised figures. His subjects are often dressed in similar form-fitting clothing and are turned away from the viewer, as if avoiding recognition.

De Ying Foundation

X89193

## THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

The Spanish Civil War lasted from 1936 to 1939. It followed years of political instability across Europe. In Spain, tensions escalated after the monarchy was deposed in 1931 and replaced by a democratic Spanish Republic.

In 1936, the Popular Front, an alliance of left-leaning political groups, were elected to power. However, later that year, General Francisco Franco and other right-wing military leaders staged a coup aimed at establishing a fascist regime. A bloody civil war ensued across Spain. Those supporting the uprising were known as the Nationalists and received aid from fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. Republican forces, or Loyalists, supported the left-leaning government. They rallied under the anti-fascist banner '¡No Pasarán!' ('they shall not pass'). Communists, socialists and trade unionists from across the world supported the Republican cause. Thousands of UK citizens volunteered to take up arms in the fight against fascism.

Around half a million people died during the war. Following the Nationalist victory, Franco established a dictatorship that lasted until he died in 1975.



## The Watcher

c.1937

Watercolour and graphite on paper

**The Watcher** shows a menacing figure in a cloak and wide-brimmed hat carrying a large ornamental scythe. They talk to an orange-robed figure amidst the ruins of a city. In the background, naked, mannequin-like figures inhabit the ruined architecture. When the Spanish Civil War erupted, Burra initially expressed pro-Franco sentiments, perhaps a reaction to early anti-clerical violence by Republican forces, known as the 'Red Terror'. However, this was quickly dispelled by his abhorrence of the violence committed by both Republican and Nationalist forces. Burra's paintings express his despair at the wide-ranging death and destruction of war, without taking a side.

National Galleries of Scotland. Purchased 1970

X89192

## Beelzebub

c.1937

Watercolour on paper

As Spain's bloody civil war unfolded, Burra began to combine realistic depictions of events with otherworldly creatures to heighten the sense of horror. This painting shows soldiers fighting and dying in ruined streets while the red demon Beelzebub gleefully observes the scene. Rather than showing the soldiers in contemporary Spanish military uniforms, Burra portrays them as modern versions of 15th-century conquistadors, dressed in form-fitting red or blue garbs and fighting with spears. The naked figure of Beelzebub adds a homoerotic element, creating an unsettling juxtaposition of desire and war.

Private collection, courtesy of Lefevre Fine Art, London  
X89195

## Wake

1940

2 paintings, gouache and watercolour on paper

This diptych speaks of death and decay. Shrouded figures look down on a skeleton in an open grave. In the background, broken columns and arches recall the destroyed buildings that Burra had seen in press photographs of Spain. It is also reminiscent of Francisco Goya's **Black Paintings**, a series of dark, intense, and often grotesque images that conveyed the Spanish artist's bleak outlook on humanity in his later years. While Burra's work references the Spanish Civil War, by the time it was painted, another war was spreading across Europe.

Tate. Purchased 1940

N05165, N05166

ROOM 4

## THE WAR WITHIN

The Second World War (1939–45) intensified a sense of tragedy that had been developing in Burra's artworks. At home, on the south coast of England, Burra experienced the war first-hand. He witnessed heavy aerial bombardments, and the presence of Allied troops stationed in and around Rye before their deployment to the front.

Wartime restrictions left Burra increasingly isolated from his friends. He was also in pain due to rationing of medicine to treat his rheumatoid arthritis. His outlook, already changed by his experience of civil war in Spain, became darker still. He wrote to Billy Chappell in 1945:

The very sight of peoples faces sickens me I've got no pity  
it really is terrible sometimes I'm quite frightened at myself  
I think such awful things I get in such paroxysms of impotent  
venom I feel it must poison the atmosphere [sic].

Burra's few works from this period reflect his deep shock at the realities of war. They mark a change in the tone of his art. The satirical humour found in his earlier paintings gives way to more contemptuous portrayals of violence. He depicts soldiers as evil supernatural beings infiltrating the countryside around his hometown.

## CLOCKWISE FROM WALL TEXT

### Soldiers' Backs

1942

Watercolour on paper

During the Second World War, Burra's hometown became a centre of military activity. This painting depicts soldiers whose overwhelming presence dominates the scene. Burra shows them climbing onto a truck, possibly heading off to the war on the continent. Their bodies are fluid and seem to meld into one another while their faces are obscured by shadow. The figures in **Soldiers' Backs** echo his depictions of soldiers fighting in the Spanish Civil War.

Towner Eastbourne. Acquired with the assistance of the Victoria & Albert Museum Purchase Grant Fund and the Gulbenkian Fund

X89209

## Soldiers at Rye

1941

Gouache, watercolour and ink on paper

Burra draws upon a wealth of influences to show soldiers lying idly in a landscape. He depicts them in Venetian carnival-like masks and dressed in clothing akin to Spanish conquistadors. They are presented in poses that evoke medieval courtly combat or perhaps dancers on stage. Rather than depicting them as heroic figures, Burra imagines the soldiers as nightmarish birdmen whose presence suggests violence. England's south coast was located within a 'restricted zone' during the war, cutting off Burra from his friends. The painting expresses his profound fear and isolation during the war.

Tate. Presented by Studio 1942

N05377

## Ropes and Lorries

1942–3

Graphite and watercolour on paper

Here, a quiet country lane is beset with a convoy of military vehicles. In the foreground, a soldier sits on a makeshift swing while another rests leisurely in his car. The scene seems to warp and shift strangely around the vehicles, as if repulsed by their presence. The war took a toll on Burra's mental health. In 1945 he wrote to Billy Chappell, 'I've given up dearie & never go out... I really feel like DEATH and cant go on [sic].'

The Ingram Collection of Modern British Art  
X89208



ROOM 5

## ART ON STAGE

Burra's passion for the stage remained constant throughout his life. His friend, photographer Barbara Ker-Seymer, recalled that as students, 'we were ... great ballet fans. We would queue for five hours for Ballets Russes tickets'. The Ballets Russes was a modernist ballet company founded in France.

It profoundly influenced British artistic and theatrical practices. The company was known for creating all-encompassing artistic environments and blurring distinctions between art forms. Its radical approach resonated with Burra's own.

Encouraged by his friendships with distinguished British dancers, choreographers and artistic directors, Burra started producing stage and costume designs in 1931. He frequently collaborated with his close friend Frederick Ashton, a renowned choreographer who later became Director of the Royal Ballet. Burra became a successful designer, working with the Royal Opera House, Sadler's Wells and Ballet Rambert. He created immersive environments where performers could interact with their surroundings in authentic attire. Burra's designs blend his characteristic style with influences from his travels in Britain and abroad, particularly in France, Spain and the USA.

Burra's affinity with the stage shaped his approach to painting. Many of his works resemble stage sets and his figures often perform highly gestural poses.

The music playing in this gallery is taken from the ballets, operas and stage shows for which Burra created designs.

## CLOCKWISE FROM WALL TEXT

William Chappell in costume for the ballet **Rio Grande**.  
Photograph by Barbara Ker-Seymer

1935, printed 2025  
Facsimile photograph

Costume design for William Chappell, in the ballet  
**Day in a Southern Port (Rio Grande)**

1931  
Watercolour on paper

Tate Archive: TGA 974/6/7  
Z90085

James L. Gordon Collection  
X63311

Margot Fonteyn and William Chappell in Constant Lambert's  
ballet **Rio Grande** by Vic-Wells Ballet at the Sadler's Wells  
Theatre. Photograph by J.W. Debenham

1935, printed 2025  
Facsimile photograph

Stage design for the ballet **Day in a Southern Port**  
**(Rio Grande)**

1931  
Watercolour on paper

Victoria and Albert Museum, London  
Z90086

James L. Gordon Collection  
X89127

**A Day in a Southern Port** was choreographed by Burra's friend, Frederick Ashton. The experimental ballet premiered at the Savoy Theatre in London on 29 November 1931. It was performed by members of the Camargo Society to a jazz-infused score by Constant Lambert. Burra's drop curtain recalls his travels in the Mediterranean. The centrepiece shows a dolphin statue located in the middle of the port town of Toulon in France. The ballet was later revived as **Rio Grande** in 1935. Burra's friend Billy Chappell danced as a 'creole boy'.

**Clockwise, from top left:**

Ninette de Valois as a peasant woman in the ballet **Barabau**.  
Photograph by J.W. Debenham

1936, printed 2025  
Facsimile photograph

Costume design for **Barabau**

1936  
Watercolour, ink and graphite on paper

**Barabau**. Pictured left to right: Leslie Edwards, Claude Newman, Michael Brooks, Frederick Ashton, Harold Turner, Richard Ellis, William Chappell, Michael Somes. Photograph by J.W. Debenham

1936, printed 2025  
Facsimile photograph

## Costume design for Barabau

1936

Watercolour, ink and graphite on paper

The Ballets Russes's comedic ballet Barabau was revived by dancer and choreographer Ninette de Valois. It was first performed at Sadler's Wells in London from 17 April 1936. Burra's costume designs for the soldiers resembled fascist uniforms, a response to contemporary events in Europe which foreshadowed the Second World War. De Valois had a prestigious career – her dance company the Vic-Wells Ballet was later renamed Sadler's Wells Ballet before it was granted a Royal Charter in 1956. It became The Royal Ballet, one of the world's leading ballet companies.

Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London

Z90088

Dance Professionals Fund Collection

X89128

Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London

Z90087

Dance Professionals Fund Collection

X89129



**Clockwise, from top left:**

Costume design for the ballet **Miracle in the Gorbals**

1944

Watercolour on paper

**Miracle in the Gorbals.** Photograph by Edward Mandinian

1944, printed 2025

Facsimile photograph

Cloth design for the ballet **Miracle in the Gorbals**

1944

Watercolour and graphite on paper

**Miracle in the Gorbals.** Photograph by Edward Mandinian

1944

Facsimile photograph

This one-act ballet tells the story of the second coming of Jesus Christ in the Gorbals area of Glasgow. The main character of the ballet, named The Stranger, resurrects a woman who died by suicide. He is later murdered by an unbelieving mob. The ballet was first performed by members of the Sadler's Wells Ballet at the Princes Theatre in London on 26 October 1944. Burra's set sympathetically rendered the poor economic situation faced by many of the Gorbals inhabitants. The cloth design for **Miracle in the Gorbals** features the hull of a large ship in dockyards, conveying the dominance of industrial shipbuilding in Glasgow at the time.

James L. Gordon Collection

X89134

Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London

Z90089

James L. Gordon Collection

X89133

Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London

Z90090

**Clockwise, from top left:**

Covent Garden Opera Company revival of the opera **Carmen**  
at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. Photograph by  
Roger Wood

1947, printed 2025  
Facsimile photograph

Costume design for the opera **Carmen**

c.1947  
Watercolour on paper

Covent Garden Opera Company revival of the opera **Carmen**  
at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. Photograph by  
Roger Wood.

1947, printed 2025  
Facsimile photograph

## Stage design for the opera **Carmen**, No.1 (The Bull Ring)

1947

Watercolour on paper

A production of Georges Bizet's tragic opera featuring Burra's designs was first performed at the Royal Opera House, London on 14 January 1947. Edith Coates played the title role of Carmen alongside Kenneth Neate as her lover Don José. Performers inhabited the stage dressed as Spanish soldiers, matadors and flamenco singers. To make the costumes, Burra's designs were copied onto parchment paper and shared with Royal Opera House staff who added notes and fabric swatches (see close by).

Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London

Z90091

James L. Gordon Collection

X89139

Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London

Z90093

James L. Gordon Collection

X89141

## WORKS IN VITRINE

Wardrobe copy of a costume design for the opera **Carmen**

1947

Watercolour and graphite on paper

Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London

X89673

Wardrobe copy of a costume design for the opera **Carmen**

1947

Watercolour and graphite on paper

Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London

X89674

**Clockwise, from top left:**

Sadler's Wells Ballet production of the ballet **Don Juan** at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. Photograph by Roger Wood

1948, printed 2025  
Facsimile photograph

Costume design for the ballet **Don Juan**

1948  
Graphite and ink on paper

Costume design for the ballet **Don Juan**

1948  
Watercolour on paper

Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London  
Z90094

James L. Gordon Collection  
X89147, X89143

Sadler's Wells Ballet production of the ballet **Don Juan** at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. Photograph by Roger Wood

1948, printed 2025  
Facsimile photograph

Costume design for the ballet **Don Juan**

1948  
Watercolour on paper

Stage design for the ballet **Don Juan**

1948  
Watercolour on paper

Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London  
Z90095

James L. Gordon Collection  
X89145, X89146

Frederick Ashton enlisted Burra to create designs for the ballet **Don Juan** at the Royal Opera House. Opening on 25 November 1948, it featured Robert Helpmann in the role of Don Juan. Burra's designs were more experimental than he had created previously, responding to the outlandish activities of Don Juan and his eventual downfall and descent into hell. The tight, form-fitting clothing and bird-like masks were reminiscent of works Burra made during the Spanish Civil War and Second World War.



**Clockwise, from top left:**

Set design for the ballet **Don Quixote**

1950

Watercolour on paper

Robert Helpmann and Alexander Grant in the ballet **Don Quixote** at Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. Photograph by Mander and Mitchenson

1950, printed 2025

Facsimile photograph

Drop curtain design for the ballet **Don Quixote**

1950

Watercolour on paper

Costume design for the ballet **Don Quixote**

1950

Watercolour on paper

Margot Fonteyn returning with an armful of flowers and a ballerina doll, to her dressing room at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London. She danced as Dulcinea in the first performances of the ballet **Don Quixote** Photograph by Paul Popper.

1950, printed 2025

Facsimile photograph

First performed on 20 February 1950, **Don Quixote** was part of a mixed night of ballet at the Royal Opera House. Robert Helpmann played the lead. He wrote to Burra to convince him to work on the set and costumes. 'I do hope so much you will do it, dear Ed.... I cannot think of another designer who could do it as well.' Burra's designs enhance the story of the delusional yet noble-hearted Spanish gentleman who believes he is a chivalrous knight, embarking on adventures with his loyal squire Sancho Panza. Margot Fonteyn danced as Dulcinea, her performance was a triumph, receiving 12 curtain calls from the audience.

James L. Gordon Collection  
X89149

Mander and Mitchenson / University of Bristol / ArenaPAL  
Z90096

James L. Gordon Collection  
X89148, X89150

Paul Popper/ SuperStock/ Alamy Stock Photo  
Z90097

**Clockwise, from top left:**

Costume design for the ballet **Canterbury Prologue**

c.1951

Watercolour on paper

**Canterbury Prologue**, Ballet Rambert, King's Hammersmith.

Photograph by George Konig

15 October 1951, printed 2025

Facsimile photograph

Costume design for the ballet **Canterbury Prologue**

c.1951

Watercolour on paper

**Canterbury Prologue**, Ballet Rambert, King's Hammersmith.

Photograph by George Konig

15 October 1951, printed 2025

Facsimile photograph

**Canterbury Prologue** is a ballet inspired by characters from Geoffrey Chaucer's **The Canterbury Tales**. The Times noted that 'the décor by Edward Burra is distinguished, and the whole is bursting with ideas.' The 12-act ballet was developed to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the founding of Marie Rambert's company Ballet Rambert. It premiered at the Marlowe Theatre on 30 July 1951 but previewed under the title **Surprise Ballet** at the Royal Hall in Harrogate on 19 July.

James L. Gordon Collection  
X90292

Rambert Archive  
Z90098

James L. Gordon Collection  
X90293

Rambert Archive  
Z90099

Scene in Harlem for **Simply Heavenly**

1957

Watercolour on paper

Laurence Harvey talking to Bertice Reading during a break  
in rehearsal of the musical **Simply Heavenly**

5 May 1958, printed 2025

Facsimile photograph

James L. Gordon Collection

X89152

Keystone Press/ Alamy Stock Photo

Z90100

**Simply Heavenly** is a musical comedy based on the 'Simple' stories by US poet Langston Hughes. It revolves around the life of Jesse B. Simple, a Black man living in Harlem, New York. Burra created a composite set design for the show, incorporating Simple's apartment, a Harlem street and Paddy's bar, which Simple frequented. Following a successful run on Broadway in New York, the musical was first shown at the Adelphi Theatre in London on 20 May 1958. It featured an all-Black cast of actors including Melvin Stewart, Earl Cameron and Bertice Reading.

## MUSICAL SCORES

The music playing in this gallery is taken from the ballets, operas and stage shows for which Burra created designs. The track listing is as follows:

1. Constant Lambert, 'The Rio Grande', for Day in a Southern (Port (1931)
2. Arthur Bliss, 'Overture', for Miracle in the Gorbals (1944)
3. Arthur Bliss, 'The Girl Suicide', for Miracle in the Gorbals ((1944)
4. Georges Bizet, 'Habanera', for Carmen (1947)
5. Georges Bizet, 'Marche du Toreadors', for Carmen (1947)
6. Richard Strauss, Excerpt from 'Don Juan Op. 20', for (Don Juan (1948)
7. Richard Strauss, Excerpt from 'Don Juan Op. 20', for (Don Juan (1948)
8. Roberto Gerhard, 'No. 5, Scene 5', for Don Quixote (1950)



9. David Martin, 'Broken Strings', for Simply Heavenly (1958)
10. David Martin, 'Paddy's Bar', for Simply Heavenly (1958)

ROOM 6

## LANDSCAPES OF A MODERN BRITAIN

By the 1960s, Burra's already frail health had begun to decline, making travelling abroad difficult. Instead, he embarked on driving tours of Britain with his sister Anne.

Burra observed fields, mountains and valleys as passing impressions through his car window. His attention was also caught by smog-belching power stations and collieries as well as newly built motorways, which had become a common feature of Britain's changing landscapes. His sister would stop periodically so he could study the view intensely. Burra's friend Billy Chappell sometimes joined them. Chappell was struck by the artist's uncanny memory and eye for detail:

It fascinated me to watch Edward when the car halted by some especially splendid spread of hills, moorland, and deep valleys. He sat very still and his face appeared completely impassive ... I do not remember Edward ever making any sort of note: not even the faintest scribble; yet weeks, even months later, the shapes, the tones; the actual atmosphere; and the colour of the clouded skies looming above those moors, hills, and valleys he had looked at so intently, would appear on paper.

Burra's paintings reflect the impact of modern society on the British countryside. Ghosts and mythological beings haunt his landscapes, but many are desolate, devoid of life. These works convey the artist's prescient concern for the destruction of the natural environment.

Even as his health declined, Burra continued painting to the end, driven by an unwavering commitment to his art. He died on 22 October 1976, aged 71, leaving behind a remarkable legacy of strange and surreal works that continue to captivate and inspire.

## CLOCKWISE FROM WALL TEXT

### Peonies and Vegetables

1955–7

Watercolour on paper

These peonies and vegetables may have been grown in Burra's garden, where he spent much of his time. During the Second World War, he sent his friends packages of fresh vegetables with books, magazines and notes enquiring about their health and wellbeing. In 1969, Burra moved to Springfield Cottages, a smaller house on the grounds of his family home, Springfield. Living independently for the first time, he began to cook for himself. He collected recipes in newspapers and read cookery books by Sheila Hutchins and Delia Smith.

Lefevre Fine Art, London

X89671

## **Landscape with Birdman Piper and Fisherwoman**

1946

Watercolour on paper

Following a road trip to Grasmere in the Lake District, Burra painted the village nestled among rolling hills, beneath a brooding sky. This painting includes the presence of otherworldly creatures in the landscape: a half-human birdman playing a medieval instrument and a nymph-like fisherwoman who waves goodbye to the scene. Burra questioned his memory of rural places, noting 'when I go back there, I'm always puzzled by what I've left out.' His landscapes were not always accurate records of reality. They combine his memories and imagination, distilled in his mind before being painted on paper.

Private collection

X89212

## Scarecrows

1949

Watercolour on paper

Here, Burra uses several motifs to express complex mixed emotions. Though he undertook several driving tours, Burra was acutely aware of the detrimental impact of increased vehicular use on Britain's roads. In this painting, a large figure with a mask-like face observes a line of scarecrows marching down a road. They are pursued by a menacing truck that expels them from the countryside. Mythological creatures tumble from the sky, suggesting the loss of fantasy and fairy-tale in the face of advancing technologies.

Kirklees Collection: Huddersfield Art Gallery

X89211

## Skeleton Party

c.1952–4

Watercolour, ink and graphite on paper

Throughout his career, Burra was intrigued by the iconography of death. A group of skeletons wearing flamboyant sunhats gossip and lounge around beside an anti-tank concrete block. Burra heightens the macabre scene by contrasting the skeletons' celebration with their bleak industrial surroundings. In the background, a mine and workers are visible. Heaps of waste from mines could be mistaken for mountains on the horizon. The work acts as an update to Burra's previous depictions of skeletons. Here, he uses them to meditate on the destructive influence of industrialisation.

Tate. Purchased 1955

T00013



## The Straw Man

1963

Watercolour on paper

Burra depicts a group of thugs beating a scarecrow in a barren wasteland beneath a railway bridge. Though inanimate, the scarecrow almost seems alive, forced to endure an act of violence at the hands of its human counterparts. The attackers' kicks are rendered as performative poses, reflecting Burra's fascination with dance and the stage. The scarecrow may symbolise a growing sense that the rural landscape was increasingly under attack by modernity. However, Burra was characteristically evasive when asked about the meaning of his landscapes, simply stating, 'Call in a psychiatrist'.

Pallant House Gallery, Chichester (On Loan from a Private Collection, 2004)

X89221

## **Black Mountain, Wales**

1968

Watercolour on paper

Burra remembered the topological details of the Black Mountain range while visiting the Brecon Beacons National Park in Wales. In Burra's painting, the scene is inhabited by ghostly figures who attend to an old-fashioned motorcar. On the right-hand side, spectres drink petrol from Shell Oil jerrycans through red tendrils. In his later years, Burra's depictions of humanity changed. His satirical images of night-time revellers are replaced by sinister figures in black robes, suggesting his disillusioned feelings towards humanity and its impact on nature.

On loan from Rye Art Gallery

X89214

## Cornish Clay Mines

1970

Watercolour on paper

Across a complex backdrop of hills, fields and old mines, stands the modern canopy of an Esso petrol station. In the centre of the composition, a man is wrapped in the coils of a fuel hose as he attempts to refuel his bright red car. The petrol pumps dispense 'JET' and 'PEEEEE SUPERR', a reference to the historical 'pea-souper' fogs caused by thick pollution. Burra also includes comical advertisements for the Michelin Man and Tango the Tiger. Burra's satirical figures and juxtaposition of the natural landscape with man-made structures that support driving culture highlight the increased presence of motor vehicles in Britain.

Private collection

X89215

## An English Country Scene No. 2

1970

Watercolour on paper

Though the title suggests an idyllic scene, the reality is far from peaceful. Burra depicts a line of vehicles relentlessly powering their way through the picturesque countryside on a long winding road. They include large untameable trucks and shadowy figures who fly past on a motorcycle. The painting was composed after a visit to the Peak District National Park with his sister and Billy Chappell. It conveys the grim realities of travelling by road across Britain, highlighting the tension between vehicles and the rural environment.

Private collection

X89670

## English Countryside

1965–7

Watercolour on paper

Painted as though looking through a car windscreen, Burra journeys down a road through the English countryside.

Moving away from his depictions of the hubbub of the city, Burra appears to have been drawn to sparsely inhabited places. His paintings present these locations as quiet and forbidding. But even in this remote and sparsely inhabited countryside, traces of human presence are unavoidable.

Ribbons of colour intersect the road, suggesting ploughed fields. A row of pylons pierces the landscape while a car and a plane blot the otherwise clean expanse of road and sky.

Private collection, London

X91662

## **WORKS IN VITRINE 1**

### **Sketch for Picking a Quarrel**

1968–9

Ink on paper

Tate Archive. TGA 771/2/57  
Z90049

## Picking a Quarrel

1968–9

Watercolour on paper

In this painting, Burra depicts the violent exploitation of the earth's resources. Vicious monster-like diggers excavate a mountainside, scarring the land and making it bleed. Dark human-like figures prowl the scene inspecting the devastation. A long coal train disappears and then reappears in the background suggesting the unfathomable scale of post-war industrial coal mining in Britain. **Picking a Quarrel** is one of the only compositions for which Burra first sketched ideas in a notebook (shown close by).

The Frank Cohen Collection

X89218

## Valley and River, Northumberland

1972

Graphite and watercolour on paper

Burra's composition features an undulating valley, located south of the Cheviot Hills in Northumberland. His landscape captures the 'sublime': a moment of transcendental beauty found in nature. Soft light glows from behind the highest peak, suggesting an almost spiritual appreciation of the rolling hills. The scene is not entirely devoid of human life. Dry stone walls meander across the scene, following the lines of the hillside. Burra seems to suggest that unlike more modern interventions, these traditional structures do not undermine the serenity of the land.

Tate. Presented by the Friends of the Tate Gallery 1973

T01756



## Near Whitby, Yorkshire

1972

Graphite and watercolour on paper

In this contemplative work, Burra captures the quiet majesty of a remote road near Whitby in Yorkshire. The road winds its way across the mountain tops before disappearing. A morning fog caught by the sun envelops the surrounding valleys, and the road appears to lead to the unknown. In contrast to the bold, graphic layering of watercolour Burra used earlier in his career, here he uses delicate washes to paint the sky and undulations of the barren mountain and valleys. His change in style may have been a response to his subject matter. It may also be symptomatic of his rheumatoid arthritis.

The Ingram Collection of Modern British Art

X89217

## Dartmoor

1974

Watercolour on paper

Burra and his sister visited Dartmoor in September 1973. Burra never strayed too far from their car, instead remembering the splendour of the landscape from a lay-by or car park. He painted his memories of this scene at home the following year. By the 1970s, Burra's health was rapidly declining. His friend Billy Chappell remembered: 'He seemed in good spirits, though there were days when his pallor was more pronounced and he was quieter than usual. It was clear his arthritic limbs, his tender feet, were causing him pain. He did not complain. I very rarely heard him complain. His work had long ago proved to be the most efficient pain killer.'

Loaned by the Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery,  
Exeter City Council

X89676

## WORKS IN VITRINE 2

Jacques Delarue and Robert Giraud (and Robert Doisneau)  
**Les Tatouages du “Milieu”**

1950

Published by La Roulotte, Paris

Tate Archive: TGA 771  
Z90050

Burra subscribed to magazines about the supernatural and paranormal, such as **Albion** and **Man, Myth & Magic**, as well as countercultural magazines such as *It*. His extensive collection of books shows the wide range of material he engaged with – from texts on the occult, to science fiction and environmental commentaries. His concerns around humanity’s impact on the landscape are also reflected in his reading material, including a handbook by the newly formed environmental group Friends of the Earth.

## **Man, Myth & Magic, No. 76**

1971

Tate Archive: TGA 771  
Z90070

## **it (International Times) No. 133**

July 1972

Tate Archive: TGA 771  
Z90072

## **Albion, Issue 1**

May 1968

Tate Archive: TGA 771  
Z90071

Lord Northbourne  
**Look to the Land**

1940

Published by J. M. Dent & Sons

Tate Archive: TGA 771  
Z90073

John Barr

**The Environmental Handbook: Action Guide for the UK**

1971

Published by Ballantine / Friends of the Earth, in association  
with Pan Books

Tate Archive: TGA 771  
Z90074

Pennethorne Hughes  
**Witchcraft**

1973

Published by Pelican Books

Tate Archive: TGA 771  
Z90068

Eric Maple  
**The Realm of Ghosts**

1967

Published by Pan Books

Tate Archive: TGA 771  
Z90069

Isaac Asimov

**Oceans of Venus**

1974

Published by New English Library

Tate Archive: TGA 771

Z90079

L. Ron Hubbard

**Slaves of Sleep**

1967

Published by Lancer Books

Tate Archive: TGA 771

Z90075

H. P. Lovecraft

**Dagon and Other Macabre Tales**

1969

Published by Panther Books

Tate Archive: TGA 771

Z90077

R. A. Lafferty

**The Devil is Dead**

1971

Published by Avon Books

Tate Archive: TGA 771

Z90076



H. P. Lovecraft

**The Case of Charles Dexter Ward**

1963

Published by Panther Book

Tate Archive: TGA 771

Z90078

## CENTRAL WALL

### Rye, Landscape with Figure

1947

Watercolour and graphite on paper

In the years following the Second World War, industrialisation dramatically transformed Burra's hometown. This painting depicts harbour-side factories processing gravel, cement and tar extracted from the surrounding landscape. The red buildings are part of a run-down industrial estate with broken cars, rotting boxes and mounds of discarded tyres. In the foreground, a figure (thought to be modelled on the Burra family's gardener) looks at the viewer with a sinister mask-like smile. The grass below his feet burns red, subtly conveying humanity's impact on the green landscape.

Trustees of the Cecil Higgins Art Gallery (The Higgins Bedford)  
X89210

## Landscape, Cornwall, with Figures and Tin Mine

1975

Watercolour on paper

This is one of the last works that Burra painted. He populates the landscape of Cornwall with a variety of characters. They include spectres who hide beneath layers of watercolour, in the undergrowth and in the ruined buildings of an abandoned tin mine. The two tattooed people were copied directly from the French publication **Les Tatouages du 'Milieu'** by Jacques Delarue and Robert Giraud (shown close by). Burra also includes himself gloomily eating a Cornish pasty. His self-portrait may indicate a moment of quiet reflection on his life and artistic practice.

Private collection, courtesy of Lefevre Fine Art, London  
X89220

