

Entertainment & Arts

Tate's empire show was a challenge, says curator

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Artist and Empire will feature Lady Butler's *The Remnants of an Army* (1879)

An exhibition about art and the British Empire has been a challenge to put together because of its sensitive subject matter, its curator says.

The autumn show at Tate Britain will feature more than 200 paintings and other artefacts dating back 400 years.

'It's been the most difficult project I've worked on,' admitted curator Alison Smith at Monday's launch event.

'The real challenge was selecting the material to make a wonderful show without being celebratory of empire.

'It's been a gradual process of refining and selecting. We've had intense debates about what to include.'

Opening on 25 November, the show will feature art from across the British Isles, North America, the Caribbean, the Pacific, Asia and Africa.

The work of contemporary British artists, including Hew Locke and Andrew Gilbert, has been included "to offer fresh interpretations of colonial imagery and confront the problematic legacies of Empire in the present day".

Dr Smith said the exhibition would present facts and let the viewer make up their own minds. There are plans to set up a screen showing people's responses to some of the exhibits.

"We don't want to be didactic - we want to bring people into the exhibition to allow them to bring their own experiences and memories," she said.

Among the paintings on show will be Lady (Elizabeth) Butler's 1879 oil painting *The Remnants of an Army*, showing on horseback the man who was thought to be the only survivor of the 1842 retreat from Kabul during the First Afghan War.

The painting has not been shown for more than 50 years and is being restored for the exhibition. It was part of the original art collection that Henry Tate, an industrialist who had made his fortune in sugar, used to found the Tate Gallery.

Dr Smith said: "Lady Butler belonged to a group of thinkers who were critical of British colonial policy and this was partly produced to show history repeating itself with disastrous consequences - though at the time it was seen to be a heroic image of endurance and survival at the very edges of the empire."

Tate director Sir Nicholas Serota said: "This is an exhibition that will open up some quite difficult issues. It's a beginning rather than an end."

Artist and Empire is at Tate Britain 25 November 2015 - 10 April 2016.

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